Someone with a highly evident degree of blessed ignorance once remarked to me, “You must love being a priest. You get to go to all those wedding receptions.” “Au contraire” is the least offensive response to this statement. Ask any priest about weddings, and the 50, 60, or 70 receptions a year, and you will discover an aversion to head tables, receiving lines, alcohol-induced conversations about Church, and last, but not least, chicken!

Several years ago I had the dilemma of whether or not to accept a request to witness a woman’s wedding. She was a parishioner from my former parish, and I had cared for her mother in her dying, and the family in their grief then and later through the days of the funeral. A year later I had presided at her brother’s wedding. Desiring to be “pastoral” (a slippery wedge if ever there was one), I checked my calendar all the while going back and forth in my head, “Do I need to take on another responsibility?” And the winner was . . . the pastoral yes.

A month or so later, I discovered that my best friend’s brother was getting married the same day in another part of the state. I called the priest at the church where I agreed to do the wedding and explained the situation. He said he would be glad to take her wedding. I then had the difficult task of calling this former parishioner to break the news that “Father Joe” could not do her wedding.

She was hysterical. She cried and cried . . . I was the only priest she wanted . . . She always dreamed of me doing her wedding. Not a pretty scene. I listened, said I was sorry, assured her that Father Mark would do a beautiful ceremony. But to no avail. Not 10 minutes after we hung up, she called to ask if she changed the date, would I do the wedding? By this time, I was firm in my now pastoral no.

Though that story is a little extreme, it illustrates one part of the truth of the power of personality and ego in the events of our lives. The other truth that parish priests will humbly confess is that years later a conversation between the couple who got their priest of choice will go something like this: “Remember the priest that did our wedding? Father . . . what’s his name? He was nice. What was his name?”
An association, whether a two-person marriage or a 3500-person NACC, has a life of its own beyond the personalities and events that seem to loom so large at any given time. As we celebrate 35 years of our existence, there have been many men and women who have come center stage in the formation and growth of the NACC. And then they move off the stage. A new troupe comes along. Since at 35 we are still relatively young, we know some of the personalities and they have written some of their stories and insights or have been written about for this commemorative issue of Vision.

The names, however, will vanish, or become some distant archival fact; but the spirit will continue to live on in the greater body. Like all relationships, the NACC has had its joys and sorrows, laughter and fighting. Some of these moments are quite public in our history; most are behind the curtain of individual hearts.

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A public fight was the infamous 1991 Portland conference where years of work and preparation for the change from two to four units of CPE as a requirement for certification was nearly torpedoed on the floor by a person who had just joined the NACC. The result was an awkward compromise that caused problems and inconsistencies for years to come (the original proposal was for two basic and two advanced units and it got changed to simply four units). Shortly thereafter, this person left chaplaincy to return to the corporate world, leaving a wake of frustration from the stand-up performance at the microphone.

But behind the curtains, there was the fighting in 1983 over the relationship of the NACC to the bishops that almost severed our relationship to the hierarchy. I have seen one member come to tears nearly 20 years later when he wanders back in the memories of some blood and guts fighting in San Francisco.

Riotous laughter occurred in the public domain when a certain unnamed bishop paused to explain the symbolic meaning of the miter before concluding the final blessing at a Eucharistic assembly. He emphasized that the miter should be worn only in times of importance such as this moment of the blessing of the Church on the chaplains gathered in prayer. In a mischievous aside, he mentioned that there are those bishops, some would say in the Northeast for example, who sleep with their miters on! The blessing descended upon the assembly in a knee-slapping laughter that lightened faces, hearts, and spirit in the gift of being able to laugh at ourselves, whether of the mitered class or not.
But behind the curtains, a committee met in Chicago for a weekend of hard work formulating a new re-working of the NACC values in 1993. During a stand-up stretch, a young lay chaplain told of a time in seminary when the community was gathered in assembly. The rector got up and began, “In the name of the . . .” and all the assembled had now lifted their right hands to their foreheads to begin the sign of the Cross, except the rector continued “. . . faculty, I would like to . . .” We laughed and laughed at the picture of a hundred men with their right hands stuck on their foreheads, perhaps now pretending to scratch, push back hair or some other graceful return to an “at ease” position.

A public moment of joy for the CPE supervisors in our association came after a highly regarded leader in the ACPE attended the 1992 NACC conference in Pittsburgh and spent the day at the CPE supervisors’ workshop. Later she wrote in the ACPE News about her experience with the NACC supervisors and how they have a sense of community that she really envied in the way this group really opened up and worked well with one another.

And behind the curtains, a lay woman wrote a note effusive with joy and gratitude accompanying a large contribution to the NACC because God had spared her life through several years of personal sickness, tragedy, and disaster. The NACC is a home for her, not built by human hands alone, but built to last forever.

Then there was the public sorrow of a region gathered in prayer, eyes fixed on the reader—a young woman leaning into the corner that will turn her into the corridor of her dying. A stillness that only God could bring as she voiced the words of the Scripture of the day before her brother and sister chaplains who loved her “. . . I carry in my body the dying of Christ . . .” The awe of unvoiced musings, “Who chose that reading? How did she end up doing it? Do you believe that she is reading those words?”

There was the quiet sorrow of six NACC members gathered at Eucharist around the bed of their dying Executive Director. The communion meditation was taken from the then new Eric Clapton release of “Tears in Heaven.” The tears came from the members; the smile came from this courageous woman en route to heaven.

No names. But lots of memories. Some are recognizable—others are not. Thirty-five hundred people, and more, over 35 years, and more, have an endless array of NACC stories, glimpses, reflections, feelings, thoughts that all constitute the living spirit of the association.

In Boston, there is a famous restaurant—famous to locals, and some
tourists—called the No Name. It sits on a pier between two of the famous names: Anthony's Pier 4 and Jimmy's Harborside. It is a difficult restaurant to find because, well, it has no name. But the food is as good as at any of the big names, and the cost is much less.

So I wonder if most of our history is between the two or three or four big names.

I wonder who was the first person, presumably a priest back in 1963 or 1964, who at a table in a meeting at CHA said, “We should organize ourselves as an association of chaplains.” Or was it on the telephone? Or did two or three conversations happen simultaneously and then one day someone did something about it?

I wonder who thought of writing standards and certifying and why? Was it looking out to other associations? Did it come from a desire to get some skills that chaplains felt they needed as they questioned their own preparation for this ministry?

I wonder how many women in how many places in the country thought, “Hey, I am a Catholic sister doing chaplaincy, why can’t I belong to this Catholic association of chaplains?” Who strategized to get that request to the board in 1973? What was it like as a woman to walk into that priest assembly? What was it like for the priests to turn and see women at that first meeting? I wonder who smiled and welcomed the approaching sister? I wonder who folded his arms and started to turn away, only to have a sister come right up, introduce herself, and slowly melt the ice as the arms unfolded and the tension decreased?

I wonder who said, “Hey, what about the lay people who work in our hospitals?” I wonder about the fights, presumably there were a few. I wonder who were the unnamed who loudly advocated or quietly negotiated some real successes, but whose names are lost to us?

Thankfully, we have the names of wonderful women and men in our history. We have their names, their faces, their stories, their wisdom, their laughter, their sorrow. Thankfully, on this occasion of 35 years young, we have a little more history written down. But let us too know that the unnamed co-create all stories just a little off center, perhaps behind curtains.

Joan Chittister quotes a rabbinic saying that goes something like this: Shake out all the words in a sentence until they all fall away and then what you have left is the meaning. I would paraphrase that wisdom saying on this our 35th anniversary: Shake out all the names and
events in the written history of the NACC and what we have left is spirit and life.

To the named and unnamed of the past, we give thanks for the spirit and life called the NACC. We are inspired by you, rather in-spirited by you, as a living body of Christ and his Church.