

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

15 Pentecost  
September 17, 2006  
Fr. Bill McGinty

**“Losing Your Life to Save It”**

After reading the lessons for today several times, I began to ponder the notion of God. The thought came from the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel: “The Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the Holy Angels.”

I tried to imagine God before Creation. God before he created Angels, God dwelling alone without a Universe is a difficult concept to grasp because that kind of existence is beyond our comprehension.

As human beings we find it easier and much more comprehensible to project God from what we know of Man and Creation. We can do so, because we understand ‘paradox’ and we understand that there are some things worth living and dying for.

Jesus tackles this question in today’s Gospel. He understands that there are ultimates and values, the highest aspirations of the human condition that can only be achieved through sacrifice and deep suffering. Peter fails to understand, because he thinks purely on earthly terms. Jesus is saying that when we rise above our nature and use our suffering for the good of others; we become ‘Spirit’ in the same way that God is Spirit. It is the highest form of love. When we Christians say: “God is love,” this is what we mean.

It is not romantic love. It is not a soft mushy love. God is the kind of love we only see, or glimpse occasionally in a lifetime. We might see it in a parent who is 100% devoted to a sick or handicapped child. We experience it in a soldier who lays down his life for a comrade or a grandparent who gives their kidney to a stranger.

I suppose I have been luckier than most because I have been up close and seen men and women give their whole life to God and the Gospel. We call them a ‘living paradox’ whether they live a contemplative life in a monastery or are ‘active religious’ working in some far away mission. They know that the world ‘mocks’ them and fails to understand that their life is a ‘living testament’ to all that is good and all that is holy in God’s Creation. Even as Jesus sacrificed his life for the Kingdom, so will they. It is a special calling and it has one purpose, it points beyond this life to the future Kingdom of God.

I have known so many religious it’s really hard to pick out ones who personify this Gospel teaching: “Those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the Gospel will save it.”

Many, of course, are long dead. Maybe there are about thirty now in nursing homes. Increasingly, members of orders and communities have grown older and the communities have dwindled. We see it in schools and colleges now taught and staffed almost entirely by

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lay people. But many people who went through Fordham or Notre Dame, Boston College or Dominican can remember being taught by little Sister Marie or old Father Gilbert. Fifty years ago they too were young like Marie Von Trapp. Their veils and habits would flap in the wind whether they were dashing late to class or playing softball with the freshmen class. I have known religious who climbed mountains; paddled canoes, were great soccer players, played the violin, guitar or French horn.

Albert Carrette was a great artist. Billy Bergin could put on a musical fit for Broadway; Elizabeth O'Donnell had a soprano voice to die for.

Yet for all their talent and intelligence, the Gospel of Jesus spoke through them in a different way. Their basic human service and kindness to fellow human beings went almost unnoticed and unrewarded. As the years ebbed away, their life of sacrifice took on a greater deal of suffering. How do you remain that kind, understanding and wise, cheerful priest when Parkinson's disease is knocking at your door and you have no children to watch over your old age?

Today's Gospel speaks of laying down your life for the Gospel. For most of us we live and die the Gospel in the context of family and the ones we love. We know we are not religious or monks but we too must respond to the Gospel in our own way. It is easy to do so in the context of the ones we love, but Jesus' mandate goes beyond that in asking us to look after the stranger, the poor and those in need.

It is with this in mind that Bishop Paul wrote to all the Clergy of the Diocese this week. He reminds us of his visit to Kajo Kegi in 2005 and the transforming effect it had on his life. He returned with the conviction that as a Bishop and Christian, he could not in all conscience, fail to respond to the pain, poverty and post war conditions he had witnessed.

Last March at the Clergy Retreat he told us that the Conference and Youth Center he had promised the Diocese would have to wait and wait for another Bishop. His priority would be in rebuilding the churches and schools of Kajo Kegi.

"The time has come," says Bishop Paul in his letter, "when we must keep our promise and fulfill our commitment to Africa." He goes on to challenge all clergy and all parish communities to join with him in this mission.

From poor to rich, parishes across the 14 counties of North Eastern Pennsylvania, the challenge has gone out to respond to a poverty greater than anything we have seen or known.

Doubtlessly, the Bishop will give us more detail on what he has in mind at Convention in October and later in the year.

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We have belonged to an incredible year in the history of the parish. At this moment in time I am writing the Annual Parish Review for our Annual Meeting in November. On a day to day basis we are so busy that we tend to forget the accomplishments and events that occurred all the way back to one year ago

Ahead of us lies a year of challenge, change, Evangelism and much increased interaction with both the Diocese and local community here in Milford.

I cannot tell you enough how proud I am of you and your individual and collective contributions to the ministry of this church in the last 12 months.

We have assembled a fantastic, talented, Vestry who have devoted so many hours of effort and service to this ministry and to the people of the parish. In November, Nancy Holleran will come off being Senior Warden after 4 years of blood, sweat and tears. No person spends as much time in this church and gives of themselves with as much dedication. After the Annual meeting on Nov 13, we will hold a luncheon in her, and Jane Herrington's honor. Please put it on your calendar.

The year ahead presents many ways to respond to today's Gospel, let us do so with pride that we are living that Gospel day by day.

Let Us Pray:

Father, we pray that we may always be faithful to your Son's words of salvation. We pray for his Spirit to fill this place with his gifts.

Amen+