



Nature's Way of Making It 'Home'

This is the time of year when my two sisters, Thom and Jude, and I yearn for the wilds of north-west Pennsylvania.

For we are natives of those hills and grew up tramping the Alleghenies, nourished physically by the blackberries, the leeks, the rainbow and brown trout from the mountain streams, refreshed spiritually by the deep, dark woods, the sanctuary of hidden hollows, the isolation of mountain peaks.

Any day now I expect to hear from either or both of them that they will be taking a trip "home."

Last New Year's Day, one of the most mild in recent history, our family, along with my young sister-in-law Chris and five-year-old nephew Joshua, set out to climb to Devil's Den on top of the mountain behind my parents' home.

With Clementine in the lead, her glossy black coat breaking through the underbrush, we made our way up the "hill," as Smethport residents prefer to term the slopes.

On and on we went, grasping at frozen tree roots

Sarah Child



All in the Family

and jutting rocks for support, finishing the climb of some 2200 feet on all fours in about an hour's time.

Just below the summit, huge boulders, some as large as two-story houses, come into view. Relics left by glaciers at the end of the last ice age, a mere 10,000 years ago or so, these rocks give Devil's Den its name.

The very top of the mountain is covered with a vast table of conglomerate rock. In the unseasonable warmth of the day we drop to the sun-heated surface, winded, tired, triumphant, to share fruit and sandwiches.

In the distance as many as seven mountain ridges,

in shades of mauve and purple, can be counted. There is some snow on the ground below the rock table and in one corner of the stone, where it cracks and separates, are lustrous green leaves of the mountain laurel.

It is these shrubs I thought of this past week. Very shortly they will be covered with tiny, porcelain-like pink flowers. The hillside will be wetter than ever, cascading streams descending to the narrow Allegheny River below, the densest areas redolent of decaying leaves and tree limbs and a thousand different growing things.

Ferns, trillium, Dutchman's breeches, trout lily, skunk cabbage, purplish blue violets form a carpet. Overhead red-tailed hawks circle and swoop. Bear cubs and spotted fawns will falter on unsteady legs. Spring peepers in swampy areas will sound the alarm at the slightest noise.

In the valley below, guarded by lush green sentries on all sides, the mist burns off by mid-morning. A gossamer circle of it remains high on the mountain west of Hamlin Pond. Like some nebulous silver wedding ring, it won't disappear until noon.

Fasting and Self-Denial: Outdated?

A grammar school youngster returned home from religion class a few days prior to Ash Wednesday and informed his parents the instructor had said: "Don't give up something for Lent; do something for others."

Youthful pupils often misquote or misunderstand teachers and that may have been the case here. On the other hand, a shift in attitude about fasting and self-denial among Catholics over the past decade could prompt this type of remark.

In 1966, Pope Paul VI issued a document on "Fast and Abstinence" which abrogated the existing tough laws we had followed for years, especially throughout the Lenten season.

Abstinence or no meat on Friday went out the window except during the Fridays of Lent.

Fasting, i.e., no eating between meals, one full meal, two other light meatless snacks, likewise disappeared except for Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

The Holy Father made this change because Catholics had slipped into a legal observance of the regulations and missed the point of an inner conversion these were intended to achieve.

Nevertheless, the major portion of that decree spoke about the need we have for a constant change of our hearts, for personal reform, for a regular and voluntary program of fasting, self-denial, prayer and good works.

Fr. Joseph M. Champlin



Our Church Family

I think it is safe to maintain that following this official mitigation of those fast and abstinence rules, many of us gladly gave up the old ascetical practices, but did not replace them with voluntarily assumed new ones. In fact, some, certainly affected by contemporary consumer-oriented cultural patterns, did and do question even the value of such self-abnegation.

The instructor's supposed pre-Lenten suggestions to the student could thus reflect that approach.

However, Pope Paul clearly taught that the practice of fasting and mortification is very sound, even essential for our spiritual well-being or growth not only during Lent, but at other times of the year.

In defense of his instruction, the Holy Father cites countless illustrations:

From the Old Testament, we can look to the example of Moses, Judith, Daniel and the prophetess Anna, among others, who served God day and night with fasting and prayers, and with joy and cheerfulness.

From the New Testament, we see our Lord commanding us to "repent and believe in the gospel," then spending 40 days and nights in prayer and fasting as a preparation for his public ministry.

From the practice of the Church in each century, the traditions of ancient religions and the principles of accepted spiritual direction by recognized masters we draw the same conclusion: fasting and self-denial are critical for a healthy interior life.

Some might object that these ascetical practices imply a condemnation of our bodies, a judgment that our flesh is corrupt, evil, bad.

Not so. Instead, this voluntary mortification or self-denial in fact liberates, proves we are not chained by our senses but are free and in control of them.

St. Paul comments in Romans 7:22-25 about this slavery to our senses and deliverance by the Lord from that bondage.

Those who have freely given up a very favorite legitimate pleasure during Lent or at another occasion for a special purpose will readily testify to the liberating effect that has upon their inner selves. We are in control, if we can voluntarily put this aside for a time.

The religion instructor more appropriately might say: "Don't just give up something; also do something for others." That would be more faithful to the Church's traditional triple penitential program of fasting, prayer, and sharing with others.

Keep Our Parish Ours

Let's take a couple of hypothetical parishes: St. Gertrude's and St. Rose's and put them in the Archdiocese of Anywhere. Each has three masses on Sunday, a DRE, a struggling parish council, and about 15 programs all vying for the same 10 per cent of active parishioners. Each organization, from the Youth Group to the Sunset Years Club, spends most of its time trying to get more money, more members, and more life.

Then along comes the Year of the Family and the parishes are told they should have support groups for singles, divorced, interfaiths, etc. The pastors throw up their hands in despair, then call the parish regulars who reluctantly agree to spearhead yet another committee.

Six months later, each of the parishes is trying to offer a parenting education workshop, a group for the formerly married, a family day of spirituality, a youth retreat, and a grief seminar. Neither is happy with attendance. They are a mile apart.

Finally, one overcommitted parishioner who hasn't seen her family for weeks is struck by the Holy Spirit, "I heard St. Rose's has a good parent course. Why don't we get in touch with them and see if we can share it?"

Silence. Heresy has reared its ugly head. Go outside the parish boundaries? What's the matter; you don't like our parish? If you don't like it, you

Dolores Curran



Talks With Parents

can leave it, you know. But our parish is our parish and we don't have to ask for help from outsiders.

None of this is spoken, of course, but it's felt. The woman hastily withdraws her suggestion and each parish continues to struggle along trying to offer duplicate services to half classes with an overworked staff.

I run into this not-so-hypothetical situation frequently. Recently I turned down an invitation to do a weekend retreat in a parish. I had barely hung up when I got a call from the same diocese, nearby parish, with a similar request. I suggested the two parishes co-sponsor a family retreat, sharing costs and staff and attracting a much wider group. There was silence on the other end. Then the pastor said, "Well, we kind of wanted something for our own parishioners... we don't do much of that sort of thing here..." And that was that.

Where in the holy words is it written that parishes are supposed to compete? Is one pastor's success

another's threat? Is this competition rather than cooperation between parishes intensified by rolls of honor in the diocesan paper, indicating which parishes drum up the most money for annual diocesan fund campaign?

I'm convinced that in most cases it's the pastors who are competing, not the flock. This may be less true in large industrial cities where one is identified more by parish than suburb and where parish loyalty is intense. In those parishes, one may not consider stepping across the line for a prayer meeting or sexuality workshop for fear of being disloyal.

But in other areas, I sense that parishioners themselves would like more cooperation (and less wearying volunteerism) with other parishes but sense that their pastors aren't interested. Their pastors don't want to know about good programs across the parish lines, much less share them. They become very quiet when parish sharing is suggested and parishioners take their cue.

Meanwhile, St. Gertrude's will struggle on with a young mothers' group that draws eight and St. Rose's with a young mothers' group that draws 10. They will both want the same speaker on the same evening. One will be disappointed, the other apologetic because there are so few attendees. Blessed be parish autonomy.