

Father Albert Shamon

# A Word for Sunday



**Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 12:49-53; (R1) Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; (R2) Hebrews 12:1-4.**

Chapters 37 to 45 of the book of Jeremiah are called "The Passion of Jeremiah" — the climax to his lifelong suffering.

The first reading is concerned with the power struggle that went on at the siege of Jerusalem (588-87 B.C.). The anti-Jeremiah party favored warring against Babylon; Jeremiah favored peaceful coexistence, living under occupied rule quietly and waiting for God to set things right.

Because he asserts that Jerusalem would be destroyed, Jeremiah was labeled a defeatist and was sentenced to death by the War Party as a traitor. Truth begets hatred. Zedekiah, the king, who felt Jeremiah was a true prophet, feared the princes and so handed Jeremiah over to them. They threw the prophet into a muddy cistern. He would have perished there had it not been for the Ethiopian eunuch, Ebed-melech. He rescued the prophet, and, as a reward for saving Jeremiah, Ebed's life was spared when Jerusalem finally did fall (39:15-18).

Jeremiah, because of his rejection by his own people and the intense sufferings that resulted, has always been a type of the suffering Christ.

In the gospel, Jesus spoke of His coming passion when He said, "I have a baptism to receive."

The Greek word *baptizein* means "to dip" or "to immerse" in water; in the passive voice it means "to be sunk," like a ship beneath the waves. From this meaning, we get the expression "I'm sunk!" when one is overwhelmed by debts or problems or suffering. Christ's baptism was an immersion in suffering.

Thus when the sons of Zebedee asked for the places of honor in His kingdom, Jesus asked, "Can you be baptized in the same bath of pain as I?" (Mark 10:38). Jesus also spoke of fire. Fire

means trial and testing — "tried by fire." God tests His servants by "fire and water" (Psalms 66:12).

As a consequence, fire came to mean judgment, and judgment means separation. The pillar of fire separated God's people from the Egyptians in their exodus from Egypt; so did the waters of the sea. Fire, water, division — they all go together.

But fire can also mean the presence of God. The burning bush symbolized God's presence. The fire on Mt. Sinai also indicated His presence. "God is a consuming fire," wrote Moses (Deuteronomy 4:24).

So Christ could say, "I have come to light a fire on the earth." Christ is God. His presence is the fire, for His presence casts the fire of judgment on the world. By accepting or rejecting Him, people are making their own judgments. In the light of belief and unbelief, a division will occur, even among one's own household. Micah foresaw this (7:6), as did Simeon (Luke 2:34). One of the reasons for Rome's bitter hatred of early Christianity was that it divided families.

After His ascension, Jesus lit another fire on the earth: His Holy Spirit. This is the blaze He wished were ignited. What anguish He felt until His baptism of the cross was over, so that He might light a fire on the earth — the Holy Spirit — and send Him forth to renew the face of the earth.

So often we associate fire with destruction, and rightly so. But fire can be purificatory. Fire cleanses gold from the dross. Fire consumes the chaff separated from the wheat. It is through the Holy Spirit that sin is forgiven. He is the fire of judgment separating and purifying.

We must choose: to bring our sins to the sacrament of reconciliation or to wallow as we are. Jesus does not preach a soft gospel: He demands we choose His way, the way of penance, even when it means division.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

# On the Right Side



## Where Vocations Flourish

Father Charles Hilbert of St. Peter and Paul Parish, Rochester, was one of the earliest Maryknoll missionaries. On a visit to Rochester after World War II, he said to me, "At first we used to send our native Chinese seminarians to Rome for studies, but when they returned to China, after a taste of the big city, they did not want to work in country parishes. So we established native seminaries, where their culture was not disrupted and they were comfortable in uncomfortable circumstances."

In October, 1984, Father Heisel, Father Wohlrab and I went to Kenya, where we were guests of Bishop Raphael Ndigni, a graduate of St. John Fisher College. He unfolded to us the vigor of the Church in his Nakuru diocese. "Let us visit the Motherhouse of our native Sisters of St. Francis," he said one day. "It is near Nakuru." The motherhouse was austere but substantial. Some sisters were out milking their six cows. The mother superior, novices and postulants all gathered in a circle in a large room, smiling at us as nice curiosities. They treated us to some sugarless donuts as Bishop Raphael, like a benign patriarch, talked to them and drew responses from these shy women.

Recently, Channel 13 in Rochester broadcast a series on Catholic sisterhoods in the diocese and the problem of vocations. It is cheering to know the flourishing vocations in Kenya. Here is a recent letter from the novice mistress.

"Dear Rev. Father Paul Cuddy, "I am in receipt of a letter from Rt. Rev. Bishop R. S. Ndigni, plus a check worth Ksh. 4,800 (\$300) from you to sponsor one of our sisters. May God reward you abundantly. You should be hearing from Serah Nthenya, one of our postulants. She is bright and capable. If helped, she will do a lot for the Church. "I remember you visited us here in Bahiti with two other priests. Do you

remember the place where you met the novices who use Bishop Sheen's tapes for prayer, and who bake African donuts? They still remember you and pray for you when they pray, using the Bishop Sheen tapes.

"Our congregation, Little Sisters of St. Francis, is a very young congregation, founded by the late Mother Mary Kevin. Our main apostolates are teaching, catechizing, nursing, social work and other duties that facilitate these apostolates. Our motherhouse is in Uganda, and as you know, Uganda has been at war since 1971. Any help you can give to our sisters in Uganda through Kenya is greatly appreciated.

"Because of the war, Kenyan girls could not go to Uganda, so our Bahiti novitiate was started in the diocese of Nakuru in 1972. God has blessed us with many and good vocations. To date, 72 sisters have been trained here and are engaged in different works in eight dioceses. Currently there are 42 candidates in training. Six of these are third-year novices, 21 are junior novices and 15 are postulants. After their formation, they will go to the missions or go for further training, as the case may be.

"Our main problem is maintenance. Generally we do not buy foodstuffs, as we grow vegetables, and have chickens and a few cows. But things like sugar, oil, clothes, medicines, petrol, soap and other small things are not easy to get. If you find us any benefactors to help our novitiate, we will be grateful, and they will have our heartfelt prayers.

"May the Lord bless you always.  
Sister Delphine Njeri"

Anyone wishing to help this struggling yet buoyant community, please write: Bishop Raphael Ndigni, Catholic Diocese of Nakuru, P.O. Box 938, Nakuru, Kenya, E. Africa.

## Kidnapping of Father Jenco symbolizes 'frailty' of Christianity in the Middle East

By Agostino Bono  
**Vatican City (NC)** — Reporters and photographers jockeyed for position around the white-bearded American priest as he held an informal, outdoor news conference after a meeting with Pope John Paul II.

Amid clicking cameras, the U.S. cleric smiled and expressed joy at being in Rome and in the presence of the pope. But he offered little else to the reporters, who were anxious to know about his nearly 19 months of captivity in Lebanon and the content of the message he delivered to the pope from his Shiite Moslem captors July 30.

He parried their questions, saying he did not want to endanger the lives of other Americans still held hostage.

The priest was Servite Father Lawrence Jenco, Catholic Relief Services director in Lebanon.

For many Church officials he symbolizes the frailty of Christianity in the biblical lands of the Middle East. The fear is that, like Father Jenco, Christianity can be quickly swept out of sight, a casualty of the region's religious and political strife.

Except for Lebanon, Christians are a tiny

minority in Middle East countries. In Lebanon, they constitute about half of the 2.6 million population and are guaranteed a majority share of the top military and government posts, including the presidency, under a 1943 French-mediated accord with Moslem leaders.

The agreement was based on census figures showing a slight Christian majority. In the Middle East, politics and religion are intertwined. Political parties often follow religious lines because of the Arab custom of social identification through religion.

Until the 1970s the accord provided a sometimes uneasy political stability and national peace. It also showed Moslem-dominated Middle East countries that Christians and Moslems could live in civil harmony under the same political roof.

In the 1970s, however, Moslems began demanding greater political power, saying they were now in the majority. The result has been a bloody 11-year civil war in which Christian political leaders refuse to cede power.

Besides causing the loss of more than 100,000 lives, the war has shattered the symbol of Christian-Moslem political stability.

"We are very much afraid from a Catholic

perspective that if Lebanon falls, 8 million Christians in Egypt and Christians throughout the Middle East are in grave risk. They look to Lebanon as a shining light where it was possible for people of different religions to live in peace and harmony," said Cardinal John O'Connor of New York last June after a fact-finding trip to Lebanon.

Catholic worry has been spurred by the rise since the late 1970s of fundamentalist Moslem movements in the Mideast. These movements advocate political dominance over members of other religions.

The pope has set the tone for the Church's position on Lebanon by asking the international community to help protect Lebanon's religious pluralism. He has told Christian political leaders to be more flexible in discussing power-sharing reforms with Moslems.

Throughout, he has condemned the "blind violence" that has turned residential areas into battlefields and scenes of vicious reprisal bombings.

Just before meeting Father Jenco, the pope called a car bombing in a Moslem section of

Beirut, Lebanon, "another horrendous massacre." He noted that it came 24 hours after a similar bombing in the Christian sector, which he also condemned as a "massacre."

Father Jenco was held captive by Islamic Holy War, a Shiite group trying to pressure the U.S. government.

Although parrying reporters' questions about his papal meeting, Father Jenco hinted that it was arranged as more than a welcome-back-to-freedom gesture by the pope.

"To keep my promise I have given a confidential message from my captors to the Holy Father," he said.

"The religious factor is of great importance," said the priest.

### Aquinas class of '46 sets reunion

The Aquinas class of 1946 has scheduled its 40th reunion for September 19. For further information, contact Mark Bonsignore, (716)467-0049, or Barney Wark, 247-5257.

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