

July/August 2009

PASTORAL MUSINGS

We were gathered at the cemetery around Betty's gravesite. Some pretty dark clouds were still hanging around even though the storm from the night before had passed through hours before. Family had come from the farthest reaches of Michigan and the upper Midwest. Some were dressed in coats and ties and dresses and high heels while others were in shorts or jeans. And some even had umbrellas in their hands just to be safe. Just about everyone had brought flowers to put on Betty's grave as well as the graves of other family members that were right there beside Betty's.

The appointed hour of Eleven o'clock had come and I began as I always do, with the words of the invocation: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." And then it happened—as it always does—about half of those gathered made the sign of the cross as I spoke the words. "Ahhh. Now I know who the Catholics are in the crowd," I thought to myself.

We prayed and then a number of family members shared some fond memories of Betty's influence on their lives. Tears were shed and laughter shared as the memories were resurrected. The Gospel was shared and then Betty's body was committed to the ground in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of all flesh.

Then, as I have done well over a thousand times in my ministry, I shared the words of what is properly titled in the liturgies of our hymnal as, "The Salutation." "The Lord be with you." And without batting an eye (or prompting from me) the majority of those gathered there responded back in kind with, "And also with you." "Ahhh. Those Catholics again!" I thought to myself.

Now I don't know for sure if they were all Catholic or even if they all believed in Christ. I'm pretty sure there were a few Lutherans in the bunch, just not from Holy Cross. But what impresses me each time I find myself in these situations (and brings a smile to my heart) is the tradition of spoken phrases that we Christians share with one another. I didn't know anybody at the gravesite except Ken, Betty's husband. But with those shared spoken phrases we had something in common—we shared the same God, the same Savior, the same hope of everlasting life. While we were strangers to one another, we were at the same time brothers and sisters sharing the same common bond of being related to one another by faith in Christ and the blood he shed for us on that cross on Calvary.

The Lord be with you. And also with you. Simple phrases we speak all the time. And because they are spoken out of tradition and routine we probably never realize and grasp how important those words are. We can speak those words without even thinking about them—an automatic response, if you will. And yet those words bind us together to people we know and to people we don't know. Where ever we are, we are always with family. And when those shared responses come out of nowhere we find ourselves pleasantly surprised to be in the company of other believers. And then it hits us—what those words really mean.

Thank God for tradition. Praise God for pleasant surprises.

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