Spirituality for Today                                                                                    June 10, 2013

Proud to be a Catholic Priest                                                                Father John Catoir

The privilege of being a priest hit me powerfully recently. I was part of an assembly of priests who gathered to celebrate their respective ordination anniversaries at a concelebrated mass.

Priests serve all over the world.  “Salute Magazine” recently had a cover of 13 smiling Catholic Chaplains in their fatigue uniforms. They help the 16,500 Catholic service men and woman currently deployed in Afghanistan.  As I looked at those brave men I remembered how my own vocation came while I was serving as an MP in the Army. Then I thought about the hundreds of chaplains who have died in combat over the years.

Did you know that 2700 priests were burned in the ovens at Dachau during World War II? They opposed Hitler’s mad scheme to annihilate the Jews. Father William O’Malley S.J. has a new book about it. (FYI: he can be located at Seattle University, 924 E. Cherry St., Washington, 98122).

One priest who managed to escape the NAZI reign of terror was Msgr. John Oesterreicher, a convert from Judaism who founded the Institute of Judeo-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University in NJ. He opposed Hitler openly in the late 30’s, but miraculously escaped to America in1940.

  Did you know that there were two Catholic chaplains who received the Congressional Medal of Honor?  Father (Navy Captain) Joseph O’Callahan, RIP in 1964, and Father (Lieutentent) Vincent Capodanno, RIP 1967, a Maryknoll priest who volunteered to serve in a Vietnam combat zone.

Their deaths reminded me of my friend Father Mychal Judge, the Franciscan NYC Fire Department chaplain who died as a first responder in the 9/11 Twin Tower tragedy. Priests all over the world are giving up their lives for others every day.

Bishop James Walsh, the founder of the Maryknoll Missionary Society, wrote, “The task of a missionary is to go to a place where he is not wanted, but is needed, and to remain there until he is no longer needed, but is wanted.”

Salesian Father Alfred Marzo, who recently celebrated 50 years of priestly service to the poor in India, said, “I am the happiest man alive.” A life of altruism does that to a man. He performed his normal pastoral duties every single day, but also helped build a pipe line to bring clean water to their village. He even taught them to construct a strong foot bridge to save his people from being washed away during the monsoon season.

Not long ago we had our own monsoon season in the form of that shameful pedophile scandal. Did you ever hear the joke about lawyers?  “It’s the 98% that gives the rest of them a bad name.” (Forgive me, I’m a lawyer myself.) With the priesthood it was just the opposite, the two percent that gave the rest of us a bad name. Always remember that it was a repentant thief who was the first one to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Today there are nearly a half-million priests in the world, serving in remote towns and villages, in wealthy parishes, and everywhere in between. They bring Christ’s light and love to our troubled world. Granted we have our domineering egotists, and our alcoholics, nevertheless I am still proud to have served the Lord as a Catholic priest for over 53 years.

   Pope Francis recently included himself when he said, “Pray for us priests, we are men, we are human, and we are tempted.” Amen to that.

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