

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK



4th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - January 29, 2006 B

PROPHETS, EVIL SPIRIT OF HATRED, CATHOLIC SCHOOLS WEEK, HURRICANE FUNDS

This week's column is a little bit of several things.

In our first reading today, we hear these words:

"And the Lord said: "I will raise up for them a prophet . . . And will put my words into his mouth, he shall tell them what I command. Whoever will not listen to my words which he speaks in my name, I myself will make him answer for it."

Commenting on the first reading and the role of the prophet, Patricia Sanchez writes:

WANTED: Men, women and children of courage and conviction willing to raise their voices in the service of the truth and to confront injustice wherever and whenever it exists. Such work requires a thick skin, a heart warm enough to forgive and big enough to forget the offenses of others, a willingness to begin anew each day, enough strength of spirit to be lonely and unpopular, a faith that believes that the impossible can be realized and that the seemingly insurmountable is only a stepping stone to further challenges. Those who will attempt this often difficult and unpleasant task should expect no gratitude or praise for their efforts; rather, they must accept to bear the brunt of criticism, sarcasm, scorn and hostility. Those seeking stability, security and personal satisfaction should channel their efforts elsewhere.

As unappealing as this "want-ad" sounds, many people through the centuries have had the generosity of heart and the clarity of spirit to respond to its challenge. We call these courageous souls prophets. As regards the sage of our salvation, these were the people who were sensitive enough to hear the call of God and strong enough to respond to it. These were the people who so understood and accepted their solidarity with the worldwide human family that they were ready to suffer its rejection rather than shirk their responsibility to bring the light and truth of God's word to bear on every aspect of the human experience. Depending on what the situation or particular circumstance may warrant, the word of God, as mediated by the prophets can either "root up and tear down, destroy and demolish or build and plant" (Jeremiah 1:10).

While believers have become accustomed to listening to the familiar prophetic voices of Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Micah, these holy men did not have a monopoly on the ministry of prophecy. Nor did prophetic communications cease with the death of the last scriptural prophet. For those who have ears to listen and the openness to heart to understand, there have been there are, and there

will be other voices to speak the Word that commands our attention and challenges our individual and collective consciences.

*For example, when Abraham Lincoln, in 1863, proclaimed the freedom of all the slaves in the United States, his was the voice of a prophet. When Lincoln's contemporary, Susan B. Anthony pioneered the suffrage movement that eventually led to the passage of the 19th Amendment (1920) and gave women the right to vote, hers was the voice of a prophet. When Pope Leo XIII delivered his encyclical entitled *On the Condition of the Working Man* and called upon Christians to attend to unjust labor laws and practices, his was the voice of a prophet. Rachel Carson's book entitled *Silent Spring* (1962) was prophetic in that it summoned the world to an awareness of the dangers of environmental pollution. When Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu drew the world's attention to the dangers and injustices of apartheid, his was the voice of a prophet as were so many others in this century alone, e.g., Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther Kings Jr., and the Latin American Bishops who raised their voices first at Medellin, Colombia (1968) and then at Puebla, Mexico (1979) to affirm the church as "an instrument of liberation an agent of social justice and a defender of the poor and the oppressed."*

All of these prophetic men and women were and are of the understanding that prophecy is not necessarily concerned with the unknowable future but with the present. Nor did they believe that voices of prophets speak only to matters of "sacred" significance. On the contrary, prophets are to bring the reality of the sacred into every sphere of the human experience, thereby penetrating the secular and redeeming it by the very word of God they have been sent to speak.

Also commenting on the first reading, Alice Camile writes:

Prophets make lovely additions to the Bible, but you certainly don't want one in your own neighborhood. No sir! Prophets wreak havoc on the status quo. They are no fun on committees, they don't understand local politics, they don't wipe their feet before entering privileged rooms, and they are never polite. Overall, prophets cause problems.

But still, we like to have just a few—somewhat marginalized and carefully controlled—prophets around. They torque the national agenda just enough to keep Big Government in line. They are available to speak to our personal consciences in tender hours when we feel a desire to clean house, just a little. They occasionally come in handy when we happen to agree with them.

And if they get out of line and become really dangerous

to the system as it stands, never fear. They will probably be assassinated or done away with by the proper authorities. Prophets don't have very long careers, and they have no insurance, only the power of oracle and God's eternal promise.

It has been said that the role of the prophet is to “comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable”. Every time we stand up for truth and justice we are in our own little way living out the prophetic role given to us at baptism.

Reflection Question

Who are the prophets of our time? Why do you believe the ones you named are prophets?

Casting out the Demon of Hatred -

This story by Jay Cormier is about confronting evil and is also a wonderful story of a prophetic event or action. He writes:

Nineteen-year-old Keshia Thomas did not intend to become a hero that June afternoon in 1996.

The black teenager was one of three hundred who had assembled in downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan, to protest a rally by 17 members of the Ku Klux Klan. The anti-Klan protesters spotted a white male spectator wearing Confederate flags on his vest and T-shirt. Keshia wanted to yell at him “What did I ever do to you?” - but, before she knew it, one of her number hit him with a sign and a swarm of angry demonstrators began beating him. Appalled, Keshia threw herself over the fallen man, shielding him from the kicks and punches. Thanks to Keshia, police were able to step in and disperse the crowd and rescue the unidentified man who suffered only a bloody nose. It was later learned that the man was not a member of the Klan.

“You don't beat a man up because he doesn't believe the same things you do,” Keshia said. “He's still somebody's child.”

A photograph of Keshia protecting the man who only moments earlier had been a target of her protest became the enduring image of that day in Ann Arbor. A nineteen year-old student changed a lot of minds and hearts that day—including more than one member of the Ku Klux Klan.

As Jesus casts out the “unclean spirit” from the poor man through a word of compassion, Keshia Thomas cast out demons of racism and violence by her act of bravery. There are “unclean spirits” and “demons” all around us—and within ourselves—that can be cast out by an act of kindness or generosity, that can be silenced by a word of justice, that can be transformed by what is right and good. In our own acts of compassion and generosity, may we speak with the voice of Christ to “drive out” the unclean spirits that “possess” our minds and hearts that “disposes” us of the things of God.

Reflection Questions

Where do evil spirits hang out today? What are some concrete examples of their activity inside of us or outside of

us? What “inner demons” have you wrestled with over the years?

C.S. Lewis reminds us that evil spirits are equally happy when we do not believe in their existence or when we believe too much in them. Seeing them around every corner.

CATHOLIC SCHOOL WEEK — Some Facts and Figures on Ascension and More.

This week across America is Catholic School Week. This year's theme is: ***Catholic Schools - Character, Compassion, Values.***

Ever since its foundation in our country in 1804 by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the *Catholic School System* has been making a big difference not only in our church but in our nation. Many “big wigs” in our country, including the media are simply amazed at the achievements of our Catholic School System. They are amazed at our success in areas where 80% to 90% of the children are from poor and troubled neighborhoods. Second, they are amazed at how much less money it takes us to run our school in contrast to the public schools. The biggest advantage of a Catholic school or any Christian school is the freedom to acknowledge the presence of God, to celebrate his presence and to teach our Catholic Faith Tradition to our children.

Ascension Catholic School

Ascension Catholic School was founded in 1961. When it opened it had 425 students, four teaching sisters and five lay teachers. Today, our school has **630 children**, 72 of whom are non-catholic, 447 families have children in our school, twenty-eight of whom receive tuition assistance.

We have 28 full-time teachers and 2 part-time teachers, 2 administrators, 8 full-time instructional aides and 1 part-time instructional aide, a development director, technology coordinator, school nurse and 4 office support staff. Ms. Donna Violi, our Assistant Principal, holds a Masters Degree in Educational Leadership from Barry University. All teachers hold at least a bachelor's degree and a valid Florida teaching certificate. Nine staff members hold a master's degree. Teachers in Catholic Schools in Brevard County are paid 96% of what teachers are earning in the public school system.

Awards and Distinctions:

U.S. Department of Education School of Excellence (Blue Ribbon School 1986 and 2003), Reading Renaissance Master School (first Catholic school in the nation 2000-2005), Computer Learning Foundation Certified School, Nation's first middle school Spanish Honor Society, a French Honor Society, International Computer Driver's License Certification Program (grades 7th & 8th). Seven staff members are listed in *Who's Who Among America's Teachers*.

Our school has 22 classrooms, a cafeteria, a science laboratory, an art room, a fully-equipped computer lab, a

music room, a library with over 13,000 titles, a stage, and rooms for remediation, speech therapy, and guidance counseling. A full range of sports activities is offered and competitive teams are basketball, flag football, tennis, track, volleyball, softball, baseball, soccer, and cheerleading. Ascension students win awards each year at the regional and state science fairs, at the national level of the Daughters of the American Revolution essay contests, locally with the Elks, the VFW, and the Genealogy Association of Brevard. Our school choir performs each Christmas at Walt Disney World. Our chess club competes and wins awards at local levels. Each class performs service projects throughout the year—this year's theme is **Give Drink To The Thirsty**. This year's school budget is \$2.2 million dollars. This week as we celebrate Catholic School's Week, I thank all the parents who sacrifice to have their children in our school. I thank our very dedicated school staff who work very hard to make our school a great place for children and families. I thank all the school parents and non-school parents who volunteer at the school. I end with a letter about Catholic schools that appeared in a recent edition of the magazine *U.S. Catholic*, Brendan McGrath writes:

As a devout 23 year old Catholic who just graduated in May from Georgetown University and who attended Catholic Schools since kindergarten, I am totally devoted to the Catholic School system. I believe that for education to be fully authentic, it must be permeated by religion, which for Catholics means Catholicism. True education cares for the whole person and since our spiritual/religious dimension permeates our whole existence, body and soul, an education that is not religious is inherently incomplete. This doesn't mean that public schools aren't of value; certainly God's grace is a work in their students, and their teachers are doing God's work in building the kingdom as well. However, public schools operate on a reduced and qualitatively different level compared to Catholic schools, like a circle compared to a sphere. This would remain true even if all public schools were better academically than Catholic ones.

Public schools may have "character education," but Catholic schools have God and the Blessed Mother and so much more. Certainly there are numerous good reasons why parents send their children to non-Catholic schools, but we should work to minimize those reasons however we can. Catholic kids in public schools are really missing out.

Hurricane Funds

Due to the extreme generosity of many parishioners and a \$10,000 check from our Thrift Store, our parish raised almost \$100,000 to help the victims of last Fall's hurricanes. Recently, I received the following letter from Lin Holmes, the chairperson with the St. Vincent de Paul Society in St. Genevieve Catholic Parish in Slidell, LA.

Dear Father Tobin and Parishioners of Ascension Parish,

I cannot begin to tell you how much your generous gift of \$20,000.00 has meant to our people.

This morning we distributed (20) - \$700 gift cards and (11) - \$500 gift cards. (all from Home Depot). Another \$500 gift card was from Wal-Mart. This one person was in a trailer and did not plan to rebuild—but had many needs. 24 families plan to buy building supplies and 7 planned to purchase appliances. Everyone was so grateful! It was a blessed experience for our members to be a part of.

Please extend our deepest appreciation to everyone involved in raising these funds. We realize that Florida has had so many similar trials.

The woman who sent me the above message just told me that she now finally has a home telephone number. What touched me a lot about the wonderful St. Vincent de Paul ladies in Slidell is that even though their own homes were badly damaged they still made time to reach out to help others. I also received a very nice individual letter from the recipients of our gift. They were all so grateful to our parish.

In January, I received a \$5,000 gift from a parishioner to help the needy. I have now sent that generous donation to Slidell.

\$10,000 check to Covenant House Florida

Recently, a parishioner brought to my attention that Hurricane Wilma had done a good bit of damage to *Covenant House of Florida*. Covenant House Florida serves runaway, homeless and at-risk youth under age 21 including teen parents and their babies. Every day, they reach nearly 175 young people in Fort Lauderdale and Orlando via street outreach, crisis shelters, transitional housing projects and aftercare. Covenant House is a Catholic organization founded over 30 years ago in New York and has been serving young people in Florida for 20 years. While insurance will pay most of the extensive damage done by Wilma, they did have a \$100,000 deductible, which of course was not in their budget. In a letter from their Executive Director, Jim Gress he said:

Your generous gift is an incredible expression of God's love for the young people we serve. From the bottom of my heart and on behalf of all our staff, volunteers and youth, I thank you for your wonderful act of love, at a time of incredible need.

I am so very glad to be a part of a parish that is *so generous*. I thank all of you who week after week, month after month, year after year contribute financially to our parish and to other needy situations and causes. We are blessed when we are blessed. We are *twice blessed* when we are moved to share generously our blessings with others. Thank you soooo much.

Have a great week,

Le Sarah