

A Time to Unite in Prayer

by Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop, CA. August 18, 2007

Recent disasters in the natural and man-made world remind us of the call to put aside lesser things and unite in urgent prayer. Whether the calamity be devastating fires or floods, earthquakes or hurricanes, collapsing of bridges and mine-tunnels, turbulence in the market and greater instability in financial institutions throughout the world, wars and civil unrest in so many troubled places, or simply the shocking disregard for human dignity evident at times in our own homes and streets, we've got to get together.

But to be truly united, we need to find common ground. Last Wednesday, pastors of various churches from the greater Manteca area met to discuss what, exactly, is the basis of our unity as Christians. Rather than jumping to conclusions from the beginning, we spent time in dialogue, letting the essentials of our faith speak for themselves. I was grateful for this process, since in articulating the most important elements of our common identity as Christians, we pastors and ministers worked together as one.

Following my article last week regarding Barry Bonds, in which I noted how controversial he is, but showed respect for his accomplishments, I asked several people for their opinions. While a few people agreed with my point that the controversies should not cancel out the significance of his many records, the vast majority disagreed. Their complaint was that, in his efforts to top the statistical charts in so many areas of the sport, the Giants' slugger lost sight of the higher purposes of baseball: to excel for the sake of one's team, to win games together, to put oneself on the same playing-field as others by abiding by the rules, to demonstrate character.

One friend, who knows the Giants well, commented that Barry Bonds' rise to glory has not brought greater glory to the team. While plenty of fans may attend the games, she expressed dismay that Bonds didn't seem to show the same enthusiasm about his own ball club. Whatever the case, I agree that true athletic heroes are not necessarily the all-stars, but rather the ones who invest themselves in making sure the whole team is shining.

As a Christian, Bonds would know that his first calling is to witness for Christ in the dugout as well as on the field, whether at pre-season practice or signing autographs for his fans. Beyond that, he is called to prayer.

Prayer, in fact, is what we all ought to be doing more of, and more often.

Reading about the sudden, fatal collapse of the bridges (one was in China, and was supposed to serve tourists in a highly visited spot), I'm not only led to wonder how such important projects could have gone so tragically wrong, and how thousands of other bridges could be in need of structural repairs, but also how it might have been members of my own family or parish that were crossing on that fateful day. And following the updates on yet-another coal mine disaster, I'm not only angry at the lack of safeguards for our miners, but I also imagine what it was like for those who were crushed by tons of rock some 1,800 feet below earth's surface.

Last year, a young, undocumented woman took up refuge in Lathrop. She was expecting, but had been forced to leave home due to circumstances beyond her control. While awaiting the day of delivery, she volunteered in our office. Then, following the birth of her beautiful baby, she returned home – to Lima, Peru. The day the earthquake struck, I was visiting a 21 year old Peruvian girl who'd been hit from behind by a semi on Highway 132. Still in a coma, she's far worse off than the young mother in Lima.

But their presence in our lives awakens us to a greater concern for their people. And that concern naturally leads to a greater investment in prayer.

Try as we might, we can't avoid the call to intercede with others, for the sake of others, that all might receive the help and the blessings of heaven.

Last Sunday, leaving our parish to attend a Filipino meeting, I drove right into the wake of a gang fight. A few young Norteños seem to have jumped a Sureño. A large stick and some sizable stones caused minor injuries. Two parents got involved, one of them sustaining a wound on her head. I suppose I should keep this silent while the proper authorities do the investigating, but I prefer to call the community at large to prayer.

When people in our midst dedicate themselves to fomenting division, hatred, and violence, we need to witness, together, to a higher calling.

Which brings me to my final point. My efforts to promote a better world are being hampered by my association with a certain destructive entity.

Why don't they keep naming hurricanes after women? If they must name a hurricane after a man, they could have at least consulted me. All my best intentions stand in danger of being blown away by the storm gathering its strength and advancing across the Caribbean. Weather.com

warns that a “Very Dangerous Dean Heads to Jamaica”. The first Atlantic hurricane of this season, Dean may inflict considerable damage before I can pray for its victims at Sunday Mass. No matter how much we work for a better world, we may not be remembered as we would have hoped.

- All the more reason to keep ourselves on our knees, united in prayer.

Conclusion: Last night, Friday, we discussed the gang incident in our Spanish language charismatic prayer group. Two of the youth involved in that fight walked into the church and sat in the midst of a large crowd of worshipers. I had just been handed a letter to the editor of the Manteca Bulletin, by a former gang-banger who wanted to testify to his conversion. So while I condemned gang activity, and challenged the youth and their parents to have the moral character to leave that life behind, we made sure to read the good news. The courage of one young man who left behind a life destined for hell to embrace the promise of life in Christ would leave its mark on our assembly. We prayed together that God would deliver our communities from the grip of Satan, and that our children might be able to walk the streets, together, with greater security.

Here are excerpts from that letter: “My name is Michael Walker. I am an ex-gang member from Manteca. For almost half my life I have been in a gang. During this time in my life I have been through so much and so has my family and the people I know...people would talk to me about God, sometimes I would listen, but then I would always go back to my normal life...Was it that I was blind to the truth or was it the distractions of the world...? Well, now I am saved. I believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit and I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

“I am in prison now and I have learned so much. I want you all to know that it is so important to get saved. It is the best decision you could ever make in your entire life. After reading this testimony, go to a church right away and ask to get saved. I want you all to know that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are real. The Bible is real. There is so much I would love to share with you all, and to tell you what God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit have done for me. It is truly amazing.” (Aug. 16, 2007).

This letter from prison proves that a person can be free in Christ in the worst conceivable situations, and a captive to Satan in the best of all worlds. It comes from a person who had dedicated himself to the works of division and self-exaltation, but who now is consecrated to building up the Kingdom of God. Finally, in this letter, Michael Walker echoes so much of what we pastors had discussed the day before: we believe in the Holy Trinity, in salvation through a living faith in Jesus Christ, in our mission to proclaim the Gospel to everyone, and in the power of prayer.