

Rising Above the Valley of Shadows and Death

Every third week of May, the priests of our region high-tail it to the hills.

In a picturesque retreat center, we gather together for four full days of prayer, fellowship, recreation, and spiritual formation. Serving 34 parishes, plus many schools, missions, hospitals, and prisons, roughly 75 priests of the Diocese of Stockton need this annual experience of rest and renewal.

This time is sacred. I used to announce the week beforehand that anyone who is considering passing away might wait until after our retreat has finished. This year, I forgot. Or, to put it more respectfully, God had other ideas. And thus it was that, for the second time in eleven years, I had to leave the mountaintop for funerals – not two, but three. and for four men.

A 48-year-old father of three, loving husband, and devout Catholic had come to Pacifica to celebrate his first grandchild's first birthday. There, while diving for the final time that day into the Pacific surf, his heart beat its last. Watching him take that plunge, then disappear, his son had feared the worse. Soon, Michael's lifeless body surfaced, driven beach-ward by the waves. Converging from across the country, his family and friends buried him Tuesday in San Francisco. The heavy fog chilled our bones.

On Wednesday, our church filled to capacity on behalf of a man who lived fully his seventy-odd years. Never one to sit still, he hauled his family around with him from journey to journey, even to the dances he loved to frequent. His wife had preceded him fifteen years ago. Now he would join her for the dance of Eternity. At the graveside, we offered Christian prayers for him, as always, but we also honored his legacy with libations.

From the cemetery, I proceeded north to a far more difficult funeral: that of Solomon and Francisco Carlos Ocaño. Their lives were both suddenly shattered on the previous Tuesday night. A speeding vehicle plowed into theirs on Harlan road in Lathrop. These innocent victims, 19 and 31 years old, probably never knew what hit them. The other vehicle's driver knows exactly who hit them, and since then has been agonizing with the memory.

That morning, I'd awoken at 3:30. Worrying about an upcoming mission trip to Tijuana, I decided it would be wise to spend my time in the chapel. Those unfortunate people were on my mind and in my prayers. Then, after

a brief return to sleep, I climbed the trails and steep hillside behind our retreat center. On the way up, I stumbled upon one of my favorite sights.

Two young bucks and a pregnant doe were grazing in a grassy patch, beneath mossy trees and a trickling creek. They allowed me to approach within a distance of twenty feet. What elegant and noble creatures, they.

Soon I happened upon a furry creature foraging through the underbrush, making altogether too much noise. Drawing close, stretching out in order to get a detailed glimpse without actually stepping on the animal, I was startled at the discovery. And then I bolted off. It was a very large skunk.

A little toxic perfume can suffice to send anyone packing. I streaked up the steep embankment to reach, finally, the crest of the ridge above us all.

There, the cold wind penetrated clear through. My clothing was useless, and my shivering body felt strangely vulnerable. Far below, as the fog cleared from time to time, I caught a glimpse of the mission-style retreat center. Half-expecting to get pounced upon by a puma, I pictured my brother priests in the womb of that warm, wood-beamed chapel. Too much news of death and dying can rob one of one's tranquility in nature.

It was good to join my brother priests for breakfast. Several, including Bishop Blaire, are celebrating forty years of ordained ministry this year. We've made sure not to miss the opportunity for toasts, roasts and blessings.

Our conferences are presented in English and Spanish. But no sooner had we meditated on the hyperactivity of Martha – who missed the miracle of the Lord's presence in her own home by being obsessed with what she could and should do for him – than I had to fly off for the central valley.

It breaks one's heart to see two young men, lying there, dead. They had so much to offer. Their families needed them alive, and well. And they had so much to anticipate for the future. But now, they're with their ancestors.

Please pray for those who have died, and for their families. Pray also, please, for the parishioners of the church I served before coming to Lathrop. They, the Corral family, died a horrible death on the Riverbank tracks. The survivors have been left with a wide-open, incurable wound.

Pray, too, for the ministers who serve you night and day. They, imperfect people chosen by God for His own purposes, struggle with all the worries,

the imperfections, and the sense of total unworthiness that characterizes any Christian called to a mission greater than one can accomplish alone.

They, too, at times suffer from, and react to, wide-open, unhealed wounds. And though the dull aching of injuries can deepen their capacity for mercy and compassion, they can also contribute to weariness and even addictions.

Finally, I ask for one last prayer. Please pray for the person driving the car that caused the death of Solomon and Francisco Carlos. I know her well. She has asked the family's forgiveness; they told me they've forgiven her.

But the lives of those two young men can never be restored. They are now buried in Mexico, where the majority of their family members still live.

Yes, life is fragile, and can be cut short at any moment. My hope for all of us is what I prayed at the second funeral: that our families make every effort to gather, to share, and to feast in the heavenly banquet of mutual consideration, of reciprocal forgiveness and of authentic reconciliation.

May we catch the sacred moments, before opportunities bound off into the bushes like startled deer. May we avoid unnecessary quarrels and needless bickering as we'd scatter at the sight of a cornered skunk. May we ascend together to that place where we see things from God's point of view. And may we look down upon our communities with renewed conviction and commitment to work for a more beautiful world. May God's will be done.

That, in fact, is why my brother priests are gathered at some distance from this desk at which I'm sitting. Yes. The funerals are done. The night has fallen again. It is high time to high-tail it back to the hills. There, the white-tailed deer nestles safely under the thicket, and the owl keeps its silent vigil overhead. There, a few grave markers quietly express hope in the resurrection of the dead. *"Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let Perpetual Light shine upon them. May their souls, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace."* Amen.

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come?
My help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth...*

The Lord will guard you from all evil; he will guard your life.

The Lord will guard your coming and your going, both now and forever.

(Psalm 121:1, 7-8)

May 17, 2007, Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop