Heritage Week 2009 – Wednesday, January 21st

Wednesday of the 2nd Week of Ordinary Time
Memorial of St. Agnes, virgin & martyr

REV. MARK PLAUSHIN, O.S.F.S.
Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel), United States Army Reserve
Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, DC

As Jesus was passing through a field of grain on the sabbath, his disciples began to make a path while picking the heads of grain. At this the Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the sabbath?” He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions were hungry? How he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of offering that only the priests could lawfully eat, and shared it with his companions?” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath. That is why the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.” (Mark 2:23-28)

What if today’s Gospel story made news? What do you think the media would communicate to readers and viewers? Let me suggest a few banners or lead-ins.

_The New York Times_: “Herod administration secret talks revealed.”

Or, the _Washington Post_ might try “Pharisees Herodians, bipartisan death deal near.”

_The Morning Call_ might go with the local focus: “Synagogue stunned by rebel rabbi.”

The _Philadelphia Inquirer_ with its special interest in the Catholic community might go with: “Catholic Church’s Christ caught touching man.”

CNN would not be alone among TV networks perhaps in probing the unseen: “How many withered hands _unhealed_ by selective healers? We’ll take a deeper look tonight.”

More insightful or cynical, I’m not sure, but the _National Catholic Reporter_ might query: “Healing, a prop for Son of God regime?”

And, of course, any diocesan paper worthy of its charter might run with: “Archbishop dedicates building, last year.”

And last, proving that even the broken clock is correct twice each day, the _Daily News_ might nail it: “Miracle! Withered man healed, death threat follows!”
Most of these, you will have to agree, can be supported by the facts found in Mark’s story, but do they contain truth? Of all the accolades accorded Saint Francis de Sales, I am most uncomfortable with revering him as “Patron to the Press.” How can I reconcile promotion with proclamation, the salacious with the Salesian, what saves with what sells, and the Good News with all the news that’s fit to print?

Well, since I am known in our community as being “fair and balanced,” and despite my skepticism, I think a good news story can be a Good News story. First we have to make a distinction that I know some of you will resist and it is this: the news and the truth are not the same thing. This does not mean that journalists have no interest in the truth or that they don’t try to write truthfully. In fact, there are many journalists dedicated to serving the truth, do so consistently, and even give their lives doing so. I will then disagree with Thomas Jefferson, lead writer of the “Declaration of Independence,” our third President, and virulent anti-Catholic and anti-Semite, who jibed, “Advertisements contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper.” Jefferson obviously lived in the age before “small print.” But while news may contain truth it’s not the point of a news story. On the other hand, a Bible story will always reveal the truth, but may not bear up too well under a fact check. How are we to make sense of this?

Fancies de Sales, is the patron of writers and journalists because he was an extraordinary writer, creating in the written word an enthusiasm for the Gospel of Truth. The reach of his work over the last 400 years, since first publishing the Introduction to the Devout Life, has been phenomenal. His contribution to the French language and the genre of popular pastoral literature is recognized throughout the Church. While this list of accomplishments should strongly recommend him as spiritual friend to journalists and writers, I suggest the more important reason to consider him as patron to those whose words shape our thinking was his commitment to the truth in a particular way.

His commitment stemmed from a conviction that the most essential truth is that God loves us and that love redeems us from our selfishness, our addiction, and our anxieties. This truth cannot be reduced to facts. The truth rather, is found in the incarnation of the Father’s love, Jesus Christ. We hear in John 1.14, “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.”

The word “truth” appears 95 times in the New Testament, but in John’s Gospel 21 times, and with a distinctive emphasis on Jesus as Truth. In other words, this truth is one that we can come to know in a personal way. In this relationship we can be healed. Isn’t it true that in relationship we experience love?

The only way Francis knew to help men and women, immersed in the heavy traffic of the days’ affairs, to find that truth was to offer them a relationship. Through his warm, personal, and engaging style Francis de Sales forged a relationship with each reader. It is no wonder that he was such a prolific letter writer—addressing each person’s needs in a way appropriate to their particular vocation and state in life. You get closer to him in reading him, and more importantly, he draws you into a relationship with his subject, Jesus Christ. In this way, Francis encouraged the reader to go beyond the text to a way of life lived in relationship with Jesus and
others for the love of him. This is why the Church offers Francis to journalists and writers as worthy of their attention.

The best writers, the best journalists, offer us a relationship, whether it is through the spoken or written word, photography or video, they invite us to get to know them. This is done not so they can achieve a following; actually no relationship is necessary to get a following. It is done because they want to draw us into a relationship with their subjects—firemen, pilots, victims, soldiers, the bereaved, the abandoned, the celebrated, the crooks. In stories that make compelling their struggles, fears, heroism, despair, failings, and hopes we are moved. There is great power in this, because it moves us beyond ourselves into relationship with others and perhaps, into a way of living that takes them into account.

When Jesus healed the man with a withered hand on a Sabbath day, he did something that in the context of what most people thought was appropriate, became newsworthy. Mark certainly though it worth recording. But more importantly, it is worthy of our attention because it compels our self-gift in this Eucharist. Here we encounter not news, but Good News; not facts but truth; not information but a relationship. The truth is that within each of us there is a need for us to be touched by God’s healing hand, made flesh for us, and thus one we can grasp in a life-giving and life-sustaining relationship.

When Jane de Chantal testified on Francis’ behalf during his beatification process she said this, “His zeal for the faith and the salvation of souls was great beyond all words, which is clearly proved by the infinite pains he took for this end and by the great number of people he in fact converted or brought back into God’s service” [emphasis mine].

So we celebrate Saint Francis de Sales, who communicated the truth of Jesus Christ by moving us beyond words into relationship with him, and he has thereby enriched the world. Any journalist or writer who aspires to do the same can be claimed as a son or daughter of DeSales. For the rest, let them heed Edward R. Murrow’s reminder that “Just because your voice reaches halfway around the world doesn’t mean you are any wiser than when it reached only to the end of the bar.”