

XXVII, Ordinary, C, 2007
St. Raphael, Springdale, AR

Back in August, I led a group of parishioners from St. Raphael's on an "Arkansas Pilgrimage." About 40 people went. We visited 3 different churches built over a hundred years ago: St. Boniface, St. Mary and St. Edward. And I figured that people would really enjoy seeing churches built in the traditional style, with beautiful stained-glass windows, ornate altars, and detailed statuary. Now, it could also have been because we stopped for wine tasting along the way that so many came! I just happened to put "WINE TASTING" in big, bold letters right in the middle of the itinerary! You know, when you go fishing, you have to use the right bait.

All three of these magnificent, gothic-style churches were built by German immigrants to Arkansas back in the late 1800's. What impressed me the most was the faith of these early settlers. They came to Arkansas with no money, but with lots of faith. They eked out a living on farms and working in coal mines. But despite their humble surroundings, they spared no expense in erecting churches of stunning beauty, churches we continue to admire a hundred years later. Now, it is true that churches are merely buildings of brick and stone and wood. Nevertheless, they are a sign of the great faith of the people who built them. For the German Catholics who settled in Arkansas, nothing was more precious than their faith, and it shows.

In the gospel today, we hear the apostles say to Jesus: “Increase our faith.” And Jesus replies: “If you had the faith of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” Now, the two parallel passages in Mark and Matthew have Jesus answering slightly differently. There He says: “If you had the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain be uprooted and thrown into the sea, and it would happen.” In other words, Jesus is emphasizing the power of faith: it can uproot trees and it can move mountains. It’s as if Jesus were saying: it’s not the great army of the Roman Empire, or the wealth of mighty Pharaoh in Egypt, or the wisdom of the ancient philosophers in Greece that moves mountains, but rather faith. And it’s good you want your faith to increase. Like the German immigrants to Arkansas, the apostles were beginning to treasure their faith more than anything else.

I just returned last week from a two-week vacation to India. I traveled with my parents to New Delhi, Bangalore, and Madras. And in each place we stopped, we went to visit the Catholic churches there. What else do you expect when you travel with a priest?! Now, if you had been traveling with a deacon, you might have hit the fine restaurants and seen the night life! But, you know, then you’d have to talk to a priest anyway, right? So, take us both along, and you’ll have a great time! But when we came to Madras, our last stop, we visited the basilica where St. Thomas the Apostle is buried. You remember Thomas: he was the one who doubted the resurrection of Jesus. Well, even though we call him “Doubting

Thomas,” he really had a lot of faith. His faith inspired him to travel all the way to India to share that faith with others. Think about it: thanks to the faith of St. Thomas, this Indian priest is standing here talking to you! And today, on top of his tomb is built a magnificent basilica. Now, to get to the crypt of St. Thomas, you have to walk along this narrow corridor. On the walls are written the names of the benefactors of the Basilica, and there were thousands of names! I remember thinking at the time that even though there is so much poverty in India the Catholics here are people of great faith. Like the Apostle whose tomb they come to venerate, their faith can move mountains.

Folks, for several years now, we have been involved in a huge construction project for our parish. It’s really exciting to drive to church and begin to see what it will really look like. Today I’d like you to consider helping with that project by buying a brick and honoring a loved one. As I mentioned last month, we are still short of the money we need to complete the project, by about 1 million dollars. And so, by buying a brick, you will help our campaign, as well as have your name, or the name of someone you love, permanently engraved on this new building. I intend to buy a brick in honor of Dc. Chuck, I figure I owe it to him for all the grief I’ve given him over the years.

But more than helping the campaign or honoring a loved one, I hope you will look at this as an act of faith. You see, the real reason we are building this new building is to continue to live and

share our faith with others. You see, we're not building a baseball field, or a concert hall, or a fine arts theater, we're building a parish life center, where our faith can grow. You know, the faith of those German immigrants shows in the splendid churches that they built. Our faith will show in the kinds of buildings we build for our parish.

I hope someday you will get to go on a pilgrimage. It's amazing to visit and pray at the churches built by the Catholics of the past. What's most inspiring is to see their faith, which is enshrined in those churches and buildings. May what we build here be a testament to our own faith, and inspire others who pass this way in the future. You know, it's okay if your faith can't move mountains yet, you can at least start by moving a brick!

Praised be Jesus Christ!