

"Quiet Courage"
Homily of July 4, 2004
by Father Brian Joyce

Courage does not always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, "I will try again tomorrow." Both the 4th of July and that gospel passage seem to call for the kind of courage that does roar. Both our national holiday and the scripture reading for today call for giants, for heroes, for figures larger than life. And, with the Declaration of Independence, there is Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, John Hancock signing his name so big so that King George won't have to put his glasses on to read it, all of them dramatically pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. And then the gospel describes the disciples of Jesus charging out without finance and without footwear, and then coming back to report that "even the demons are subject to us." ... Great stuff! Great stuff!

When we think of the life and history of our nation, we think of names like Washington and Lincoln, like Davy Crockett and Kit Carson, like McArthur and Eisenhower and FDR. When we think of the life and history of our Church, we think of saints like Peter and Paul. We think of Popes. We think of martyrs and missionaries. We think of great mystics and famous saints.... Great stuff! Great stuff!

....And all of it misguided and deceptive. All of it, just a little wrong-headed because whether we think of our nation or our Church, its strength and its fabric is in ordinary people like yourselves. And the courage that matters and that makes us what we have become and what we need to become is not the rare and exceptional kind of courage, but the day-to-day kind of courage that is within our reach and is in our hands, that is sometimes just putting one foot in front of the other, just hanging in there or just doing what we have to do. This is the real strength and the real grace of our nation. Remember there were fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence, most of them little-known and, if they were known at all, long ago forgotten. And most of the people who have made our nation what it is, in most cases, came here just because they had to, because they had no other choice. They came here to find work, to find a job, to just get by for themselves and for their families. And those are the untold stories of quiet, but enormous courage.

I think too of our young men and women in Iraq today. I think most of them don't want to be there. Most of them don't want to kill anybody, and they certainly don't want to get killed. But they are there. They are doing their jobs in our name. Very ordinary, and enormously impressive!

The same is true of our Church. It's not prelates and vestments. It's not famous martyrs and

famous saints. It's what the Second Vatican Council called "the People of God," what James Joyce described as "Here comes everybody." It's just us folks. We have our disagreements and our doubts. We have our spiritual high points and spiritual low points. We have our difficulties and disappointments. But we are very much here and we are very much The Church. Just look at the enormous number and variety of ministries that go on in this parish every day of the year because of you. Just look at the sound financial support and the generous outreach to needy and hurting people because of you. Just look at the level of participation because of you. And just look at the fact that you are here! Woody Allen says, "95% of success is just showing up." Well, even today when there is a parade somewhere else, you showed up!

I think of the single mother of five who, at her parish, was apologizing to the pastor because it was ministry sign-up Sunday, and she didn't sign up for anything. She said, "I am sorry. Maybe when the kids are raised and away in college, I will have the time and energy to do some Church ministry." And he said, "Wait a minute! Just by raising your children and just by surviving, you are doing one of the most important ministries in the world. That's Church ministry. That's Church!"

We are always, just because of who we are, passing on faith, passing on values. Sometimes it is very casual and unnoticed and we forget about it. But it makes an impact on people's lives, way down the line. I remember, about fifty-five years ago, and it still has its impact on me..... I remember my mother reminding us to say our prayers. And I remember the first time I passed (I was about six years old.) a union picket line, outside a factory. My father took my hand and said, "Don't you ever cross a picket line. Those are good people trying to put food on the table for their families, and to get a little bit of justice. Now, you remember that." Here it is fifty-five years later, and I remember that.

What you do as Church and what you are as Americans you do so very well, all of you, passing on life, passing on values, raising questions about what is not right and what needs to be changed and what needs to be improved, and at the same time, celebrating and giving thanks for all that is good and, each day, just doing the best you can. We just do the best we can. Sometimes the impact it has down the road is amazing.

One of the most impressive stories for me to come out of Iraq came out of that horrible prison camp with its torture and abuse. That was done in our name, but there was another young soldier there who acted quite differently and more genuinely in our name. He refused to participate. He insisted on reporting the abuse, and he was just a teenager, just a kid. When asked why he didn't participate like the others, he explained simply, "My parents never brought me up that way." As simple and as powerful as that!

As an American people and as Catholic Christians you need to do three things. You need to appreciate and celebrate the values and the virtues of our land and of our Church. That's the first thing.

The second thing is you need to do what you can (It may be little but it has to be real.) to oppose policies and practices that fall short of what we are called to be as a people and as a Church.

And, finally, you need to rejoice in and celebrate yourselves. You are the people who hang in there. You are the people who pass on our values. You are the people who participate in the life of our land and the life of our Church. Courage does not always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, "I will try again tomorrow." Amen