

July 26-27, 2014

Thoughts from the pastor,

This is the last week that Conor Bopp will be at SEAS for his short summer internship. At the end of the week he will be attending the seminarian/family picnic and then will have a retreat with his peers before heading back to Kenrick Seminary in St. Louis.

Last Wednesday is a good day to use as an example for some of what he has been learning. One of his big projects has been taking out a tree on the hillside behind the church. He took off the top with a handsaw over the past couple weeks when he had the chance to work on it. But Wednesday he and I worked on taking out the stump. We had shovels, a pick-axe and a regular axe. We sweated a lot and didn't get it done. We got a chance to talk about how much fun it was. We were given all sorts of advice on easier ways of doing the task, with chainsaws and things like that. We talked about why we were doing it the hard way. We wanted to. It was a spiritual lesson.

Conor does not have the joy of growing up on a dairy farm. He has not had a lot of chances to do mindless, draining work for hours and even days on end. I have. I presumed it was normal. When I got to the seminary and spent time doing draining and sometimes exhausting classwork for hours, days and months I presumed it was normal. As a matter of fact it was a step up from the farm work. When I became a priest it was another step up but it was still hard and I had to look forward to around fifty years of it. My thought was how normal that felt. Some of my classmates were not that lucky. They just thought of seminary as hard. It wasn't anything like the instant gratification that they had grown up with. So some of them left before priesthood could start for that very reason. Some that were ordained really struggled with the lifelong commitment part of priesthood. They had never taken out a tree.

Working on taking out a tree with hand-tools is something that doesn't come easy, but when you are done you feel great. You feel connected with people who have done that kind of thing for centuries. Most important you felt like you could do it again. This may seem strange but many of our young people have not had any experiences like this. Life is easy for them. Their parents make it that way. I happen to think that is a big mistake.

One of the things my Dad taught my siblings and I when we were growing up was that he had seen his job as having been to make our lives as tough as possible so that whatever we did in life we would be happy. In today's culture that would be thought of as child abuse. But which is more abusive; teaching young people to work so they can find out what kind of things they can achieve, or do everything for them so they never fail or achieve anything?

I believe that one of the reasons that people are falling away from faith in God is that it is hard and they have never had to do anything that is hard. If someone doesn't make faith practice easy and fun for them they don't want to have anything to do with it. This is a disaster because the crucifixion of Jesus is a sign that following Him is not likely to be easy or fun.

As Conor's mentor for the summer I wanted to challenge him in several ways. I wanted him to have to work very hard at something. I wanted to give him tasks that he would have to figure out on his own with the knowledge that he could fail or succeed but it would be on his own. I gave him enough time to learn whether he was going to challenge himself or if he needed to be led by the hand. He did well on all of these. He now knows what he did well and what he could have done better. I think he will be ready for the next stage of training and spiritual growth he will need.

God bless you all,
Fr. Frank