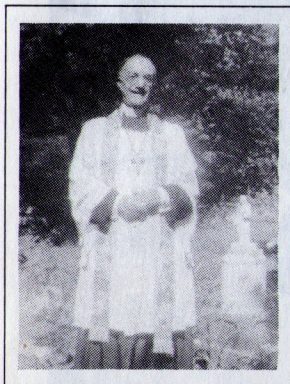


*Excerpts from
Reminiscences and Musings of
A Retiring Episcopal Missionary*

The Rev. Francis C. Capozzi



Father Capozzi

Thinking of the Rev. D. A. Rocco, Dr. J. C. Keller, Bishop Ethelbert Talbot, Nicholas Gentile, Archdeacon Harvey P. Walter, F. M. Kirby, Dean Howard Diller, Joseph Pontrelli, Frank Ambrose, Raphael Manente and all others still living, whose generous cooperation helped fill with blessings 35 years of missionary ministry — F. C. C.

It is customary for retiring clergymen to preach farewell sermons to their parishioners. But because, to use a Latin maxim, "Words fly away, while writings remain," we have chosen the larger pulpit of the press to indulge in a bit of reminiscing. This will

enable future generations to know something about the painful beginnings and progress of St. Mary's Church in Wind Gap, and St. Joseph's in West Bangor.

None of us wishes the past to be a dead hand hampering the present; but neither should we be reluctant to cherish the past as a source of inspiration. We believe that the present has its roots in the past, even as the future will have its roots in the present. But for this vital connexion, Memorial Day — the most sacred of our observances — would be rather meaningless.

In spite of the poorly-built and meagerly-equipped headquarters, we somehow managed to survive, and even to raise five children, two of whom proved heroes in the last world war. We may have had little as regards modern conveniences and comfort; yet in the old rectory we managed to entertain bishops, judges and congressmen. Which goes to prove that one can do much with little, even as one can do nothing with much. We do not wish, however, to be misunderstood. Lack of a certain degree of comfort was never conducive to health, and good health is needed, if a minister is to serve his people best.

We have heard more than one fellow-clergyman declare that a certain parish or diocese had hired them, not their wives; consequently people had no right to expect that the latter should work for the church. We thank God for giving us a life partner who, fired by the same Gospel ideals as ours, refused to be merely a rectory ornament. Sharing, as she did, our own dream of the Kingdom of God, she has worked tirelessly at our side, as the faithful women mentioned in the Acts did at the side of the Apostles. For years, with no thought of remuneration, she has been doing for the Diocese of Bethlehem all the work which paid deaconesses or missionaries do in

metropolitan parishes or in the foreign field — even in giving the first bath to new-born babies.

Yes, we did not always do things canonically correct. We were not too careful about church rules and ways. A good deal of our work was done in the old-fashioned missionary style. Much as we respected traditions and canons, we put the interests of the Kingdom of God before them.

We confess that it has been with an increasing feeling of unworthiness that we, week after week, have been pronouncing absolution upon penitent people, knowing that none of them needed it more than we ourselves. But we are humbly thankful that all we have done, little though it may be, bears the clear imprint, "Done for the sole glory of God and the good of souls." We felt too small and insignificant to assume the airs of prophets or reformers; we were satisfied with shedding a little light and love into the dark corners of life.

It is not for us to say how good a preacher of the Word we were. But one thing we know: with God's help, we tried to be a good shepherd to our flock — a shepherd who, for all his failings (and they were many) never took superior priestly airs, who never thought of being a kind of boss set above the people, who believed (and still believes) in the royal priesthood of all believers, and made himself one of the people. We tried to share all of our people's joys and sorrows, and, like our Master, went about washing the feet of our fellowmen.

We are thinking of the countless people whose merciful servants we made ourselves: sick visited or taken to clinics or helped to be hospitalized; lonely into whose lives we longed to bring the sunshine of faith and hope; dying strengthened for the last journey, and bereaved, comforted; ignorant lifted above the dark haunts of falsehood and superstition; foreign-born led to the privileges of American citizenship; orphans for whom we found welcoming shelter; widows and old men and women who were helped to secure government aid; people in distress to whom the Red Cross assistance was made available; estranged persons and families we brought together, and divorces we prevented; needy people of all kind whom we tried to relieve and cheer. In each and all of our suffering brothers and sisters, to use the touching words of one of our hymns, "we caught the vision of Christ's tears, and "saw the sweet compassion of His face." We were not satisfied with announcing that the rectory was always open to people in need; we felt that we had to go, seek out sufferers, and bring them within the Everlasting Arms. To us service is the distilled essence of Christianity. Let others wish to be known as great preachers and administrators. We crave but one distinction: that of being remembered as a good shepherd.

People in Wind Gap will remember that time and again the pulpit has rung with the proclamations that the Greatest Joy of Living is the Joy of Giving; that we live as much as we love, and we love as much as we give. We might add that we taught our people to be generous toward the church not merely by words, but by personal example.

To us giving is the yardstick of our love. And giving is real only when it is

sacrificial, that is, when we give until it hurts. Real Christians do not give God what is left after satisfying all their needs — real or imaginary. They make church-giving a part of their budget — so much for shelter, so much for food and clothing, so much for fuel, taxes and insurance, so much for health and medical care, so much for church and beneficence, so much for self-indulgence (the television set, cigarettes, movies, beer, candy, cosmetics, etc.) The Church of God, the Church which Christ bathed in His precious blood, and the Holy Spirit baptized in the fire of His love, the Church which is here to keep the holy fire burning, comes before amusement and pleasure.

Five years ago (1946) when we heard that the Germans had practically destroyed all cows in Italy, and there was no milk for babies, we bought a pure-bred heifer, and sent it to Italy. There were not meetings held to discuss the matter, no motions made, no resolutions passed, no entries registered in the parish records, no advertising in newspapers. We just went ahead in the old-fashioned way, collected \$175, and added one more cow to the Italy-bound merciful shipload. Perhaps, it might have been better for us to do the good deed in a more regular way; but we cannot bring ourselves to believe that by doing so the gift would have been more acceptable to God, or more helpful to our fellowmen. To us the important thing is not how the cow was sent, but the fact that the cow was sent, and is now somewhere in Italy pouring milk which to healthier Italian children must speak of our love for them. At the risk of sounding heretical, we will confess that sometimes we feel like doubting whether the minute recording, mania for hair-splitting statistics, flashy advertising, and all officialism which the church has copied from the world of tradition or that of business can ever bring the Kingdom of God one inch nearer.

Other accomplishments, which we hope not all will forget, are that we found at Wind Gap a bare chapel, and gradually transformed it into a thing of beauty. Likewise, we found bare, treeless grounds, and gradually made them so fair that a Bangor druggist once told us, "Whenever I pass by St. Mary's, I slow down my car to let my eyes drink in the beauty you have spread over those grounds."

Both St. Mary's and St. Joseph's churches are surrounded by cemeteries. People should take their shoes off, as they tread those holy grounds, thinking of the beautiful lives lived by many of our brothers and sisters lying at rest there — lives which, we like to think, were inspired and nurtured by our preaching. That preaching may not have been strikingly eloquent; but we thank God that it touched lives and made them a little more Christlike. The gist of all our preaching has been that God is Love, and religion is Love, and life itself is Love, and the flower of Love is the sacrificial offering of ourselves on the altar of Service to God and men — the children of God.

But, as we review the past, we must confess that there is one thing about which we were always dissatisfied: the financial side. True, it is that in the church's work the main thing is souls, not dollars. It is equally true that during the past 35 years at St. Mary's alone we spent in repairs and improvements about \$40,000 — that is, an average of more than \$1,000 a year. Among these improvements are: beautifying the church grounds,

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waterproofing the church tower, laying sidewalks, purchasing more than three acres of land, shingling and reroofing the rectory, erecting a Soldier's Monument, fixing the church basement and equipping it with a kitchenette, installing in the church a new heating unit and repairing it, re-decorating the chapel, building a field kitchen, etc., etc. In order to do all this, we denied ourselves many things at the rectory, which perhaps it was our right to demand. But we put the needs of the Church — the House of God — before those of the rectory — the residence of man.

St. Mary's Church property, as we found it, was valued at about \$10,000; now it is worth from \$60,000 to \$70,000. We regret that we had to leave at St. Mary's a small indebtedness of \$450; but this liability (which at the time of our resignation was being wiped off at the rate of \$50 a month) must look small indeed to one who considers that in the past three years we spent more than \$3,000 for repairs and improvements. Moreover, St. Mary's small liability is more than offset by the cash balance of \$2100 we left at St. Joseph's for the building of a parish hall. We are glad that for a long while we could contribute \$5 a month to this fund.

Last but not least among the causes for rejoicing is to see that some people have taken a new interest in the church — which, we hope and pray, may be permanent. Nor is our rejoicing lessened by the fact that some of the things now being done were not done while we were in charge of the two churches. The far-looking worker cannot always expect to see his work completed in his lifetime. One of Italy's great publishing houses has chosen as its motto the words, "Alteri Saeculo" — For the Future Age. The jacket on the cover of its books shows a man bent down to plant the seed of a tree whose full growth he himself may never see, but his children and grandchildren will.

Finally, we thank God for all other people, whose precious friendship has made the air around us sweeter to breathe. The names of some of them (like Caporaso, Bosco, Catino, Pascal, Cortez, Basso, Ronco, Calabrese) reveal Italian descent. Some (like Meyers, Wenzel, Greensweig, Heller, Dreher, Felker, Rissmiller) point to German ancestry. Others (like Whinnery, Pritchard, Elkins, Allen, Estes, Ede, Gaines, Jones, Davis) bespeak English or Irish or Welsh lineage. The forbears of others (like Pienigzeck, Jasinski, Tomko) were Slavish. Most of them were Protestants; a good many, Roman Catholics; not a few, Jews. Some belong to the learned and cultured elite; while others were plain working people. But, regardless of race or national origin or religion, we saw the faces of all of them lit by the mystic glow of goodness — a glow which will keep brightening our life's sunset like a radiation from the very heart of God.

We would like to close our preachy reminiscing with a note of thanksgiving for all those whose precious goodness has gone far toward enriching life with us. We can never thank God enough for the privilege of serving under two great Bishops — the colorful Ethelbert Talbot, and his gentlemanly successor, Frank Sterrett. Nor can we be forgetful of the inspiration that has come to us from the lives of many fellow-clergymen, both within and without the diocese. Many of them now adorn the mansions

of the Church Triumphant; while others are still holding the ramparts of the Church Militant.

We did not preach a farewell sermon to our people. If we were to do so, our last message would be addressed to the young people, and would run somewhat like this: "These are great days to live: great, because of the great task confronting the church — the task of destroying war, the monster which crucifies again and again both God and humanity.

"We have glamorized war with our striped uniforms, our bombastic citations and glittering brass medals. But, seen in its nakedness, war is still what Leonardo DaVinci labeled it: the most brutal of frenzies. Not even the wild beasts of the jungle feel like engaging in war: a single lion may attack a single tiger, but we have never seen a regiment of lions marching to destroy another regiment of tigers.

"So long as men go on killing other men, the Church cannot speak of love to the world. And if she does speak, hers will be the hollow voice of one crying in the wilderness. She may boast of increased membership and filled houses of worship and imposing new cathedrals; but so long as she goes on justifying, and even blessing, the wholesale murder called war, she will be more or less like Nero of old playing the fiddle while Rome burned.

"No Christian can deny that freedom and democratic institutions are worth upholding; but to think that the precious things of the Spirit can be defended by other weapons than those of the Spirit is to fall into the pagan heresy that the end justifies the means.

"It is up to you, young churchmen, to stop the world from its suicidal madness, and bring it back to the Gospel of Him who was lowly and meek of heart, who commanded His disciples to love all, even their enemies, who condemned all violence, who taught that the only way to overcome evil is goodness. If your children are dear to you, if you don't like to raise them just to be fodder for cannon, help the Church to abolish war! Help hasten the promised day when the love of God and man shall fill the earth as the waters cover the sea!

"But remember that there will be no peace in the world until there is peace in the hearts of men, through obedience to the laws of God — laws which are now violated by both the hideous tyranny of Russian Communism and the stinking corruption of American Democracy. More than bragging or flag-waving is required to make our way of life acceptable in the sight of God: what is needed is a new world-wide baptism in the pentecostal fire of faith and love — a task which only the Church of God can fulfill.

"It is sheer illusion to think that Democracy must; or can, destroy Communism, or vice versa. Atom bombs can plunge the world into a deluge of blood and tears, but they cannot shake deep ideological roots. The two ways of life are here to stay; and each had better learn to live tolerantly, if not lovingly, at the side of the other in our shrunken planet. We Christians can only work to bring both Communism and Democracy at the feet of the Christ, whose spirit could transform them into something better than either. To people who maintain that it is impossible to Christianize atheistic

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Communism, we answer that also materialism-ridden Democracy denies God — in practice, if not in theory.

“Until we Christians become peace-minded and peace-loving, we shall never convince the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Moslems and other heathens, so-called (they outnumber us three or four to one) that our religion is better than theirs. They, wiser than we think they are, will go on judging Christianity not by the Founder’s Gospel, but by the lives of His followers. And what Mahatma Gandhi once said to a Christian missionary will keep ringing like a scathing indictment: “Give me your Christ, but keep your Christianity!”

“Remember, in conclusion, that, if only a re-Christianized church can save the world, the church is none other than you and I: you and I and the rest of us are Christ to the world. For Christ has no hands but our hands to touch and bless and heal; Christ has no feet but our feet to lead men into the paths of truth, justice, mercy, purity and meekness; Christ has no arms but our arms to gather the scattered sheep into one fold, and to re-bind together the torn mankind — His own sacred body; Christ has no tongue but our tongues to speak to our bewildered, despairing planet soothing words of faith and hope and cheer; Christ has no heart but our hearts to believe, to hope, to love, to feel, to yearn, to dream, to pity, to save!

“May God bless all and each of you, and grant your new pastor grace to be a true interpreter of the ideals of the Kingdom of God! May you feel in his heart the throb of God’s loving heart, and hear in his tongue the voice of the Great Shepherd leading His sheep into the way of salvation! May you uphold him, that he may uphold Christ, the King of Peace!

Psalm 19:1-3

“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handywork. One day telleth another; and one night certifieth another.