

August 24, 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Recently Pope Benedict spoke about the need for vacations. Full disclosure: he made these comments from his own vacation spot at Castel Gandolfo, a lakeside town in the Alban Hills southeast of Rome. Here's the AP report:

During his traditional weekly appearance to bless the faithful, Benedict quoted from writings of St. Bernard in the 12th century meant for the popes of his time on the subject of overwork.

Benedict quoted the saint as advising pontiffs to "watch out for the dangers of excessive activity, whatever ... the job that you hold, because many jobs often lead to the 'hardening of the heart,' as well as 'suffering of the spirit, loss of intelligence.'"

"That warning is valid for every kind of work, even those involved in the governing of the church," 79-year-old Benedict said.

It's only this fear of becoming hard-hearted or stupid that has kept me on vacation these past few weeks!

By coincidence, the news this week also reported that: Americans are taking less vacation time than before; that they often do not use all the vacation time they have coming to them; and that the practice of taking consecutive vacation weeks is on the decline. I'm grateful that I get three weeks of vacation and that through the assistance of Fathers Burke and Cuenin I have been able to take them consecutively. Their sacramental coverage in my absence rests on the foundation of the ministry of our parish staff and ministers who so ably keep the parish ship afloat while the captain is ashore. Well, actually the captain has been *at* the shore, spending a week with some fellow priests in Provincetown and the remainder of my time by myself in Yarmouth and Hyannis.

Perhaps what I enjoy most about vacation time is all the unscheduled time: no meetings to attend or appointments to keep and no requests, phone calls, mail or emails awaiting response. The best part is simply having days on end when I never have to look at my appointment book (or ask Pat and Sheila) to find out where I'm supposed to be and what I'm doing next. To have unscheduled time is a great luxury and I treasure it. How do I fill that unappointed time? Reading 3 or 4 newspapers a day and doing (well, attempting to do) the crossword puzzles in each is a simple joy and one my regular workday doesn't allow me. I've also been reading a great book but I want to finish it before I recommend it. (Watch this space for more details.) Good food is also part of a great vacation and I'll gladly recommend for your Cape Cod dining pleasure The Roo Bar on Main Street in Hyannis. The food is excellent and Chef Leah Dubois' menu will take you beyond the standard Cape offerings. If Stephanie, Matt, Jody, Jackie or Rodrigo wait on you, please tell them I sent you! (And no, I don't get a commission for the plug here!)

I spent more time at the beach this year than I usually do, lathered in number 30 sunscreen in a serious and successful effort at not repeating the bad burn I got last year. The beach is a curious world. Families and friendship groups are only a few yards away from each other on the sand with no walls to separate them or muffle their conversations or shield their behavior from their neighbors. Still, most folks speak and act as though they were in the privacy of their own homes, offering a great

opportunity for observing human nature. Since my cell phone doesn't take pictures, let me offer you a few prose snapshots from my afternoons at the beach...

A father and his son (probably 4 or 5 years old) pass by me on their walk down the beach. The little boy is engaged in an animated monologue about baseball as he pads his way across the warm sand. Suddenly, the boy stops in his tracks, throws his hands in the air and then rests them on his hips, calling out, "Dad!" Dad stops in his tracks and turns to his son. "Dad, the thing is, I think YOU are the best baseball player in the whole world!" Dad adopts his son's hands-on-hips stance and says, "Isn't that funny? I was just thinking the same thing about you!" I have few words to describe the pride that smiled its way across that little boy's face and how it mirrored on his dad's face, maybe because my eyes were a little blurred with the teary, pure joy of taking in what this dad and son were sharing, for all round to see and hear...

Another day... five women arrive and claim the beach just in front of me. Four of the five are in their late 30's and early 40's and the fifth is a considerably older woman. Judging from their open conversation, there are close relationships among the four but how the older woman relates to the gathering is not so easily discerned as she soaks up the sun in silence. After a while, one of the younger women reaches over and begins to rub the back of the older woman's neck as she sits in one of those beach chairs with very short legs. It's not a deep massage, the older woman's shoulders do not move in response, her posture does not change. But after a few minutes she turns and smiles gratefully to her companion and I understand that it's not a massage being offered, simply the gift of touch, a connection, the bridging of two people through fingertip contact. I wonder who she is, this older lady, and whose lives have bridged with hers? I wonder about all the lives she has touched, all the lives that have touched hers over the years. I wonder if she might live alone now rendering her especially grateful for those fingertips on her sun-warmed neck...

Another day... A family of four, spread out on blankets only a few yards away from my spot, decides it's time for lunch. Dad takes orders for hot dogs and burgers and gets up to walk to the refreshment stand. His son, 8 or 9 years old, jumps up and asks, "Can I go with you, Dad?" Dad snaps back, "No, stay here." I watch the youngster dissolve in disappointment as his father walks away. But then dad turns around and says, "Actually, maybe you should come and help me carry the food." The boy gets up again, slowly, and I wonder if he's wondering, as I am, if his father wants his company or just his assistance. Dad has a head start and doesn't wait for his son to catch up. There's a sand-covered paved embankment to negotiate to move from the beach to the macadam plaza and the food stand. Dad scales it easily and then turns around to see his son studying the incline, his young face worried about slipping. Son looks up and sees dad standing there so he stretches his arm and reaches out his hand to his father, looking for an assist. Dad just stands there and says, "Walk down a little farther, it's not so steep over there" and then turns away and heads to the refreshment stand. I see what Dad doesn't like a window shade being drawn, a lonely resignation shadows the boys' face in spite of the afternoon sun as he walks alone to where it's "not so steep..." About 15 minutes later the two of them pass by carrying lunch, in silence. I know it's not fair to make judgments based on one snapshot, but snapshot memories shape the persons we become. As I put on some more sunscreen I wonder how a father misses his child's desire to be close... I wonder how many more times that boy will ask to go along, will reach out his hand, will pull down the shade on his disappointment? I wonder about the snapshots and memories that have made me who I am and the memories I'm making for others...

Another day... on the sand by the paved walkway at Herring Cove, a young girl, perhaps 10 years old, stands about 8 feet away from her grandmother (my guess). Grandma is leaning on a single crutch that extends to a brace on her left forearm while her right hand holds a paddle. She and her granddaughter are playing a simple paddleball game, volleying back and forth with occasional misses on both sides. I try not to stare and pretend to be interested in the ocean's sweeping, glistening beauty – but the ocean will be there tomorrow while the paddleballers might drive home to New Jersey or beyond before the tide comes in again. I want to watch the game and I marvel at the patience and love paddled and passed across a sandy court with no net to break the serve, no lines to fault the server. And I wonder, who's the server? who's being served? Is the older woman serving her granddaughter's need for the company of a playmate or is the girl serving her grandmother's desire to be included and engaged? Maybe both? Yes, both... there's only one team here and who am I to keep score of a game that's all love?

One more "snapshot" but this one was not taken at the beach. Yesterday I'm driving down Ocean Street in Hyannis and see the Shea family coming from the opposite direction on the sidewalk. Do you know the Shea's? I've not met them personally but they were in the news last week. Here's the Boston Herald story dated August 15:

An Everett man with cerebral palsy is begging the stone-cold thief who stole his electric wheelchair to have a heart and give it back. The powered chair that Brian Shea, 48, relies on to get around was stolen from behind his condo over the weekend. "I used that chair for everything. Going on job interviews, taking my son to karate. I go run errands. Now my mobility is really compromised," Shea said. "I need it." The Shea family is asking for the bandits to return the chair, as they can't afford a new one and can't fathom life without one. The theft has stripped the family of their freedom and forced them to cancel a trip to Hyannis to celebrate his wife's birthday.

Shea can walk only a short distance on crutches and his weak shoulders make it hard to use a manual wheelchair. His 6-year-old son, Zach, is too young to push. His 41-year-old wife, Randi Shea, who suffered a traumatic brain injury in a 1988 skiing accident, also relies on crutches and has a speech disability. She works full time. "It destroyed the way we were living," Randi said yesterday as an energetic Zach ran around their Woodland Street neighborhood.

Karen Schneiderman, an outreach worker at the Boston Center for Independent Living who has known Brian Shea for decades, said he relishes his freedom. "Brian doesn't rely on people to take care of him and his child," she said. "They take care of their own lives."

Brian's stolen chair has not been recovered but generous readers have supplied him with a new one and several others have been donated in his name so that as many as four others in need of a powered chair might now have one!

I recognized the Shea family moving down the street from their pictures in the Herald. Brian in his powered chair, Randi on her crutches and Zach enthusiastically leading them drew my attention as I drove past the Islands Ferry Terminal. Perhaps it was a few days late but it looks like the Shea's made it to Hyannis to celebrate Randi's birthday. I wondered if any family was enjoying the Cape as much as were the Shea's. I wiped the blurry dampness from my eyes as my mind and heart took a snapshot of love and courage moving slowly and gracefully down Ocean Street...

Why all these “snapshots?” Well, I’ve been on vacation and you’re supposed to make people look at your pictures when you come home! And surely, both St. Bernard and Pope Benedict are correct on the need for vacations to help one avoid becoming hard-hearted and stupid.

Of course, my real purpose in sharing these with you is to give you a share in the glimpses of God’s grace I saw over the past few weeks. These “snapshots” are filled with grace: grace celebrated, grace offered, grace shared, grace missed, grace incarnate, grace at play, grace triumphant... Perhaps as the summer winds down we might all open our eyes and look for the glimpses of grace God spreads along our path each day.

And as we say every weekend, “For those who need work, and for those who need rest, let us pray to the Lord...”

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming