

14<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (July 5, 2009)  
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

First, an extended announcement: you perhaps saw the article in Friday's Courier about Fr. McManus, priest-chaplain at Covenant Hospital, who is retiring as of July 14. He has served at Covenant for the last 14 years, and I'm sure I speak for my brother priests and you as well in thanking him for his many years of very dedicated service to the patients, their families, and hospital staff as well during that time. His retirement leads to the question: will there be a priest at Covenant in the future? For many years, that position was filled by one of our archdiocesan priests. With our numbers declining in recent years, however, that luxury is no longer available. Covenant has been looking for a priest-replacement for Fr. McManus; I understand that a priest from Nigeria (Africa), now a Canadian citizen, has accepted the position. Because of some immigration issues, it may be a few months before he is able to begin. His name is Fr. Peter (I do not know his last name); I look forward to meeting him.

With this change in priest presence at Covenant after July 14 come some other consequences:

1. There will no longer be Mass at the Covenant chapel on Saturday or Sunday mornings at 8:00. Fr. Peter is hoping to help out at the local parishes on the weekends and to be more visible in the community. And I need to say that I will not resume the Saturday morning Mass that used to be offered here at St. Ed's. I realize that will be a disappointment to some of you, but the four weekend Masses and the Saturday funerals and weddings that come on a regular basis already fill up my weekends.

2. Before Fr. Peter is able to arrive, there will obviously not be a regular priest presence at Covenant. Fr. McManus has agreed to be present there on Wednesdays starting next month until Fr. Peter arrives. In the meantime, I suspect that we local priests will be called out to Covenant for anointing, emergencies, and the like. Of course, we will do the best we can to get there as soon as possible...but please remember that we are not always immediately available. If you know you are going to the hospital and would like to receive the sacrament of anointing, please call the parish center—I'll be more than happy to offer that sacrament beforehand. That's the case, by the way, no matter what hospital you are going to: Covenant, Allen, Sartori, or out of town (Rochester, Iowa City, or anywhere else).

This will obviously be a time of transition for any of us who have any connection with Covenant Hospital in terms of the pastoral care extended to Catholic patients. Again, I promise you that we local priests will be present to you at the hospital as we are able to be; your understanding and patience as we all adjust to these changing conditions will be most sincerely appreciated.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." These words spoken by Jesus to St. Paul form the centerpiece of our second reading today. Paul writes on a very personal level here, telling the Corinthians about a strange experience he had of being afflicted by 'a thorn in the flesh' and of being beaten by 'an angel of Satan.' We have no idea what Paul specifically endured; the Bible scholars can only offer some rather haphazard guesses. But Paul does say that he experienced these sufferings (whatever form they took) so as to not become too conceited. He had received many special graces and revelations from God—and a sort of spiritual pride can easily worm its way into a person's soul if he isn't careful.

It's also fascinating to read that Paul begged the Lord to deliver and free him from his suffering, that 'thorn in the flesh.' That should not surprise us; how many times have any of us prayed to be delivered from this illness or that other trial or difficulty? It's a very natural kind of prayer to offer. And so we come back to Jesus' response: 'my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' Once again, Jesus' words can strike us as countercultural, of going so much against the grain. We value strength; we work hard to preserve or increase our strength—physically, mentally, and spiritually/morally as well. And on this Independence Day weekend, we thank God for the blessings he has given to us as a people and a nation. We also pray for the strength to preserve or (when necessary) return to the ideals and virtues this nation was built on when the Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence 233 years ago.

These are all good and important things to do—strength is indeed a virtue. So why does Jesus say that ‘power is made perfect in weakness’? It goes back at least in part to Paul’s reality. He had been given extraordinary graces by Jesus. Frail, sinful creature that he was, however, he could easily begin to take those divine gifts for granted and then perhaps even begin to think that he deserved those gifts. And so Jesus allowed Paul to experience that suffering—to help him remember that his strength ultimately comes from the risen Christ and only from him. The more Paul experienced his utter dependence on the love, truth and mercy of Jesus Christ, the more he realized that is where his ability to do good and to carry his inevitable crosses came from.

And what is true for Paul is true for us as well. When life is going well, it can be the easiest thing in the world to proclaim a love for Jesus and a willingness to follow and serve him. But things don’t always go our way, do they? That’s not the way life is. And so how do we respond when the Cross appears or reappears in our lives? Do we rant and rave against the unfairness of it all? Do we allow ourselves to sink into a sullen despair or a cynical unbelief? Or do we use that experience to remind us of the perhaps painful but still unavoidable truth that we are not completely self-sufficient—that we need God first and foremost in order to survive and grow in real strength?

Allow me to bring this a little closer to home for us. A week ago last Wednesday, our neighbors in Parkersburg were confronted with another awful tragedy in the shooting death of their football coach Ed Thomas—as if last year’s tornado wasn’t bad enough. I didn’t know Mr. Thomas, but from all accounts he was a deeply loved and respected man on so many levels and not just for his success on the football field. The question going through everyone’s mind: why? What led that young man to do such a terribly wrong thing? How could God let that happen?

No, I don’t have any quick and easy answers. But what has happened has been an amazing demonstration of the power of Christ made present in the weakness and sadness of this tragedy. You have no doubt heard or read that the Thomases (family of the victim) and the Beckers (parents of the young man accused in the shooting) both belong to First Congregational Church in Parkersburg. Soon after the shooting, the Becker family issued a statement expressing their sympathy to the Thomas family and requested prayers for them and all others impacted by this. They said “Ed and Jan were our brother and sister in Christ and will continue to be always. God WILL prevail.” On their part, the Thomas family, speaking through Ed’s son Aaron, spoke of their concern for the Becker family: “They, too, are suffering and grieving, and we want the community to embrace them.”

That, my dear friends, is what real, authentic Christians do. In their weakness, in their grief, in their direct experience of the mystery of evil, they find their power and strength in the risen Christ to reach out and show compassion to each other and then urge others to do the same. By themselves they couldn’t hope or even dream of doing so. But once again, Jesus’ words to Paul are right on the mark: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So please continue to pray for the Thomas and Becker families, that they continue to find their strength and power in Christ as they suffer and grieve. And pray in a special way for the young man accused of this crime (and pray for all who are accused or in prison). God desires for him the grace of conversion and healing. He must and will face the legal process now, but Jesus loves him and died on the Cross for his sins just as he did for all our sins. God loves this young man now no less than he did before this happened—as any parents will always love their child, even if they don’t love the wrong that has been done.

It’s not easy to admit our weakness, our sin; we would rather foster the illusion that we don’t need anyone’s help. But that is an illusion, and it’s a most seductive one at that. The sooner and more readily we acknowledge our weakness and utter dependence on God, the stronger we will be. A paradox to be sure, but true nonetheless. Then we can join Paul in declaring “I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me.” And we will know that joy and peace of the truth that Jesus’ grace is indeed sufficient for us since his power is made perfect in our weakness.

