

Reflection

SVD Foundation Day

St. Augustine Chapel, Bay Saint Louis, MS

September 8, 2016 4 pm

Part I: Proud

I am proud to be a member of the SVD parish. I speak not only for myself but for all the Brothers of the Sacred Heart at St. Stanislaus. We've considered it a real grace to have been beneficiaries of your attention and ministry for decades.

We are richer for your charism of speaking the Divine Word to us and to this community of Bay Saint Louis.

You've touched us by your way of presenting God's Word. You are a delightful contrast to today's clericalism which gives an image of God shouting marching orders for Rules and Rituals. Your word has consistently fed us with the honey of God's good news of forgiveness, close presence, and hope. We're not the only ones who feel that way: a regular mass goer here told me just yesterday, "In other places the word we get is that when the sheep and the goats are assembled, we will miss the cut."

Spreading the GOOD part of the good news is intuitive in you. Your word is divine poetry to us.

The poetry has to do with who you are: an International, multiracial community. Available. Present. Supportive. Open, hospitable, accepting. For us the personification of: Father Bill Kelley and the retreat center named in his memory, which is an oasis for our province and our students. One of our senior students considers the grounds here to be his sacred space. Last week he told a group I was part of: "I was having a very bad week last week until I drove to the Seminary and sat on my swing [the one he had broken during a retreat]. I took in the peace and got filled with the spirit of the retreat. That was a close moment."

You've made yourselves brothers to us. In you your priesthood the Divine Word comes across as flesh and blood.

In the Biloxi diocesan directory we share with you the page listing religious men. We are it. There are no religious men here but the SVDs and the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. It is a great consolation to have you to cling to as both of our communities try to be witnesses in the diocese to vowed apostolic religious life. How lonely we would feel without your strong congregation permanently and faithfully at our side.

Part II: Humbled

I started by saying I am proud to be a member of the SVD parish.

I am also humbled.

As Society of the Divine Word, you are so much more than a Society of Divine Talk! At a critical time in our history and the history of the Church – the decade of the 1960s – you walked the Walk. You were for us the “Society of the Divine Walk” during a time we could not have walked alone. It was time to end the racial segregation of our Province schools. Specifically 1966. This year—2016— is the 50th anniversary of the integration of St. Stanislaus. We would not have been able to do it without you.

Our story of segregation is a shameful one in the story of the Church and of our province. Other schools in the province had serious issues and bad blood. Two school principals would not desegregate. The province had to replace them. It was hard to go against our segregationist clientele, a long history of institutional racism in education, fears of a white backlash, deeply ingrained family prejudice.

Because of you and who you are, everything was different here. You had long ago walked the walk of racial equality and integration. You showed us how Saint Augustine minor seminary and St. Stanislaus could merge seamlessly into one school in August of 1966.

I don't know exactly how it happened. In those days I wasn't part of this parish. Brother Lee Barker was here. What an amazing grace it was for him and the school to have you walking by his side. I went back to the yearbooks of those

years. I saw the pictures of you walking the walk with St. Augustine seminarians, who became class officers, honor society members and star athletes.

There were Fathers Charles Burns, Byron Lasalle, Leonard Olivier, Terry Steib, Gerhard Vogel, Wilbert White. And Jerome Ledoux. Fr. Ledoux, I don't know if you remember founding a club called OLVA: it was an advocate organization for lowering the voting age.

The yearbook of 74-75 sports a photo of a young priest named Walter Bracken smiling through his goatee.

By walking the walk side by side with us, your community transformed our school and our hearts. During the same period you transformed St. Rose Parish into a sanctuary of African American spirituality and an enduring welcome center of Gospel communion between races.

On this feast of Mary, I celebrate Saint Augustine Seminary's long-standing *Fiat* to your vocation to be an attractive and contagious Society of Divine Talk and Walk. There is nothing like it in the world.

Final Feelings

To close to say I how much I admire you. I am deeply grateful for you. I am proud of you. I love you. I never walk away from here without carrying in my heart a strengthened attachment to you. Furthermore I believe that the affection for you that abides in me comes from God.

That is my deep faith. It is reinforced by today's readings:

From the Letter to the Romans: "God is for you."

From the Gospel: "It was by the Holy Spirit that you were conceived."

I bless you with the words of the Prophet Micah:

May you stand firm and shepherd the flock by the strength of the Lord,
In the majestic name of the Lord your God.

And may you remain, for through you

His greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth.”

Brother Bernard Couvillion, SC

bgcouvillion@ststan.com