ST. BARNABAS FREE HOME - St. Barnabas Brotherhood

The death of a Religious Order

Growing up in the Diocese of Pittsburgh in the 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s was a joy. Great bishops like Bp. Austin Purdue encouraged us young people immensely, but one of the highlights of the year was the annual ingathering of foods - foods collected from virtually every parish and mission in the Diocese - wrapped in white paper. The baskets of food would then be taken to Gibsonia to the St. Barnabas Free Home, for residents who lived there. Modern restrictions prevent me from using terms that are now deemed to be unacceptable by the language police, but the residents were people, in many instances, who would have no place of their own to live, largely due to medical conditions.

This extraordinary ministry was possible because of the Brothers of the St. Barnabas Brotherhood - a Residence and Monastery that for many of us was a spiritual center and spiritual home in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. There were two chapels at St. Barnabas: one where the Brothers prayed the Offices and the Chaplain celebrated Mass, and one that had greater physical accessibility which was for the residents.

The Brothers were “lay brothers” and their chaplain, while not a member of the community was significant in terms of his sacerdotal presence. As young people we would go and participate in the annual event on St. Barnabas Day, see our Bishop, visit with the residents who blessed us more than we blessed them, and together have a community picnic.

As many of us grew older, we would return for Quiet Days, Retreats, and simply time to pray and reflect. It was a holy place with holy people. Years later after I was ordained a priest, I was asked in 1976 by the two remaining Brothers to be their chaplain. There were no more residents, and the remaining brothers could not maintain the facilities. I was the last chaplain.

The Church desperately needs Religious Orders, and I can say that the character of the Diocese changed after the death of the Order, and today I suspect that few people remember what an impact this Religious Order had on so many, both at the Mother House in Gibsonia and at another House near Erie, PA. Sadly when I see the various Prayers of the People, in our Prayer Books, I do not see a section where we pray for Religious (Monks, Nuns, Friars, Sisters) nor do I see prayers beseeching God to raise up Religious Orders. In truth, much of my vocation now in my fiftieth year as a priest and thirty years as a bishop was shaped by Religious Orders, and in particular by the St. Barnabas Brotherhood in Gibsonia Pennsylvania.

Please pray that God will raise up men and women who dedicate their lives to living in community and provide safe places for those of us who are in need of their prayers. For 70 years of my life I cannot celebrate the Feast of St. Barnabas without thinking about those days: men in dark brown habits, embracing people who had few others to embrace them……..indeed these Brothers were “sons of consolation.”