***What I learned about Life and Ministry working in the Steel Mills***

In 1964 I walked through the ominous gates of a steel mill as an eighteen-year-old ready to join the ranks of my grandfather, my father, and numerous uncles and cousins. The Swedish side of my family came to the United States to work in the Steel Mills. The Welsh side of my family came to this Country to work in the Tin Mills, and my grandfather was the Superintendent of the Maintenance division of the Tin Mill in our town. My father had entered the steel mills also as a younger teenager than I, and he had “worked his way up” into management, but all of us were at the heart and in reality “blue-collar.” For me entering the mill it also meant becoming a member of the Labor Union. All of my life since 1946 had meant seeing cloudy mill skies, seeing burning blast furnaces, and playing in the snow with a covering of black mill dirt. It also meant recognizing that there was a whole other world that existed behind the gates inside the mill, and that world carried with it sets of protocol, rules, and principles related to manufacturing steel and also trying to coexist with people who spoke other languages, had other traditions and customs, and yet all together were given the task of making steel. Our ethnicities became our nicknames in the mill, and the humor meant that eventually each one of us would be the butt of some ethnic or physical appearance joke. The unwritten rule was to take it in stride or become a victim of our own over sensitivities.

Life was also divided into management versus labor, and the Union not only took our substantial dues each paycheck, but also demanded of us a sense of loyalty. Since my paternal grandfather had lost half of a finger at work one day, went to the hospital in that plant, and had stitches placed on the end of his half finger, he was expected to finish his shift that day, and he did. His “excuse” did not fly. That was life in the mill. We were welcomed to “file a grievance” but it depended upon who you were as to whether or not your grievance would mysteriously make its way to the top of the stack or be placed constantly at the bottom. We even had a grievance officer whom we elected at Union meetings. If the grievance officer became a real pain to management, he was often promoted into management. It was the system.

LESSONS LEARNED: If you want to learn how to live and coexist in a sinful, broken world, get tougher skin, because otherwise, every day you will be offended by something or someone. If we think that everyone really cares about how we feel about everything — that’s called “delusion,” and it usually occurs with people when they think they are the center of the universe. Clergy get into trouble when they think they are “Management and not Labor”! If you have a grievance — pray because your concerns are “on the top of the pile,” when you put them into the hands of Jesus.

All of us wanted to get a paycheck. For me, it meant having money for college tuition. I usually worked Midnight until 8 AM, went home, took a bath (we didn’t have a shower) hurried off to classes, and then took a “sleep break” for a few hours after classes, with the time of the nap depending upon which paper I had to write or which book I needed to read. I needed the paycheck more than I needed sleep. We were fortunate where I lived to be relatively close to several good universities, and so the drive back and forth from the mill to the home to the university simply was a part of life. Churches were often accommodating; so with an early morning Mass, we could work in the mill and still participate in the life of a parish. Although the “blue laws” were in force, steel making is 24/7.

LESSONS LEARNED: if you really feel a calling to do something valuable in this world you cannot live in the realm of “impossible” but rather in the world of “possible.” If you feel called to do something and that “something” is important — you will do it. Pittsburgh Steeler fans worked in rainy, cold, dirty environments at the mill, so they could handle the rainy, cold, dirty football games. If their goal was to watch a live game — those conditions come with the game. If they wanted to have a paycheck, those conditions come with the job.

On my first day in the Steel Mill, I put on the clothing: asbestos pants and jacket, steel-toed shoes, hard hat, tinted glasses, and gloves. An old man with a thick accent took me on the “newbies” tour of the finishing mill where slabs of steel were coming from the furnaces. I saw red, white, and blue — namely the colors produced by the steel. I naively asked the man if that extreme heat would weaken the steel. He said, “You’re a punk kid and you don’t know \* \* \* \* about makin’ steel.” And he was quite correct. The heat treating “forced out” the impurities and there were slag (the waste) trucks and slag railroad cars filled — ready to go to some landfill somewhere where some enterprising people thought they could build shopping centers and buildings.

LESSONS LEARNED: First, hear the entire story of someone before asking a question, since many of our questions are based on ignorance even if others have told us how smart we are. Those “smart” questions are not always “smart” in real-life experiences. Secondly, listen carefully to those who have endured much and not think of our minimal experiences first before listening. Thirdly, when we have what we consider to be “bad breaks” in life, is it possible that it’s really heat that is forcing out our impurities so that we can be purified to be used in a stronger state of existence? Fourthly, much of what we say is often “slag” words, and it is not wise to build on waste products, even if many things in life try to convince us to build on what they are offering instead of on what has been proven as being strong. In the end, steel is steel and waste is waste, and very few people would want to cross a bridge made of slag or made of steel that had not been heat-treated forcing out the slag.

I was amazed by how different parts of the mill did maintenance. Obviously, if a steel mill is producing 24/7, something has to break down. There are even maintenance divisions and crews who work full-time in each section of the mill. In the end, there were two types of maintenance: “break down” and “preventive” or “Preventative.” In the former when something broke, the workers sat around sometimes for several shifts in a row; no steel was made but workers were paid. Sometimes even finding what caused the “break down” was mysterious at best. In the latter type of maintenance, the “shut down” was planned and it was swift. More steel was made and fewer workers were paid for not working. Preventive Maintenance meant anticipating the problem, having the parts in advance, and having people who were trained to make that repair possible.

LESSONS LEARNED: Some people like to avoid all conflict, so they smile and keep on doing whatever it is that they do, and ignore all of the signs of a potential breakdown because they just want everybody to be happy and work out their own problems. When a systemic breakdown occurs, then there is a maximum amount of time spent trying to make the repairs. Sadly, these repairs often do not fix the system, because there had been no maintenance done. In the latter, we look at the various signs and potential problems that could occur and we confront the issue(s) before breakdown occurs. This involves ongoing systemic checks, instead of simply ignoring or avoiding what, in the end, we know could be a fatal problem.

In the end, the ways in which I earned degrees and received information and formation, were richer because I could see God’s hand at work in each, and I could realize that what I learned could simply not be accomplished by taking on-line or correspondence courses. One must be “IN” a steel mill to make steel. I also learned from God that every experience in the steel mill prepared me ultimately to be a therapist, a deacon, a priest, and a bishop. And for that matter, they prepared me to be a husband, a father, and a grandfather. If I look carefully at numerous conflicts that are inevitable in every “system” I have been in, I allow myself to walk back into the steel mill and look carefully at how the product is being made. Whenever we take our eyes off the product, we are in trouble. In the mill when we thought more highly of ourselves than we should, we were humbled. Whenever we want more for ourselves than we really need, I go to my memory of standing in line at the unemployment office during a general layoff or being at home during a Strike - wondering when it would be resolved and wondering when the paycheck would come again.

We are all called to offer the free gift of Salvation as one of the “products” offered by Jesus. So often people start out first by asking about the perks of Heaven, without first going to the foot of the Cross. People who first ask “How much does this job pay” are often not hired. I should have realized those sixty years ago that one day steel would no longer be made where I had worked, and I should have realized that one day there would be churches that would focus on the likes and dislikes and convenience of the congregation, instead of on the price paid by Jesus; lots of Easter and little of Good Friday. The steel mill was filled with pain. As the saying goes, “no pain — no gain.” But the better saying is: “His Pain — your gain.”

***And that’s what I learned in 1964 when***

***I put on my steel mill “vestments!”***