

The Mirror Column  
7-21  
Bishop William Joensen

### **Gentle and Ordinary Revelation**

Chef Mark Peel rose through the culinary ranks in the kitchens of famous restaurants in Paris, West Hollywood, and other hotspots before opening La Campanile with his then-wife Nancy in Los Angeles in the early 2000s. He wrote some popular cookbooks and won the James Beard award for outstanding American restaurant. Chef Peel did not earn his reputation with exotic dishes but by his farm-to-table approach and his special grilled cheese sandwich and tuna noodle casserole made with gruyere cheese, along with other ‘unglamorous’ dishes such as meatloaf and chicken pot pie. He once commented, “You can take the simplest recipe, do it with care, good ingredients and love, and it’s a revelation.”

God’s self-revelation is rarely like a fireworks display bursting at uncomfortably close range. His tender care and love most often wells up from within our midst, amid the network of relations that compose our everyday circle of life. Just as for Jesus who grew to adulthood in Nazareth, God relies on the familiar ingredients of an ordinary life, including our families, our local communities, our day job and the simple pleasures of enjoying one another’s company in a relaxed setting—which, God willing, includes our parish and the small groups with whom we are renewed and refreshed in Catholic faith. Faith is not simply a grace note that is in addition to whatever God decides he wants to do. Faith is a vital ingredient in the collaborative kitchen of God’s kingdom plan. We may pray especially before meals (even though we might be a bit hesitant to do so in public settings, thereby missing a chance to give witness to others), yet we must bring faith to the table in all the varied settings that compose our life’s mysterious menu.

Still, like the folks at Nazareth who encountered Jesus' wisdom and mighty works, we may hold out for a God who is more like a three-star Michelin chef, who brings power, fame, and dazzle to our lives. If we never win a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, we may want a God who does. The crucial question posed to persons of faith, according to Trappist monk Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, is: Do we want to be dazzled or saved? In a similar vein, Fabrice Hadjadj sagely observes: "Every miracle that comes from the One who created the ordinary course of things is not there to turn us toward the extraordinary, but to bring us back with wonder to the ordinary."

We can "ooh" and "ahh" at fireworks bursting in the night sky, but their sizzle is temporary. How childlike and blessed to gaze with contemplative reverence at the fireflies afloat in the fields. We can't ultimately control God's gift in nature—unlike what I tried to do as a boy at the summer picnic when I caught a bunch of fireflies and put them on a bench under upturned Mason jars. We capture and control what God creates with all his wisdom and generosity, only to suffocate the mystery if we don't trust enough to receive and let go, let breathe with the freedom and detachment that faith makes possible.

Chef Mark Peel was 66 years old when he died in mid-June. Our beloved Father Daniel Gehler was only 61 years old when he did not show up for daily Mass on June 30 at St. Joseph Parish in Earling, and was found dead in his residence by parishioners to whom he ministered as pastor, along with St. Peter Parish in Defiance and St. Michael Parish in Harlan. Then, barely ten days later, Father David Smith, SJ, pastor of St. Mary, Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Portsmouth, St. Boniface in Westphalia, and St. Mary of the Assumption in Panama, also did not show up for Mass; he was taken to the hospital in seemingly stable condition, but then suddenly declined and died within a few hours. He was 67. God has taken these two Shelby County

shepherds from our Des Moines diocesan family in a way that seems wrenchingly abrupt, even violent. We grieve and will continue to miss them dearly.

Father Dan was born and raised on a farm in northwest Iowa, and though he eventually had a secular career where his work involved travel to both coasts, he called Iowa home and preferred to stay put. His servant's heart was evident to the people of St. Joseph Parish on the east side of Des Moines long before he entered formation for the permanent diaconate. Upon ordination to the diaconate, the earlier stirrings to priesthood were still there, but it was not until receiving what he called his "two-by-four" moment of losing his job that he heeded the encouragement of his spiritual director and his diaconal classmates to apply for seminary studies for the priesthood. He was ordained to the priesthood in St. Ambrose Cathedral on June 3, 2016, and eventually realized his desire to be a rural pastor in Shelby County as a "young priest" who the day before he died was light-heartedly declared by Father Dan Kirby to have "graduated" after five years in the newly-ordained priest program.

Father David Smith's path to the priesthood led him to join the Wisconsin Province of the Jesuit religious order. He particularly relished his time spent serving Native American peoples at the Red Cloud Indian School at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota before being assigned to our Diocese to direct the Creighton University Retreat Center in Griswold. He became pastor in Shelby County in 2014 and hoped to remain as long as his health allowed.

Both Father Dan Gehler's and Father David Smith's faith, like their personalities, was nothing flashy. Their unswerving dedication to the people with whom they was present, just like their smiles, could light up a room. They were—and remain so—ordinary in the best of senses, and for that reason, they were warmly embraced by parishioners and their brother priests. Their weaknesses, such as their willingness to care for everybody but themselves, were also evident,

but these were also endearing, for they revealed how grace is sufficient, for then God's presence and power are all the more on display. And now, God has lifted the Mason jars so both Father Dan's and Father David's lights can rise to the heavens.

Both priests will remain gentle and ordinary figures in the narrative history of the Des Moines Diocese. We honor them with the rites of the Church and our continued prayers, as well as in the stories and tributes that will continue to be recalled. But we honor Father Dan and Father David most by living our ordinary, familiar faith, day-in, day-out, which is anything but dull; it is the great adventure God's grace affords us. We do not seek to be dazzled but saved by the God-man who came from Nazareth, Jesus Christ. It is in the household of Mary and Joseph, and in our own homes, where the mystery of our redemption is revealed, and all the needed ingredients are in the cupboards of our hearts.