

Wednesday, October 30, 2013
Basilica of St. Michael the Archangel, Loretto
Mass for the Conclusion of the Diocesan Investigation
In the Cause of Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin
Homily

Donald Shephard Hewitt was the creator of the CBS television program 60 Minutes. It began in 1968 and remains the longest-running prime time program in the United States. Before his death in 2009, Hewitt was asked how he was able to make the program such a success.

He said that his approach was simple. It was something that he learned from little children and from the Bible. Hewitt said, “Little children ask their parents, ‘Tell me a story.’” And Hewitt said, “The issue is evil and the story is Noah’s ark.”

Hewitt said that some of the producers at the CBS television network suggested that he do a program about the issue of acid rain. He would tell them that acid rain is not a story; it is a topic. Then Hewitt would tell his staff, “Show me someone whose life is affected by acid rain; that’s a story.”

Evangelization is a topic. It is not a program. Evangelization is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But, as Pope Paul VI explained in the Apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, promulgated in 1975, evangelization is only truly evangelization when it becomes a story.

Many of you have heard of a woman by the name of Mrs. Susan Burgoon was living in this area when it was known as McGuire’s Settlement. The year was 1796 when she became ill and wanted to become a Catholic before she died. Her husband John sent for a priest. The closest available priest happened to be Father Demetrius Gallitzin who was 150 miles away.

Father Gallitzin made the journey and ministered to Susan Burgoon who fell in love with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the sacraments of the Catholic Church. Through that pastoral experience, Father Gallitzin fell in love with this place and the Catholic people who struggled to make a life here.

A pastoral response to the challenges of their lives in this place and other locations in these Allegheny Mountains became Father Gallitzin's life and mission. That's a story.

As most of you know there is so much more to that story. It is a story that has remained alive in the minds and hearts and souls of so many people in this region for all these years. Children of Loretto and other communities would say to their parents, "Tell us a story," and they would hear tales of the life and ministry and holiness of Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin; a priest and a pioneer.

Father Gallitzin connected with the stories of the Catholic settlers in Western Pennsylvania. But his story became their story. It seems to me that his story became the story of Catholics and it remains part of our story because the story of Father Demetrius is intimately connected with a profound mystery of our Catholic faith.

That mystery is the Incarnation; it is the mystery of the Word who was with God and who is God became flesh. The Word made flesh is Jesus Christ who was born into the world as Son of God and Son of Mary. The Word made flesh is Jesus Christ who pitched his tent in the midst of what some might consider the wilderness of a world that longed to experience the love and living presence of God.

The Word made flesh is Jesus Christ who was and who is the living expression of that love and living presence of God. The Word made flesh, is the full expression of God whose desire is that our world should not remain a wilderness, but that it should be transformed into a paradise where the love of God is revealed and shared and passed on from one generation to another.

This great mystery of the Incarnation is THE story. It is the story of the Gospel. A story that brings life and light and hope to people whether they find themselves in wilderness or in Paradise.

This Gospel is our story which has been proclaimed in these Allegheny Mountains and not forgotten since the first visit of Father Gallitzin. As suggested in the image used by the Prophet Isaiah in the first reading, Father Gallitzin came here to the top of the mountain to establish a house of prayer where the people gather joyfully to give honor and praise to the glory of God.

You and I are the beneficiaries of Father Gallitzin's response to the order given by Jesus at the end of the Gospel; to go out and make disciples of all nations by proclaiming the ultimate story of faith which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Father Gallitzin did that with the firm conviction that God was always with him and the people he was called to serve. That's why Demetrius Gallitzin is known as the Apostle of the Alleghenies. He was convinced of his vocation as one who was sent; as one who was sent here to proclaim that Gospel.

Our Bishop Emeritus, Bishop Joseph, has often reminded us of the need for people of our time to adopt and manifest the evangelizing spirit of Servant of God Demetrius Gallitzin. Far from being just an issue or idea, this challenge to adopt and manifest this evangelizing spirit is a story that each one of us must repeat over and over in our lives.

In the past several months, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has reminded us that this is our vocation because it is the vocation that Jesus gave to the Church that we heard repeated in the Gospel of Matthew.

Pope Francis tells us that in order for all of us to be true to that vocation of the Church, we cannot remain closed in on ourselves where we become preoccupied with our own self-interests. Instead, we are to go out beyond the doors of the Church to those who are on the periphery.

That's the evangelizing story of Father Gallitzin. Beginning with the story of Susan Burgoon who was seeking Christ in his Catholic Church, Father Gallitzin went out beyond the doors in which he could have remained safe and secure and relatively unaffected by what was going on in the world during his time. Instead, he went out and it brought him to us here in Loretto and throughout these mountains.

That view is so evident in Father Gallitzin's letter to a Protestant Minister in defense of Catholic principles, where he says, "The idea we have of a minister of Christ, you will perceive, is precisely the same which the first Christians must have had. Surely, dear sir, the Church in 1815 must be the same as it was in the beginning: the same kind of pastors, provided with the same powers, administering the same baptism, the same Eucharist or Lord's supper; in short, all the same sacraments, and preaching the same doctrine."

And so it goes for us today, 200 years after Gallitzin wrote those words. We gather here this evening to be reminded of the same doctrine and to celebrate the same Holy Eucharist that was instituted by Christ the Lord so that what is meaningful and life-giving is not just a topic to be researched and discussed, but a story, a story of living faith.

That story, in which our stories are connected with the story of Demetrius Gallitzin, is reason for us to give praise and thanks to the Lord for the living legacy of this Servant of God; this Apostle of the Alleghenies. That's what we do here this evening.

We have a well-founded conviction of the holiness of Demetrius Gallitzin and we pray that one day he may be counted among the officially recognized saints of God. We do not take it upon ourselves to canonize him, but we pause this evening to certify what has been gathered in recognition of the story of Father Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin; his life, his ministry, his holiness; a holiness to which every one of us has been called.

Ideas, concepts, or topics can be sterile and even dull or boring. But stories of the flesh and blood and spirit and faith of others, like Servant of God Demetrius, inspire us to go out to those on the periphery and share with them the ultimate story, the timeless story of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

When it was announced that I was appointed Bishop of Altoona-Johnstown and even before I was ordained, I heard from many of the priests of our diocese who had two important requests.

- That I would help with encouraging and fostering vocations to the priesthood in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown;
- That I would help with the renewal of the presbyterate of our diocese.

In these two and a half years, these are the special intentions that I have presented to the Lord in my personal prayer every day while invoking the name of Father Demetrius Gallitzin.

Each day I say, "Lord God, with the help of the prayers of your servant Demetrius Gallitzin, please grant an increase of vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. Awaken to this call young men and women who are outstanding in holiness, full of love, and ready, willing, and able to serve you and your people."

And each day I say, “Demetrius, Servant of God, please pray for us, the priests of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, that we may continue to grow in holiness and remain faithful to our vocations.”

I have a sense that the first intention is being heard because there was one seminarian for our diocese when I first started, and now we have four; with more on the way. I am confident that even right now in this Basilica there are young men and women who have heard or felt in their heart the stirring of the Holy Spirit calling them to follow Christ as priests or religious.

And I have a sense that the second intention is being heard because more and more the priests of our diocese have been directly involved in encouraging and supporting young men in the discernment of a vocation to the priesthood.

It may not sound like much, and for some it may still seem a bit discouraging. But I cannot help but think of the circumstances of the priestly ministry of Father Gallitzin when there were less than a handful of priests in all of western Pennsylvania.

I have seen the award-winning television program 60 Minutes on a few occasions. It’s endurance as a long-running news magazine is credited to Donald Hewitt’s vision of the impact that stories have in people’s lives.

Thanks be to God that the endurance of the Catholic faith in these Allegheny Mountains and in our Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown is credited to the impact of the priestly life and ministry and holiness of Father Demetrius Gallitzin.

We are about to conclude a Year of Faith, which has been a time for each of us to be renewed in our awareness and understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that we can continue to experience our personal encounter with the Son of God. That encounter should be a motivation for us to engage in the New Evangelization that is needed in our time and place.

During the Holy Year of 1975, Pope Paul VI explained in the Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* that evangelizing means bringing the Good News of Jesus into every human situation and seeking to convert individuals and society by the divine power of the Gospel itself.

At its essence are the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ and the response of a person in faith, which are both works of the Spirit of God. Evangelization must always be directly connected to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pope Paul VI observed that there is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed. Otherwise, people are deprived of the opportunity to encounter the Lord Jesus Christ who is the source of life and holiness for all of us.

We gather here this evening to bring to conclusion the diocesan investigation of the sanctity of life of Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin. I do not need to convince any of you that official recognition of Father Gallitzin is long overdue. And so we move forward by sending the Acts of the investigation to the Holy See.

Regardless of the outcome of these years of asking questions and finding answers about the story of Father Gallitzin, all these efforts will have been worth it if we remember the first love of this Servant of God; to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that others may come to know him, love him, and serve him, and experience the peace and happiness of his Kingdom.

Demetrius Gallitzin was called to engage in the work of the first Evangelization in Western Pennsylvania. That's what the story of Demetrius Gallitzin is all about.

In this Year of Faith we have rediscovered that it is to be our story too, because we are called to engage in a New Evangelization which will continue to renew our lives and the people out there like Susan Burgoon who want to know Christ through his Church.