

## 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

I split the cost of a hotel room with a priest friend of mine, recently retired from teaching at the University of Notre Dame. Each year during the first week of January he and I attend the annual conference of the North American Academy of Liturgy, this year in Vancouver. When the conference ended, we went to two very different places. I flew to Erie, Pennsylvania, where seven feet of snow lay on the ground, to give some talks on liturgy for their diocese, and he flew to Hawaii for some vacation time with friends. You're probably thinking he made the better choice. But the people of Erie were very kind to me especially after they realized that the dates they had chosen for their gathering began on my birthday. And my friend Michael woke up in Hawaii on a Saturday morning when his cell phone erupted with this text message in all capital letters: "EMERGENCY ALERT: BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL." As you probably know from the news, an employee at the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency, following instructions to carry out a drill, chose the wrong option from a dropdown menu and sent this message to the public, alarming thousands of people, including my friend Michael from Notre Dame. He told me afterward, "Immediately there was a moment of panic, which turned quickly to resignation." Others were not so peaceful. Many realized that on an island they had no shelter from an inbound missile. They thought the end was near until the threat was canceled 38 minutes later.

In retrospect, many people realized they needed better plans for physical shelter in case of an actual inbound missile; others realized they needed spiritual shelter. If you think your life is coming to an end, what spiritual steps do you take? Many who received the alert contacted their family and friends to say, "I love you," creating in the world a spiritual good as their presumed final act. In the Catholic tradition we also encourage people to make an act of perfect contrition, that is, declaring to God our total love, complete sorrow for our sins, and resolving to confess mortal sins to a priest as soon as possible - if it is possible. Under such circumstances, a bishop may permit priests to offer general absolution, giving people forgiveness when there is no time to hear every confession individually. A spiritual emergency evacuation plan, then, may include both expressions of love and of repentance.

When Jonah arrived on the shores of Nineveh, he warned the people, "Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed." Given forty days to respond, the people fasted and repented, and God showed them mercy. A similar theme arises in Psalm 25 today, "Good and upright is the Lord; he shows the way to sinners." Jesus' first message at the beginning of his ministry was "Repent and believe." Christianity starts from a focus on how imperfect we are, how sinful we are, and how much we need the perfect love and mercy of God. Psalm 25 pleads, "O Lord, make me know your ways. Teach me your paths." With the wisdom that comes from God, we can live in a way that obtains forgiveness for our sins.

None of us knows when the end will come - whether in forty years, forty days or thirty-eight minutes. We will be prepared if we practice our spiritual emergency evacuation plan, proclaiming our love of God and neighbor and asking forgiveness for our sins.

Sunday, January 21, 2018