

“THEREFORE, STAY AWAKE!”: A SHEPHERD AFTER THE HEART OF JESUS

“Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.” These words are taken from the Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent, Year A. They were the last Scriptures upon which **Bishop Paul David Sirba** would reflect as he prepared a homily for St. Rose Catholic Church in Proctor, MN. Having recently taken up residence in its rectory and following a 19-inch snowstorm, he was walking to Church to offer the 8:00 a.m. Mass so that the pastor (in residence at another parish) would not have to brave the roads. Seemingly, a decade passes in an instant. December 14 would have marked ten years since the consecration and installation of Bishop Paul Sirba as the Ninth Bishop of Duluth. It was a shock to all when he died suddenly of a heart attack two weeks ago. By all accounts, the heart attack was immediately fatal.

Bishop Paul Sirba was more than a dear friend; he was truly an **inspiration** for living my priesthood in the most authentic way possible. He was kind, caring, deeply spiritual—authentically human and real. Friends since seminary days (he was three years ahead of me), we grew much closer during the four-year period during which I lived in residence at Saint John Vianney College Seminary. I was serving as Co-director of the Vocations Office, while he was serving as spiritual director at the seminary. We had daily interaction during those four years, and I came to respect his authentic holiness, sense of humor and joy for the priesthood in an even deeper way. He truly led quietly by his example, and not by fiat or force.

We took numerous trips together and he was the **perfect** travel companion. Why? Because **he let me plan** them all! But seriously, he always “went with the flow” and never became flustered, even if we occasionally got lost or something went awry. We took multiple trips to Canada, Europe and national parks within the United States. I took pride in planning an itinerary and making arrangements. He dubbed my efforts “Ubel Tours,” a moniker that stuck! I presented a proposal and with a minimum of horse trading, we would settle on a plan. How many people do you know who would agree to take a trip on the Dempster Highway, a **456-mile dirt road** from the Yukon Territory to Inuvik, Northwest Territories, in order to see the Arctic Ocean? Well—he and his brother, **Fr. Joe Sirba** agreed. The pristine and barren landscape was stunning, and we had a ball!

In 2009 while serving as Superintendent of Saint Agnes School, I was to lead a group of high school girls on a **pilgrimage** with the express purpose of praying to discern one’s vocation in life. The pilgrimage was to Italy. But after agreeing to accompany me (lest I be the only male amongst 16 high school girls and three female chaperones), Father Sirba had to cancel. But this time he had a good excuse—Pope Benedict XVI had named him as Bishop of Duluth, and our trip was scheduled for one month before his consecration. One day while in Rome, I brought the girls to the **Basilica of Santa Sabina**, one of Rome’s most ancient basilicas on the Aventine Hill. There we posed for a photograph in front of the painting of Our Lady of the Rosary in one of the side chapels. Duluth’s Cathedral is Holy Rosary. I sent him a text message photograph, aware that it was just 5:30 AM in St. Paul. It said that we were praying for him and were with him in spirit, knowing he could not be with us in person.

He immediately called back to thank us! He had just begun his daily Holy Hour. Then he said to me, “By the way do they have any holy cards of that painting by Sassoferrato? (see sidebar) in the gift shop?” I told him I would be happy to inquire. “How many would you like?” I asked. **Pause.** He responded sheepishly: “Well...what about... say 5000?” “Are you serious?” I exclaimed. He was, so I went to the gift shop and in my best broken Italian, inquired about the availability of the *immagini*. The **expression** on their collective faces was **priceless**. They told me I would have to come back later. I did just that, bringing the girls to the next stop on my meticulously planned agenda, calculating I had just enough time to hop into a cab to Santa Sabina, make the purchase and return at the end of the girls visit with some Sisters of St. Peter Claver in Rome.

Do you know how much 5000 holy cards weigh? I lugged them around the rest of the trip and had a huge smile on my face. I was so happy to tell him, “Mission Accomplished!” We laughed about that escapade. In the person of Bishop Paul Sirba, there was truly no guile. He was as humble as he was personable, as kind as

he was gentle, and as sincere as one could possibly imagine. He was the holiest priest I have known, and I will miss him greatly. But in faith, I **should be happy** for him, for he is with the Lord whom he loved and served so faithfully for **33 years** as a priest and bishop. I do not fancy the man called upon to succeed him. The Diocese of Duluth and the Archdiocese of Saint Paul And Minneapolis lost a true shepherd after the heart of Jesus. His episcopal motto was “They Will Be Done.” Well done, good and faithful servant. May you rest in peace.

- Today, we invite you to write names of loved ones in whose memory or in whose honor you wish to make a donation to our Christmas **Flowers and Decorations Fund** for our main sanctuary and ten side chapels. This year we plan to add two Christmas trees to the back of the sanctuary. The trees will provide a beautiful backdrop for the poinsettias. Insurance regulations forbid live trees, and these could be used each year. Your generosity is most appreciated. We will leave the envelopes out for the next two Sundays.
- The sudden announcement of the postponement in the beatification of **Venerable Fulton Sheen** is highly unusual and not without speculation. Unusual because the Pope approved a miracle of intercession, so we believe that Sheen is interceding from heaven. But the climate today surrounding bishops and their oversight has come under increasing scrutiny. The delay is related to being extra cautious about his historical record in this area of oversight. Many are hoping and praying that the delay is only that—a delay, and not a cancellation.
- **Thank you!** To date, we have **raised \$11,121** towards our **Safety and Security Fund**. Recall, the goal is to install high quality security cameras throughout the church and campus in order to provide the safest environment possible for all who enter these doors. Yes, this is a bigger ticket item, but it is necessary. We will proceed as we have funds available, so please consider a gift before the end of the calendar year. We also hope to address the issue of fire prevention in the dome.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector



Outside boyhood home of
Pope Benedict XVI
Markt am Inn, Bavaria
October 7, 2019

