

Though I'm a priest here in the archdiocese in the Twin Cities, admittedly my heart is in the diocese of Duluth, and in about 29 years, 340 days or so, I may end up retiring in the diocese up there. I guess it's in part because I love the open areas, the nature, the wildlife, and of course the big lake. As a photographer, I go up there for photographs throughout the year, and average probably around 10 trips or more up 35 each year.

Most of the spots I visit again and again for photos like Gooseberry Falls or the Devil's Kettle, but about ten years ago when I had a booth at a festival for photography, another photographer, seeing that I was a priest, came up to me and gave me a photo he had taken. It was mounted on a greeting card, and it was of a cross that was on the shores of Lake Superior. He told me where to find it, and it was known simply as "Father Baraga's Cross." Sure enough, when I went on my next trip up north, there was a brown sign near Schroeder, Minnesota, directing you off the highway to the shores of Superior where you will find the cross near the Cross River.

It's a beautiful spot, but why is this cross there overlooking Superior? The answer to that is it was because a man who was born into privilege decided to walk away from that, travel halfway across the world, and bring the

Gospel to people who weren't hearing it because there was no one to teach them: the Native Americans in the Great Lakes area.

Frederic Baraga was born in Slovenia at the end of the 19th century. He was born into a noble family, and received a great education in Vienna where he studied law. But despite considering the law as a career, the Holy Spirit was calling him to the priesthood. His family was deeply religious, and in college he got to know a priest, Fr. Clement Hofbauer, who helped him to grow in his faith by patterning his life after Christ's, and making prayer a regular part of his daily life. This inspired Frederic, according to his biographer Fr. Glenn Phillips, to make decisions from a religious point of view.

Despite a possible career in law, he left law school to prepare for the priesthood and so went to the seminary, and was ordained a priest in September of 1823. He also elected to walk away from the inheritance that he would have received, as his parents died when he was still a teenager.

His first work was in Slovenia, where there were problems. People were falling away from the faith, being attracted to Jansenism, a heresy in the

Catholic faith. The Austrian emperor, who was in power over the area at the time, was also somewhat hostile to religion, outlawing a devotion to the Sacred Heart. Frederic instituted it anyway at his parish. When he was then put at a remote parish as the third assistant where the others hindered his efforts, his response was to be kind and serve the people. But being a little discouraged about what was going on in his homeland, he heard of the great needs in America specially the diocese of Cincinnati, specifically with respect to evangelizing Indians. His request to go to America was approved.

After a month crossing the Atlantic, he began studying the Ottawa language. He was assigned to Arbre Croche, Michigan, which is near Harbor Springs, an 800 mile journey. The Indians shared their many spiritual gifts with Fr. Baraga: deep religious faith and love, harmony, an unwritten order of life, a quiet and peaceful community, and affection and respect for their spiritual leader. He shared with them the devotional practices he used, and learned their different patterns of life and prayer. And he worked hard to serve them. He spent days and nights trying to get the language down perfectly so he could teach the faith to them in their own language. Of course it wasn't always a warm reception; when he'd go

to Beaver Island on Lake Michigan, getting there across 30 miles of open water, there was some resistance to his message, but he never gave up. He'd also have to contend with fur traders, who continued their unscrupulous practices and provisions of whiskey to the native peoples. He challenged them on having their belly as their God. They threatened his life even as they promoted ignorance, poverty and drunken aggressiveness among the natives. A drunken crowd paid the missionary's small home a visit and threatened to burn it. Only the sheriff's visit finally ended their loud threats. And despite the animosity from some of the white settlers and traders, some saw the holiness in this priest and recognized they needed to change. Specifically a group from a sugar camp came to Mass, and Fr. Baraga went out to another camp to offer Mass at Easter of them.

In the fall of 1832, when the bishop visited, he spoke of future work among the tribes around Lake Superior. Part of the reason he'd be moved though was because of his savvy as an attorney. At the time, the federal government was steadily caught up in driving the Indians into the dust. Using his skills as a lawyer Baraga tried to protect the rights of the Indians in these negotiations. The Indian agent sought his removal. The government dealt with the bishop who drew Fr. Baraga into consenting to

leave so that he could go to the Ojibway on Lake Superior, where French Jesuits had nurtured the faith 100 years ago. In obedience Baraga gave his work into the hands of another missionary.

He arrived near Bayfield, Wisconsin to serve on an island (Madeline Island) in July of 1835. He baptized 50 Ojibway in his first week. It was a tough first winter; he didn't even have winter clothes yet, but because most Indians went deep into the woods in winter, that's where he went too. He'd cross the ice daily, and that first winter prepared 20 adults and two children for Christmas baptism.

In 1836, he arrives near Duluth, and returns to Europe the following year to recruit priests for the mission of Lake Superior and to have a book printed on the life of Christ and prayers in the Ojibway and Ottawa languages.

When he went back to America he continued to serve near Bayfield, and also went east of there to meet up with another Ojibway band in 1843 where found the group embarrassed by a drunken revelry in the village. Yet they refused to listen if he would not stay with them. He agreed to stay two weeks and found the seeds of great good among those who received his words and desired information. Later when funds came from Europe, he

worked to build log homes near Bayfield and a church. Winters found him snowshoeing hundreds of miles to visit LaPointe, Fond du Lac (near Duluth) and Grand Portage missions. Summers found him traveling by water. When the Catholics returned that fall to L' ACSE, one of the missions, he found that several canoes needed to go the 400 miles round trip to Sault Ste. Marie to bring back supplies before winter. His journeys by water were equally difficult and dangerous. One such trip was the 40 mile "short cut" across the open waters of Lake Superior from Sand Island (Apostle Islands) to Grand Portage. The alternative route took a month and 200 miles along the shore. However, a storm rose on the lake and Frederic and his single native companion, Lewis, struggled through the ever-higher waves. Frederic prayed on through several hours of buffeting wind and rain, before they came to the frightening sight of a craggy shore ahead. "We will be saved," he assured his companion. "Go straight on." And there ahead could be seen a small, calm river. They disembarked and erected a small cross of thanksgiving. The river is still known as Cross River. And it's here, as the river is a direct tributary of Superior, that today you will find Father Baraga's Cross, that wood cross replaced by a granite one.

In 1853, he received notice that he was to become a bishop. Before leaving the city for his begging trip to Europe he wrote his first pastoral letter in English and Ojibway. His message was: stand firm in the faith, adore, respect, obey and love God all the days of your life. (N.B. Baraga's pastoral letter is the only such letter ever printed in a language of the native peoples of America.) He'd serve the next 12 years in Sault Ste. Marie in the UP of Michigan, and continue his ministry among the people known as "The Indian's Bishop." It wasn't easy. There were mean-spirited men who opposed him, continuing shortage of funds and harshness from some who had lent him money. Some criticized him for his "spoiling" of the Indians with "too much" generosity. Others thought him too solicitous in his defense of poor people's rights. The last decade of his life he grew weaker, but he'd still travel to be with the people in winter, serve the dying and hear confessions. He died in January of 1867, in his 37th year of ministry to the Native Americans.

When you look at his life's work as a missionary, I think if you were to sum it up in just a sentence, it could be that he helped the blind to see and the deaf to hear. He reached out to people that were often just used by fur traders, or others might have just written off and not evangelized to, and

brought hundreds of people to the faith. And the question for us this week in our Gospel, is do we want to hear, and do we help others to hear as well.

Jesus, on a missionary trip of his own to the Decapolis, an area of 10 cities that were influenced by the Greek culture, encounters a man who is deaf. And the deafness can symbolize something else, spiritual deafness. He then takes the man off by himself away from the crowd and says “Ef-a-ta” or “be opened!”

That man is all of us. And the challenge for us is to first, hear.

We can be deaf too. For some, like the Native Americans that Fr. Baraga ministered to, no one was evangelizing to them. For others, the deafness is a result of culture, or even family and friends drowning out the word of God with so many other things so that God isn't given proper importance. Or perhaps its just busyness that gets in the way of our spirituality. Fr. Baraga began by listening; listening to the counsel of his spiritual director Fr. Clement, listening to the Holy Spirit through prayer, and then making the choice to walk away from a law career and an inheritance and to serve God as a priest. That first step towards hearing is listening to God through

prayer, the sacraments, and especially Mass. When we make that a routine in our lives, we can discern what God is calling us to do. We can hear His voice, and keep him as the one who guides us through life.

But with that too, we must remember that the Church is there to guide us as well, to help us hear the voice of God. George Wiegel is a noted Catholic author and a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. A few days ago, he penned an op-ed in Wall Street Journal called “A Crisis - But Not of Faith.” He points out in it that scandals of abuse in the Church must never cause a Catholic to lose trust in Christian teaching. He points out that yes bishops have made mistakes in handling the abuse situation, but that our Church in his words is “such a large, fascinating, complex and storied institution and Catholic life is so focused on institutions like parishes, schools and hospitals that it’s easy for serious Catholics to lose sight of something quite basic: Catholics aren’t - or shouldn’t be - at Mass on Sunday because they admire the pope of the day, or their local bishop or their pastor. Catholics come to Mass on Sunday to hear what we believe to be the Word of God in Scripture and enter into what we believe to be communion with God because of Jesus Christ...Friendship with Jesus Christ is where Christianity begins. To learn

from Christ and to be fed by him in holy Communion is the primary reason for Catholic worship. If Catholics lose sight of that, the awfulness that has come to light about some of the people of the Church, at all levels of Catholic life, can cause what might seem at first blush a crisis of faith... Yet, much as I share the anger and disgust of my fellow Catholics over what has surfaced these past few months, I'd suggest to those imagining themselves in a crisis of faith that they're experiencing something different: a challenge to understanding what the Church really is. As the Second Vatican Council taught in the first sentence of its most important document. The Church, first and foremost is about Jesus Christ, the "light of the nations." Catholics trust Jesus Christ; trust in the institutions of the Church follows from that. And when trust in the Church as an institution is broken, as it has been so many times over two millennia, it's important to refocus on the basis of the Catholic faith, which is trust in Jesus Christ." Remember a few weeks ago when many leave after Jesus' Bread of Life teaching which they say is hard. Peter and the 12 are asked do you want to leave too, and Peter says "Master to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life." That conviction, notes Weigh, is the reason to stay a Catholic and the reason to bend every effort to reform the Church as an institution, so that it can be a credible witness to the Lord who offers communion with God and words of

eternal life.” He sees the Church being called to a purification through more radical fidelity to Christ, to Catholic teaching and to Catholic mission. That’s where the moral teachings of the Church matter so much. They are there not to hinder, but to guide and help us to holiness. It’s why Fr. Baraga decided to go deeper and deeper in his faith and learn it. We are nourished by the sacraments, but the Church also helps us to hear how to lead a holy life which is why she speaks on things like abortion, the treatment of the poor, and sexual morality. So lets make sure catechesis is an ongoing part of our lives. If you are deaf, you have a hard time speaking and do so with an impediment. So lets hear what the Church has to say in helping us learn God’s law so we can engage with others and know our faith.

Lastly, as I shared a couple of weeks ago from Fr. Mike Schmitz of the Duluth Diocese, he urges people to not leave but lead the Church. And that’s so important, because there’s a lot of people out there who need us.

Mr. Weigel sees it in the Church - there are bishops, priest and lay men and women who have squarely faced the abuse situation and are determined to get answers to the questions that have to be made. Fr.

Baraga in his priesthood experienced other priests who frustrated him in his ministry, but he decided not to give up but rather to work to help others

hear the voice of God. So how do we do that? Within the Church, when we see things that need reform, we engage our bishops. And in the greater world, we recognize that it's important to evangelize, to talk about our faith. As an example, one time I met with a couple who were engaged. They weren't yet living together. And they made note of how some friends were completely baffled. Why are you not saving money? Why not know now if you should stay together as living together you might find you should not get married and would know? Well they knew they were doing the right thing, and I'd suggest in making their choice through their actions, they were evangelizing. We need to be like that; to evangelize with how we live our lives, but also be able to articulate why we believe what we do. If someone asks you about Mary, the saints or why you genuflect in front of the tabernacle, or what a tabernacle is, could you answer them? Do we look for ways to talk to kids about the faith, or to engage those who get the anything goes message from the world? There's so much spiritual deafness in the world, and the Holy Spirit can use us to open the ears of others. To do that we need to be able to speak the language of our faith. Fr. Baraga spent countless hours learning his faith but also the Ojibway language, and then a life of walking through the woods of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Upper

Michigan to bring the Gospel to people and save souls. How far are we willing to go for our faith?

When we look at our lives there's a lot we can speak about; perhaps our expertise at a video game, or a hobby; or the fortunes of a sports team. Maybe we know a thing or two about where to go on vacation. Doing a little research, I know know why there is a granite cross in Schroeder Minnesota, but I also know what that cross meant to the priest who first put a wooden one there in 1846. He's love for Jesus compelled him to travel to the ends of the earth to help others learn and speak the language of faith. Hopefully when we look to the Cross and think of our faith, we make the time to hear what God is saying us, and like Venerable Fr. Baraga, help others to also hear God's voice and proclaim him to one another. As we now prepare for Holy Communion, may our hearts, minds and souls be open to His grace, and may we grow in that grace by hearing and understanding God's word and our faith, so that we can help others hear the directions we've all been given to the Kingdom of Heaven.