

Jesus, our Eternal Fire Fighter

Earlier this week, after helping with an evening Lenten penance service at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, I decided to go to the Ott House, a nearby favorite restaurant and pub, to get a late dinner. When I went in, the place was packed with everyone from locals, to Mount students, to people associated with the FEMA academy in town, to people watching the Olympics on TV and some seminarians. I sat up near the bar first because there was nowhere else to go.

While I was there I met several fascinating people, including a man from New York who was taking a course over at FEMA related to HAZMAT chemicals. He is a currently a firefighter in New York City. So, we talked for a little bit, and as we talked and I learned about his work he shared a great story with me – and gave me permission to share it, too!

As a firefighter a few years ago, he was sent to an apartment complex that had caught fire. He had to go in to rescue a young woman who was trapped inside and upstairs on one of the floors above. It was a pretty bad one, so he went in to find the woman and through the flames and fury did eventually find her upstairs. She was alive, but struggling to breathe because of the heavy smoke. He said at one point it was so intense that the flames and the heat were like a “wall” that pushed him back at one point as he was going through a doorway.

Thankfully, he reached the woman and carried her. Yet because of the raging fire downstairs they were unable to make exit through the main entrance.

So he opened a window and had to – very carefully – “toss” the woman down to firefighters below who safely caught her. Once he learned that there was no one else left inside he himself had to get out. I asked him if, in this situation or in another instance as a firefighter, he had ever wondered if he wasn't going to make it. He simply said that when you are in those situations you don't even have time to think about that!

As he quickly went through a larger room to get out of the burning house – it was probably a living or dining room – he said he saw something striking out of the

corner of his eye.

“Father, I’m not the most religious man around,” he told me, “but when I turned to go out, I stopped in my tracks.”

There was a large painting of Jesus Christ hanging on the wall. What was amazing was that the frame was engulfed in flames: but the image of Jesus itself wasn’t burning at all. In fact, he noticed that it even had a bright light around it.

He then said he knew he was going to make it out. And he did.

And, everyone from that house ended up being saved.

That’s a true story, and it reminds me of what Lent is all about. It reminded me of one of the prayers we prayed at mass last week on Ash Wednesday:

“O Lord... through our works of penance and charity... we may turn away from harmful pleasures and, cleansed from our sins, may become worthy to celebrate the Passion of your Son, who lives and reigns forever and ever.”

The works of penance and charity that we do are meant to purify us, like the flames burning that picture frame. Yet as they do that, more importantly they help us to focus on Christ. They are Lenten reminders to us that even in the midst of the “fires” we fight in our own lives, often on a daily basis, Jesus is always and ever present to us, as he was to this fireman and to the woman he saved. As divine Lord and most human savior, he knows all about the fires we fight. Remember that he was sent into the desert to be gravely tempted and tested [Mk 1:12-15, the Gospel of the First Sunday of Lent.]

He is our “Eternal Firefighter” that has come into a burning world to save us, to rescue us from the fires of hell and lead us safely home to heaven. May all that we do during this holy season help us to see the face of Jesus more clearly in our lives. His light always conquers the darkness.