

Local author finds God's presence

I was fortunate enough to be given a copy of "I Never Really Left" by Jozef J. Goethals. This is his autobiographical account of growing up in Belgium during the Nazi occupation, his involvement as a youth in Catholic action programs, his formation in the seminary (much of which I could identify with), his ministry as priest-teacher and missionary in the Philippines, and his leaving the priesthood and continuing his ministry as a teacher for 31 years here in Baltimore at Notre Dame Preparatory School.

In his introduction, Goethals has this powerful reflection: "I finally understood that the events in my life, the people I met, the struggles I endured, the defeats and the victories, were all part of a fabric through which a golden thread was woven. The golden thread was the presence of God who knew me, loved me and never left me behind."

Goethals notes that he did not create his life.

"I was called into being, was called to serve, called into an unknown future by this divine power who knew me," he said. After the Nazis were defeated, terrible reprisals were taken on ordinary German citizens in the formerly occupied countries. Innocent Germans were thrown out of their homes, beaten, sometimes killed, often left homeless. Goethals recounts that there were 14 million German refugees, whom no one essentially cared about.

A Belgian priest started an outreach to these people. Through his efforts, millions of lives were saved and former enemies were reconciled. People who had been traumatized by German Nazis now reached out to help ordinary German citizens. The wonderful line that the priest spoke was: "God is better than we think God is, and people are better than we think people they are."

This priest firmly believed in a forgiving God, and in the power of people to rise above their own prejudices and unforgiveness.

Martin Luther King Jr. was right when he said: "Revenge makes us even. Forgiveness makes us better."

Jozef Goethals was in Rome during the years of the Second Vatican Council. He was thrilled by the new spirit of renewal. He never lost his vision of the church as a servant church. He spent the rest of his life serving the church, and serving others through the church. If you care to know the rest of the story, his book is published by Otter Bay Books here in Baltimore.

I want to skip to the end of the book. He closes it with a prayer he composed, a prayer shared with many students, and prayed each day by School Sister of Notre Dame Helen Marie Duffy until the day of her death. I offer the prayer with just some slight editing:

Dear God, I ask you to bless me, and to watch over me this day.

May my feet walk where my presence will be a glimpse of you.

May my hands touch someone in pain.

May my eyes always see the good in everyone.

May my ears listen only to words of praise and not to words that tear down.

May my mouth always speak the truth.

May my mind not judge others because they are different.

May I just be myself - a reflection of you.

May my heart be restless until it rests in you.

I ask this in the name of your Son and your Spirit for today, tomorrow and all my days. Amen!

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