

'The World Needs Heroes'

Is appealing to a young man's innate desire to be a hero the key to attracting more vocations to the priesthood?

Matthew Hennessey, an associate editorial features editor at the Wall Street Journal, thinks so.

In a recent **column**, Hennessey introduced readers to Father Andrew Vill, a young priest of the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., who was a teenager during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Father Vill was inspired by a banner on the landing page of a website developed by the Archdiocese of New York after the attacks. The message was simple and direct: "The World Needs Heroes."

"Every young man wants to be a hero," Father Vill told Hennessey. "We dream about saving the day."

The Catholic Church has untold numbers of heroes who "save the day" and, more importantly, save souls.

Hennessey highlighted just one of them - St. Maximilian Kolbe, whose feast we celebrate today. The Polish Conventual Franciscan gave his life in place of that of a family man in the Auschwitz concentration camp who had been selected to be killed in response to the 1941 escape of fellow prisoners.

There are countless others.

St. Ignatius Loyola was inspired to reform his life and found the Society of Jesus after reading the lives of the saints on his sickbed. Blessed Oscar Romero, who is expected to be canonized soon, was murdered in San Salvador in 1980 while celebrating Mass. Blessed Jerzy Popieluszko was murdered by the Polish Security Service in 1984 after upholding the dignity of all in the face of oppressive Communism in his native Poland.

St. Isaac Jogues, the 17th-century Jesuit missionary to the Hurons of New France, is one of my favorites.

While Father Vill was inspired to priestly service by a banner message on a website, St. Isaac's missionary zeal was emboldened by the messages he read in "The Jesuit Relations," writings sent back to France from the Indian missions of the New World.

St. Isaac became a priest in 1636, traveling to what is now Canada soon after his ordination. In preaching the Gospel, the Frenchman endured unbelievable hardship and torture - even having some of his fingers chewed off by Iroquois warriors who held him captive for more than a year.

After escaping, St. Isaac returned to France. For more than 20 months, the "Black Robe" had not celebrated Mass since canonical regulations forbade those with mutilated hands from offering the sacrament. Inspired by St. Isaac's faith, sacrifice and desire to bring others to Christ, Pope Urban VIII lifted those regulations for the missionary, giving him special permission to celebrate Mass.

"It would be shameful that a martyr of Christ not be allowed to drink the Blood of Christ," the pope said.

Despite everything he endured, St. Isaac returned to the New World only to be tomahawked to death in 1646 by Mohawks who accused him of harboring a demon and practicing sorcery against them in what is now Auriesville, N.Y.

Right here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, heroes and heroines such as St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (a pioneer in Catholic education), St. John Neumann (a pastor, bishop and minister to immigrants), Blessed Francis X. Seelos (a gentle pastor and much-sought confessor), Mother Mary Lange (founder of the first religious community for African-American women and the first Catholic school for black children) and **Father Demetrius A. Gallitzin** (the "Apostle of the Alleghenies") led lives that inspired many vocations to the religious life.

As Hennessey suggests, if we start sharing these stories of heroic virtue, we are bound to inspire religious vocations.

In "Saint Among Savages: the Life of St. Isaac Jogues," the definitive English-language biography of St. Isaac, Jesuit Father Francis Talbot quotes from a letter the saint wrote to his mother after the missionary first arrived in New France. The

words apply as much to us today as they did nearly four centuries ago.

“So well must we use the time that is accorded us,” St. Isaac wrote, “that we must do that in our life which we would have wished that we did at the moment of our death.”

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