

## *Artfully Done*

### Youngstown's little secret -- St. Paul the Apostle in New Middletown OH

Sometimes, the phone rings and a desperate voice asks for a last minute program because a scheduled speaker had to cancel. Sometimes, Beacon Street gets a year's notice for a unique program. Such was the occasion when we got a call from Fr. Nick Shori. He said that the parish had an annual mission just prior to Holy Week and this year they were looking for something interactive and full of the Spirit. "Could someone come and meet with the mission committee?" Of course.

Volunteers fresh from the eleven o'clock mass poured coffee and sat in chairs around the living room in the parish house. After a few words of introduction, I asked my usual question: "What do the people need to hear?"

"Back to the basics. How to live faith daily; we are tested every day. Faith at work? What about our children? Teach us more about scripture. What is the next step for us as a parish? Inner healing. Evangelization. Forgiveness. Prayer." All this in just three sessions!

There was some back and forth with the committee over the next several months until everyone agreed on theme and format. Each evening would offer a three-fold approach: teaching, prayer, and ritual.

St. Paul the Apostle Parish was accustomed to good teaching on all levels. In fact, two previous missions were directed by parishioners themselves, offering a blend of personal witness and road-worthy spirituality. St. Paul himself would have been thrilled to be part of this community.

Prayer just might be the trademark of this parish. Membership had an ease and familiarity with prayer that can only come from experience and deep faith. "Let us pray" was more than an invitation to focus for a moment while the presider read from the printed page; it was a time of transformation for all assembled to stand in the Presence and feel the Spirit. In every instance, it was apparent that this community loved to pray, lived to pray, longed to pray.

Ritual provided the dance. St. Paul's seized every opportunity for employing meaningful

gesture, movement, and symbol. They would make certain that each evening concluded with memorable interaction with the members of the Body.

"Come and see." (Jn 1,46) was our theme, St. Paul's invitation for all to be part of the ongoing mission of the church. "Come as you are" was the focus for the opening evening. We tried to address the feeling of unworthiness that sometimes plagues even the most fervent of believers. All should feel welcome in the sight of God. So our scripture was John 4, the encounter Jesus had with the Samaritan woman at the well.

In an effort to engage the assembly in the narrative, each of the four sections of pews was assigned a response. When I pointed to the first section, they would say *water* and move their hands like rainfall. The second, when pointed to, raised an open hand and said *five*. The third, *Amen*. And the final group *whoa* when I pointed in their direction.

Most everyone was probably familiar with the story. But because they had a part in the telling, they listened more keenly and could imagine themselves being present in the center of town. I knew it was a good exercise in proclaiming the Gospel when laughter punctuated the telling and applause broke out at the end.

Song filled the prayer time that followed. Lots of singing; lots of prayer. Bowls of water were blessed and then passed up and down each row so individuals could take part in the blessing. Some crossed themselves on the forehead. A few dove in up their elbows. All were refreshed. All were found worthy.

"Look around you" was our focus the second night with the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 15) setting the tone. "If we stop long enough to be moved with compassion, we will recognize our neighbor everywhere we look."

Members of the parish were asked to bring a blanket or shawl to the church. I saw hundreds of them neatly folded, piled high on the altar steps. A representative from the high school ministry team led a blessing prayer over the array of wraps and

*continued on page 6*