



Enduring Echoes

by Father Robert Dalton

"The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well." Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

This affirmation touches the heart of missionary activity and focuses my thoughts as I consider the return of Good Shepherd Church in Lebanon, and St. Therese Church in St. Paul, Virginia, to the care of the diocese of Richmond. Echoes of the laughter and the tears, the worries and the ways we spelled relief during the five years I served as pastor in Russell County are with me still.

I recall my shock one wintry Sunday morning as I was leaving for early morning Mass only to discover that the teen-agers of the parish had decorated my car with tin cans and a "Just Married" sign. It is funnier now than when I stood there shivering in the snow. It is funnier now as I realize that these same young people have become decent adults with teen-agers of their own.

I can still see Janet, a college volunteer, who was buried in debris when she rushed into a collapsing building to tend to the trapped and injured workmen. I look back with pride at the faith of that tiny congregation storming heaven with prayer until the miracle of her recovery had been obtained.

I can still feel the raindrops mixing with the tears I shed at the side of a desperate young husband and father. We stood upon the railroad tracks watching helplessly as the flood waters swirled to the very roof of his home.

The faces of many of the Head Start children still lighten my heart. Laughter and joy reverberated through the building from their classrooms in the church basement. Darrell was especially memorable. Stepping off the bus one day, he

saw me putting up new playground equipment. Excitedly, he jumped on my back as I crouched in an awkward position. My back was "out of fix" as they say in the mountains and I crawled to my house on my hands and knees.

Then there was Dean who came faithfully to the Catholic Church on Sunday morning and attended the Holiness Church on Sunday evening. When I asked him about this, Dean replied with a wisdom all his own: "I go to the Catholic Church for my head and the Holiness Church for my heart."

Some memories are bittersweet like bringing Holy Communion to Beulah, who was confined to bed following a stroke. With confusion in her eyes she said: "Tell me what this means. I know it was really important to me once." The cross of a failing mind now brought a further suffering.

As few as Catholics were when I worked in Russell County, whenever asked how many parishioners there were, I would reply: "28,000." The total population of the area is the concern of a missionary. Although it is not really possible to share the joys, hopes, griefs, and the anguish of that many people, the Glenmarians who have worked there have tried. It makes saying "good-bye" very difficult.

It is also a deep joy to realize that a new stage of church life is beginning in these communities. Missionaries, after all, are meant to work themselves out of a job and move on. We find the courage to move on by remembering so many faith-filled friends whom we carry with us in our hearts.

