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Pastoral Nature Notes
Father Joseph Backowski

Kahnawake: The Water Speaks

This past Saturday during what seemed like a fierce snowstorm by May standards, I went for what could become a trudge along the Mississippi in one of my favorite parks behind my home parish, Holy Family in Belle Prairie. I noticed the river to be unseasonably low. At about the level it normally is in July. I decided to go “off road” and walk the bank rather than the trail.

River banks are fascinating places. They tell a story like so many things in nature tell a story, but they also are a story. As the water moves by the story unfolds before your eyes as it moves sediment, organic matter, logs etc. this is the natural story of the river.

As I came downriver, I came to what are known as the Belle Prairie Rapids. The river gets extremely shallow here. The stream bed is of rocks, boulders, and gravel. This made this area a natural crossing for the ox carts that would go between Saint Paul and the Red River. This was also the place where the early Catholic settlers came to find rock to build their church. For three years 1877-1880 these faithful people would drive their teams of horses and wagons down into the river to fill them with rock and then drive them up to use the rock to build what is now today Holy Family Church. This is part of the human story of the river.

It is in the rapids that here the water can speak for itself. While water is usually very quiet when it moves as it encounters these rough streambed conditions it begins to speak in an audible way. What it says are not words but more of a kind of music. The Mohawk work is Kahnawake: the water speaks. Saint Kateri Tekakwitha lived in a village in Quebec after becoming a Christian. The name of this village is Kahnawake on the banks of the St Lawrence River.

The Native Americans recognized the speaking of the water. There is a rhythm and a tempo to it. Yet depending on amounts of water and items coming from upstream there are also special measures included for variety. A combination of rushing, of falling, of splashing, and clapping against itself and the irregular stream bed, the water speaks its music. What does it

say? Well obviously, nothing verbal. Water is the foundation of all life and of our spiritual life as well. In the splashing, the falling, and the clapping against itself as it traverses the rough bottom, it seems to express its great desire to animate those immovable obstructions into something living. Yet water, despite its power, is no more alive than the rocks it clangs against. It only takes on life when infused with the Spirit of Life. When breathed upon then water comes alive! You'll remember at the beginning of creation God breathed upon the waters. This breath laden water then flows through our veins in our blood. It also flows in the xylem and phloem of plants (plant veins). Water then can be alive so to speak. It also is not only the basis for natural life but for supernatural life: The Waters of Baptism. Jesus was plunged by John into the waters of the Jordan to make them Holy. Water not only took on life but divinity when God became Man in the womb of Mary and that same water infused with the fullness of Jesus' divine life poured from his most sacred side as he hung on the cross. This is what the water speaks of. In its power it longs to be alive, and when it comes up against that which isn't alive but is hard and callous it speaks as if to summon us to drink and to summon the Holy Spirit so that it may continue to support life both earthly and divine! Happy Easter!