

Happy summer to all of you, especially those who are visiting St James. We've been blessed with local sunshine today and hopefully you've had a chance to enjoy it.

In our gospel, Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor, and are burdened, and I will give you rest." This is a time of year when we take a break from the burdens of life and get some much-needed rest. Last week I spent time at my brother's lake house in Michigan. Our family goes every few years to spend time with extended family and friends, many of which have Polish last names. You could say that summer days on the lake are heavenly, and since Christ and his yoke guide us to heaven, I'm going to reflect on how vacations can bring us closer to God.

First let's talk about the yoke of Christ. A yoke has two positions or curved sections and in the case of this metaphor, one is for Jesus and the other is for us. Christ meets us where we are and together we move forward. When we stop, he stops with us. When we struggle and fall, he pulls us back to our feet. Just like a yolk is used to convert the energy of the oxen to till the soil, the yoke of Christ directs our energy to perform the will of God the Father.

As with the oxen in the field, this work is often messy or humiliating, a word that comes from "hummus," or earth. This stems back to the words of Jesus, "I am meek and humble of heart" and we take on his virtues when we accept his yoke.

However, Jesus is also a powerful partner, as we hear in the gospel, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father." Christ uses this power to carry us through our darkest times. OUR job is to stay by his side, listen, learn, and become the best version of ourselves. The yoke of Christ keeps us focused on heavenly things, and since he conquered death on the cross, we look at the end of our lives with great hope rather than darkness.

For more details on "heavenly things," we turn to Peter Kreeft and his book, "Everything you ever wanted to know about heaven, but never dreamed of asking." He describes heaven as "the meaning of earth" and "The mansion after our earthly pilgrimage." By accepting the yoke of Christ, we invite his divinity into our hearts and as Peter Kreeft points out, "We become divinized by the divine becoming humanized."

The process of divinization begins on earth, however, no one dies "finished." Our lives on earth may be finished, but we are not finished. Time in heaven is spent perfecting our essential relationships in three phases, with ourselves, with others, and with God. The first phase is called "purgatory," where we understand our earthly life by "God light." This is where we, "Review our lives and milk all the meaning dry.

In using vacation time to focus on heavenly things, reflection on purgatory involves stepping away from our day-to-day life and looking at the big picture. On our way to Michigan, we had an early flight to Chicago, followed by a four-hour drive. Other family members fell fast asleep, while I used this rare quiet time to pray and reflect while I drove.

The second phase of heaven is called a The Communion of Saints. Kreeft explains this is a time when, "We share all other human lives, and take time to understand and appreciate the lives that have influenced ours." From a vacation perspective this came to life in the many conversations with a sense of family openness similar to what might happen in heaven. In many cases, it had been 3 to 5 years or more since I had seen some of my cousins and their kids. I caught up on many life transitions since our last time together, including high school and college graduations, newly married couples and new parents.

During a pontoon boat ride, one of my second cousins and her new husband explained how they had taken on the yoke of Christ since our last visit. She shared how she was bullied as a child for not fitting in, went through a rebellious phase, and finally re-connected with her Catholic faith. She married a man who had little religion growing up, experienced the divorce of his parents as the oldest of three children, and was attracted to the church by her and her family. He raved about his RCIA training and was baptized into the faith earlier this year. In heavenly terms, I was witnessing the Communion of Saints being created before my very eyes.

The last phase of heaven is called, "The Beatific Vision." This is when we explore God and his inexhaustible nature. As Jesus says, in today's gospel, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." Learning about God begins on earth and lasts for an eternity, since God is infinite. Reflecting on God during the vacation started the moment we arrived at the lake, as I experienced the beauty of his creation, the sky reflecting on the water, and the tall green trees surrounding the lake. On Sunday we celebrated mass with a brand-new pastor in the small-town St Joseph's Parish church. During his first homily as a pastor, he committed among other things that he would make mistakes. He said that like Jesus, he was starting his pastoral assignment at the age of 30, and he hoped that his congregation wouldn't want to kill him after three years! Mass, especially a quite daily mass is a great opportunity to bond with God.

These are the phases of heaven: Purgatory, The Communion of Saints, and the Beatific Vision. This is what we look forward to as Christians and begin to experience, through a dark glass, during our time on earth. Christ is offering us rest, learning, and His gentle yolk to guide us to our heavenly resting place.

As our summer continues, let's reflect on what burdens us: health, relationships, career, habits, or something else. Is our relationship with Christ helping us embrace his vision for us? If not, what can we do to improve it? In John's Gospel Jesus says, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." As we take time this summer to rest from our burdens, reflect on the things of heaven and consider how to become what Peter Kreeft describes as, "Tubes designed to let God's love in at one end, by faith, and out the other, by good works, the works of love."