



Carmelite Spiritual Center

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8433 Bailey Road * Darien, Illinois 60561 * 630-969-4141

Oct. 13, 1999

Life is Worth Giving

CARDINAL BERNARDIN'S WRITINGS REFLECT LOVE AND WISDOM

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

"Life is not a brief candle. It is a splendid torch that I want to make burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

This statement by the great Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw may be taken as a motif and guiding principle of the life and work of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of the Archdiocese of Chicago. He came to Chicago and stated simply, "I am Joseph, your brother."

In living out that statement, he guided millions of Catholics, and others, not only by the sincerity of his life but also by the truth of his words. For those who remember him well, there were many dimensions to Cardinal Bernadin's personality, his ecclesial vision and his pastoral ministry, but he devoted unusual care to his teaching role as a representative of Christ. It is altogether fitting, then, that the words and ideas of this great man, recorded in his many talks and writings, should be preserved and presented in this excellent volume, "Selected Works of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin," the first of a series.

Carefully and wisely edited by Fr. Alphonse P. Spilly, C.P.P.S., his long-time friend and advisor, the book is excellent.

Life Worth Giving/ Fr. Kevin/ 2

It also demonstrates that Cardinal Bernardin's teaching style was quite simple — even though the content was often profound and had a deep meaning for the lives of his listeners.

Fr. Spilly writes in his preface: "He seemed to know instinctively that, while all of the three components of communication are essential — speaker, message and audience — the key to effective communication is the knowing, respecting and effectively addressing the audience. He was always very concerned to deliver his message in a way that would be understandable to his listeners or readers."

To say the least, Cardinal Bernardin had little to be concerned about in regard to getting his message across accurately and effectively to his widespread audience. Just in this first volume, the range and depth of content and presentation are awesome. Whether he is writing in his pastoral letters about liturgy, ministry, the church, or health care, Cardinal Bernardin is always lucid, exact and encouraging.

The same may be said of his pastoral reflections on living a Christian life, religious life, or religious education. And in the section on pastoral statements, Cardinal Bernadin doesn't hesitate to deal with such sometimes difficult topics as AIDS, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the Permanent Diaconate, youth, and parish sharing.

Life Worth Giving/ Fr. Kevin/ ³✓

A final section, titled "Synodal Interventions," lists talks given by Cardinal Bernardin at various synod meetings. Here again, his insight and foresight help us to understand more fully such topics as the sacrament of penance, the church and the world, spirituality and celibacy, and religious life.

Historians will probably identify Cardinal Bernardin (1928-1996) as one of the great leaders of the Catholic Church in the U.S. during the 20th Century. In writing of his own role in the church, he wrote: "Episcopal ministry is directed primarily toward pastoral service and care, and not the exercise of power." He further added that leaders in the church are to serve others. And in the relationship of bishops and theologians, he points out that their goal is "understanding the mystery of Jesus." And although that goal will never be fully achieved in this life, the journey is necessary. In the meantime, however, such experiences as theological reflection can be "an exciting endeavor, one that can deepen our faith and bring us closer to Jesus, God's only son."

In writing of the experience of the Catholic Church in the U.S., Cardinal Bernadin notes six things that have made a significant impact: immigration, pluralism, our brief history as a nation, our abundant economic resources, the ideal of a free democracy and firm belief in the value of the individual.

Life Worth Giving/ Fr. Kevin/ 4

In summing up this experience, the late cardinal writes that in our nation, since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have attempted to change their understanding of the church as entirely separate from the world to its being an active agent ~~separate from the world~~ for the good of society.

"At the heart of ministerial activity is service which discloses and supports our relationship with God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit...." With such an approach, the individual Catholic "is disposed for fuller life with God and with other people, greater participation in the reign of God."

In all his speaking and writing, Cardinal Bernardin seems to be conscious of the fact that disagreement is not necessarily bad in itself. "There cannot be growth without some sort of questioning and conflict." And he adds the words of the great Carmelite mystic St. Teresa of Avila that a person cannot grow closer to God without constantly growing in self-knowledge.

This excellent first volume is almost literally a treasure trove of theology and its application to our daily lives of growth in understanding of the Lord, ourselves and each other. Let us hope that succeeding volumes will continue that process for all. Cardinal Bernardin lived what he wrote in his own personal, spiritual life. This gives added meaning to the text.

("Selected Works of Joseph Cardinal Bernadin, Vol. I," edited by Father Alphonse Spilly, C.P.P.S. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999, 264 pp.)