

RZEZINSKI's MOUNTAIN

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"To everything there is a season...

A time to be born, and a time to die;

A time to plant, and a time to pluck...

A time to keep silence and a time to speak..."

Michael Fitzgerald seemed to have ended his sermon just as he had begun it. "To everything there's a season..." he repeated himself, after a long pause. "Ecclesiastes 3:1-7.

"No, I'm not so bright that I can steal someone else's poetry and get away with it," he said after another pause. Although his accent showed signs of its Irish roots, his voice came through loud and clear in that somewhat coarse sound that most English-speaking people associate with America. He was a bit under six-feet tall, dark haired and fair complexioned. As he spoke, even when he tried to show seriousness, a gentle smile seemed to emanate from his mouth and eyes, giving the impression that he enjoyed what he did.

No one in the parish ever bothered to find how he had gotten time off to come to St. Margaret's. Everyone just assumed he had come to visit and stayed to fill the vacuum left when his predecessor died. In short, Father Michael Fitzgerald had arrived from America when St. Margaret's needed him. God need not explain why things resolve themselves. Only man tries to get at the truth which has been there all along, proving in the process how little he knows about the scheme of things. Michael Fitzgerald, therefore, had no other choice but to stay. It did not matter that he was younger than most people in the parish. They all called him Father with the same respect that they would have shown him had he been several years older. Things did not change much at St. Margaret's, and those who generally wanted change most often ended up by leaving to set new traditions elsewhere where they would end up eventually absorbed by other cultures.

Few ever returned from amongst those who left, although there was always that curiosity whenever Seamus sounded his bus horn up the Shore Road whether O'Neill had come back with one of his tales. O'Neill, in a way, was like the seasons of Father Fitzgerald's sermon, although not as regular. Sometimes he would even appear in spite of there having been no sign that Seamus had been in town. Seamus always visited Callaghan's. Many times, in fact, he would be the one who'd get O'Neill started by commencing the story prior to leaving, letting it stay around for days until O'Neill would see fit to continue it. "Yes. O'Neill has a goo' one this time. But I shan't spoil it fer ye. Better he tell ye 'bout it. 'tis 'bout Kevin McCarthy. You remember Kevin, I suppose. Made lots'a money in America, poor chap. But I'm goin' too far. 'tis better O'Neill tell ye."

"Kevin made money in America?" Someone would ask.

"Oh, yes. Lots. Poor chap. If only he hadn't married that American girl. True, her parents were catholics, thank God almighty. But English catholics, you know..."

Seamus would then stop, leaving everyone silently waiting for his next word. He would pick his pint of stout, take a sip, wipe his mouth with his cuffs, and put the pint down gently. That ritual over, he would then look at his audience and resume his tale as if he hadn't stopped telling it. "Yeah. English catholics. Full of airs, like the 'cross Channel ones. But I'm goin' too far, and I'd not be willin' to tell ye lies. 'tis better that O'Neill tell it."

One always knew if O'Neill had come back with money. For several days he'd show up at Callaghan's and pay cash. Around the third day after his return, he would even buy a round for everyone.

Once his fortune had dried up, however, he would look for whatever work he could find just to keep going.

He never worried about a place to live. Although his older brother had moved into the family cottage when he married, his parents had died shortly thereafter, leaving the west room vacant, assuring O'Neill that he would be welcome until his nephews and nieces were big enough to need the space for themselves. That day, however, seemed delayed. His brother and sister-in-law were childless.

"I've often felt whenever I've read that passage," Father Fitzgerald continued, "that whatever control I have over my life is something that was set down for me somewhere in a time that was completely beyond me. On the other hand, I can not but feel that, if my life were one of seasons, then when would I know in what season I'm actually living. Is it a season, for example, like the ones we enjoy and have come to know? Or are they more like hidden secrets within us that only visit us when we ourselves challenge them?"

"Years ago, when I was still a boy living in New York, there lived a Jewish family downstairs from us. I don't know how they had come to America, or why they had chosen to live near us when there were areas where the Jews congregated and felt more at home with their own. In any case Mr. Rzezinski seemed to have a story for everything, making me feel that, perhaps, the parables of our Lord were not just lessons, but part of the culture into which He had been born. One day Mr. Rzezinski told me the one about the two men who lived on opposite sides of the mountain.

"'Strange,' he said, 'they each lived in a valley where the waters flowed freely, one on the north side, the other on the south. They each

knew of the other's existence and lived each day preparing so that they'd never have to submit their freedom to anyone, especially to one another.

"One day, as if motivated by the season, they each felt they had to do something about their plight. And so, almost simultaneously, they prepared to annihilate the other.

"Fighting, however, has its drawbacks, for he who enters a fight stands a good chance of winning or losing. And so they each decided that, in order not to lose, they'd have to surprise their adversary. They looked around and suddenly discovered that, if one were to climb the mountain and gain the high ground, one could then come down hard on the unseen enemy and destroy him once and for all - a point that no modern military man would dispute. One early morning, before the sun had even made its full appearance in the east, they decided to climb.

"It wasn't an easy task. For several hours, they reached into their inner strength as they tried to get to the top, where their expected advantage lay. Finally, hungry and tired, they reached their objective. Exhausted, they threw themselves on the cold, cloud-covered ground, totally unable to see their respective valleys down below. They wrapped themselves in whatever garments they hadn't discarded on the way up and each fell asleep.

"As they woke up, they discovered that the heat of the afternoon sun had burned the cloud away. They looked at the valleys below from where they had come earlier that day. Eventually they turned around to look at the rest of their horizon, only to come face-to-face with one another for the first time. There wasn't much difference between them. They were both ragged and still exhausted. Yet they walked toward one another with all the rage that their fears had bestowed on each of them for years. As they walked, however, they stumbled and fell, their bodies touching as they hit the ground.

"Above them, the sun was shining. They started to rise slowly, only to sit down sit by side, tired and spent. They spoke different languages, yet as they tried to communicate, they each knew what the other was thinking.

"They were each trying to figure how to get down from the mountaintop."

Michael Fitzgerald stopped talking and looked towards the congregation. "To everything there is a season...", he started anew. "A time to be born, and a time to die; A time to plant, and a time to pluck...A time to keep silence and a time to speak..."

He bowed gently and walked slowly towards the altar. For a moment it seemed as if a total hush enveloped the members of the congregation as

they followed him with their eyes. As Irishmen, they had long been accustomed to story telling, but never to a sermon where the speaker had been a Jewish storyteller. Little by little they took their eyes off the priest, who was now readying himself for the Apostles' Creed, and started looking at one another. O'Neill stood silently at the rear of the church by the last pew.

He'd always stood there whenever he attended Mass. It allowed him to get out before everyone else. He hadn't yet fully told McCarthy's story at Callaghan's. But he would, someday...It didn't matter if he had already been around long enough this time for people to start wondering when he'd leave again. If he couldn't finish his story, then perhaps Seamus would. Stories were the soul of St. Margaret's. It didn't matter who told them, where, or how. Stories were told. Period. In a town that seemed to be dying, life constantly renewed itself.

Like the seasons.

Manuel L. Ponte

St. Louis, Missouri.