

Pittsburgh Catholic

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by: Bill Hill

Author of new book finds God in great outdoors.....

Tracking down Father Joe Classen for an interview about his book took a couple of weeks because, true to his book's title, he was "Hunting for God, Fishing for the Lord" (Our Sunday Visitor, paperback, \$12.95). He had just split two weeks of vacation between a fishing trip to Arkansas and deer hunting in southern Missouri. But his hunting and fishing are not just sportsman outings. For Father Joe, spiritual insights and love of God are inseparable from his passion for being outdoors and enjoying God's creation. This combined love of God and the outdoors goes back to childhood. Father Joe, now a ripe 33 years of age, writes: "The more time I spent in the outdoors, the more I recognized God's handiwork all around me and the closer I grew to him. ... God is still my best fishing buddy. God is still my best, not to mention most reliable, hunting partner."

Just released by Our Sunday Visitor, Father Joe's hunting and fishing adventures could easily fit into outdoor magazines. The chapter "River Rats" includes a chilling tale of being caught with two fishing pals by a freak snowstorm on a Mississippi River island. Bedding down after a sunny day in their tent, they awoke to rain, sleet and then inches of snow. Much worse, they had a dead boat motor and no paddles. Rotten 2-by-4s were no match for the turbulent river, and the hapless fishermen luckily crashed onshore miles downstream and were able to find their way to shelter and then a ride home. That adventure continues to be a source of teasing from many of his friends, Father Joe says. Other anecdotes in the book are less life threatening, ranging from an obsession, now past, for catching "trophy fish" to bow hunting for deer, turkey hunting and quietly enjoying the outdoors.

Outdoor lovers will recognize and sympathize with the moment when a giant rainbow trout snaps the line just when you thought you were close to landing him. Or the utter

disbelief when the arrow heading straight for the big deer inexplicably takes a nosedive after hitting some unseen twig. They will get a chuckle out of the big gobbler that was stunned by one shot, and when Father Joe is close enough for a finishing shot he finds himself out of ammunition, yet continues to give chase, even throwing the empty shotgun at the turkey, which then flies away, leaving one feather behind as a lasting reminder to Father Joe.

Father Joe brings high levels of energy to every pursuit in the book — whether it be studying fish and what they eat so as to be able to tie the best flies, or figuring out the best places to stalk deer and turkey. The same energy prevails when he turns to spiritual and moral observations, finding the supernatural in the beauty of nature: “Watching the sun come up on Lake Taneycomo (in southwestern Missouri) was one of the most transforming experiences of my life. The pitch black evolved into a dark blue, then a medium gray, and finally radiant beams of sunlight pierced the morning sky.”

Later in the book, in a chapter labeled “The Eternal Trout Stream,” Father Joe writes an enchanting description of a cold, snowy day on a trout stream, achieving a purity of spirit and intense enjoyment that he says he has never achieved since that time — “It was truly a taste of heaven,” he said.

In addition to moral truths derived directly from hunting and fishing and the outdoors, Father Joe spends a good deal of time in his book on philosophical and pastoral observations about life, sin, commitment, trusting in God and other lessons of faith. Father Joe thought the spiritual lessons flowed seamlessly from the hunting and fishing experiences. When asked if he, while engrossed in a good yarn, might suddenly remind himself, “Oh, I need to put in some spiritual observations here,” he said that wasn’t the case.

Father Joe’s description of his own growth as a sportsman and as a person was especially on target. He described the progression of fishermen and hunters in three phases. The first is a “got to get something phase,” when any fish or game will do; then the “trophy phase,” when we are seeking the biggest we can find. Father Joe spends a great deal of time talking about the dangers of this particular phase and how people often get hooked on trophies in business careers or family, not to mention hunting.

Finally, he notes, we come full circle to the “philosophical/spiritual phase” when you simply begin to appreciate what you have learned, what you have achieved and what you have been given. “It’s like the veteran deer hunter,” he writes, “who takes to the woods with no intention of harvesting a deer.” Father Joe describes some of his present-day outdoor trips as “catch and release” hunting, when he takes along a camera instead of a gun and captures some of those great moments in nature on film.

While the actual writing of his book took less than a year, it took almost a year of struggle to decide to go ahead. “I got the idea for writing the book while I was sitting on a big oak stump in the woods, when I realized that my love of the outdoors and love of God were entwined — important on so many levels. It was a spiritual time and there were so many lessons I had learned, about patience, about maturity. “But I dismissed the idea and put it out of my mind, but it kept coming back to me, so I finally decided there was something else telling me to write this book. And once I accepted the idea and committed to it, I began to write down my ideas. I kept a log in my truck and would jot them down whenever they came to me. Soon I had an outline, and I basically wrote the book over the summer of 2005,” he said.

Reactions to the book have been generally positive, Father Joe said, with only one or two objections from animal rights people. “I put a message to those opposed to hunting on the Web site for my book (www.huntingforgod.com) explaining that the use of animals for food and clothing is a teaching of the church. ‘God entrusted animals to the stewardship of those whom he created in his own image. Hence, it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing.’ (CCC 2417). As outdoorsmen, this is what we do. And again, it is our duty to do so with respect and reverence. Many hunters donate game to poor families through the program called ‘Share the Harvest.’ “I share fish and game with friends and family, and since coming to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (in St. Louis, where he is associate pastor), I have donated a wild game dinner each year as a fund-raiser for the parish auction.”

Father Joe’s resistance to writing the book resembles his resistance to the call to the priesthood. “I was like many college students. I had drifted away from the church, but I began to come back, and rediscovered my faith. I kept feeling this need to study it, and finally took ownership and committed — much as I did with the book.”