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By Kathy Etling

Nature helps inspire priest's faith.....

Telling the Rev. Joe Classen how much fun hunting and fishing are would be like preaching to the choir. That's because Father Joe, 33, a Roman Catholic priest who serves as associate pastor at St. Margaret Mary Alacoque Parish in south St. Louis County, is both an avid hunter and an experienced angler. Classen is also a newly published author, one so eager to share the myriad ways in which faith has helped his love of the outdoors — and vice versa — that he's written a book about the topics.

Classen's book, "Hunting for God, Fishing for the Lord: Encountering the Sacred in the Great Outdoors," should be required reading for anyone who sometimes wonders about life and its meaning. The author has done a good job of articulating personal philosophy as well as outdoors anecdotes, a few fairly hilarious. Of course, what else would you expect from a person so dedicated to archery that he set up his own range on the parish rectory's second floor?

"I shoot through the (guest) room, down the hall, through my bedroom and into the storage attic where the target's been placed," Classen said. "That's a good 20 yards." Classen's Hoyt compound bow is set for a 70-lb. draw weight, so those arrows slam into the target with a fairly loud "thump." "When the other priests, Monsignor Norb Ernst, the pastor, and Father Bill Leach, hear the arrows hit they know I'm practicing," Classen said. "Monsignor Ernst loves to hunt too, so the two of us are always cooking wild game."

"Even at a young age, I was drawn to places of solitude," Classen continued. "Walking through the woods and fishing filled my heart with uncontainable joy. It made me feel so alive that it awakened an unquenchable thirst to (become better acquainted) with the one who was responsible for creating all the wonders of nature." That desire to get to know God more truly and intimately gave rise to a simple, deep, spirituality in Classen. "The more time I spent outdoors, the more I recognized God's handiwork all around me and the closer I grew to him. God became not only my God, but also my best friend. When I

went fishing, or did anything else, I did so with God."

By the time Classen was in third grade he'd started thinking about becoming a priest. As he grew older, however, and graduated from both grade school and Duchesne High School, the idea of a vocation dimmed. He enrolled in Central Missouri State, later won a music scholarship (he plays classical guitar) to Lindenwood University and began to question his faith. "Young people question lots of things as they ponder what to do with their lives," Classen said. "I eventually returned to the idea of a vocation, so I decided to check it out."

Classen attended Kenrick Glennon Seminary's undergraduate program at St. Louis University. He was taking a philosophy course, taught by the Rev. Ted Vitali, chairman of the university's philosophy department, when he realized that Vitali was also a diehard angler and hunter. "Father Ted would often wear a jacket with bass logos, or he'd lecture about topics inspired by hunting or fishing," Classen said. When, on one test, Vitali asked for an explanation of a particular philosophical problem, Classen was momentarily stumped. "I began writing about what trout fishing meant to me and how I thought it might apply to the problem, and (Vitali) must have liked it because I got a good grade," Classen said.

Classen's philosophy shines through the words printed on his book's pages. "(The) 'Bambi syndrome' has significantly clouded the truth of (nature)," Classen wrote. "The nature of. nature is that of indifference to life and death. The food chain, which we (humans) are a part of, is real.....animals spend every day of their lives doing one thing: surviving. Their mission... is to eat, avoid danger and propagate. ... The law of the jungle has not changed. ... animals are far more brutal and savage to one another than any human could ever imagine (unless they are extremely disturbed)."

Classen reminisces as well about the innocence of his boyhood when a chum would sometimes come to school with a pocketful of shotgun shells. "Not to take vengeance out on his classmates in a psychotic fit of violence," he said. "But because he was hunting over the weekend and forgot to empty his pockets." Father Joe knows what it's all about. He's watched in horror as the biggest trout he'd ever hooked broke his line after an exhausting fight. He's despaired as a massive whitetail buck walked in the opposite direction. He's had triumphs too, like the day he used his bow to harvest a 10-point trophy

buck.

He'll share the details — and more — with anyone who reads his book, right down to the way he felt that day, even though he knows that with some of us he'll simply be preaching to the choir.

For more information about Father Joe Classen's book, "Hunting for God, Fishing for the Lord," visit www.huntingforgod.com. The book sells for \$12.95.