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by Joseph Kenny

Priest writes about his love for fields and stream.....

If you can't find a reason to thank and praise the Lord, you might not be spending enough time in the great outdoors, according to Father Joseph Classen. Father Classen combines his passion for the outdoors with the spiritual knowledge it awakens in a book he wrote just released by Our Sunday Visitor, "Hunting for God, Fishing for the Lord." The book is subtitled: "Encountering the Sacred in the Great Outdoors."

The priest's talent for storytelling comes through when he describes an overnight fishing and camping expedition in March on a Mississippi island with a friend and the friend's father when the boys were high school freshmen. They were awakened by an unexpected storm that turned from rain to sleet to snow. The storm forced them to make their way off the island, paddling their boat with two-by-fours after the engine wouldn't start and they had lost an oar. While that story was a bit harrowing, other times in the book he simply tells of the solitude of nature. "I see the outdoors as a catalyst for getting into the nuts and bolts" of spirituality, he said.

Father Classen, a native of St. Charles, was ordained in 2003 and is associate pastor of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque Parish in South County. The book is intended for Christians of all denominations and even for those who perhaps have little or no faith but love the outdoors and are possibly hunting for God, he remarked. Many times men won't pick up a book on spirituality, he noted, so the book is a good way to provide that introduction without overwhelming them. "It entertains people and gives them spiritual nourishment at the same time," he said.

The outdoors, especially hunting and fishing, "have always been a part of my life. It's in my blood," Father Classen said. He grew up in St. Charles and is a self-described "river rat." In the book he tells how much as a young boy he looked forward to fishing trips with his dad. Though he played baseball and soccer, he really was obsessed with the outdoors, he noted. "The more time I spent outside, the more I recognized God's

handiwork all around me and the closer I grew to him."

In his interview with the Review, he said, "I enjoy being out there in the peace and quiet. It is God's work." He noted that people don't have to like hunting or fishing to enjoy the outdoors. Going for a walk in the woods is sufficient. It is a good way to slow down and appreciate one's gifts and blessings, he said. In his priestly work he has seen problems caused when people are too focused on work and careers, ignoring their families and becoming obsessed with material goods. He also noted problems caused by a sedentary lifestyle.

Father Classen's parents are Tom and Kathy Classen of St. Charles Borromeo Parish in St. Charles. His father is a retired aircraft mechanic and his mother a homemaker. His older brother, Chris, his wife and five children are members of Immaculate Conception Parish in Dardenne Prairie. Father Classen still goes hunting and fishing with friends he has had since grade school. His spirituality developed when he was a boy spending time in the outdoors and he thought about the priesthood, but later those thoughts faded. Just as many others do, he went through a period of questioning his faith. In college, he returned to the Church, he noted.

Hunting and fishing, he said, is hands-on stewardship and a way of taking an active role in the food chain. People who hunt and fish have a deep respect for food, he added. In a message on a Web site promoting the book he noted that he doesn't consider hunting or fishing a sport but a way to sustain life and feed others, as it was intended. He quotes the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which states that it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing.