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The spirit of the hunt: a Catholic perspective

By Teak Phillips

Early one recent morning, well before the sun was ready to awake over the horizon, Father Joe Classen said a quick prayer for a safe and fruitful day. He grabbed his bow and trekked across a field, through a creek and up a hillside into a thicket of cedars and hardwoods.

For most of the next 10 hours, he sat quietly and watched the woods for deer and turkey. Birds chirped, squirrels gathered nuts and leaves rustled in the breeze and cool drizzle. His tree stand provided an ideal perch for being surrounded by nature — and in the presence of God.

Like many hunters, Father Classen is drawn to the outdoors to witness God's creation firsthand. "What motivates me to hunt is a deep love and appreciation of the natural world," said Father Classen, associate pastor at St. Margaret Mary Alacoque Parish in South County.

Hunting is an "opportunity to spend quality time with God, family and friends, the prayerful solitude and much needed stress relief," he added. "And, yes, the opportunity to put fresh, healthy meat in the freezer by means of my own efforts."

Needing food is, of course, the original purpose of hunting. Hunting as an ancient tradition has been preserved through art and Scripture. In Genesis, we read that Isaac, nearing death, told his son Esau to "Take your gear, therefore — your quiver and bow — and go out to the open country to hunt some game for me. With your catch prepare an appetizing dish for me to eat, so that I may give you my special blessing before I die." (Genesis 27:3)

Stewardship of resources

As we have industrialized food production, the absolute need to hunt for survival has almost vanished. Motivations for hunting now range from providing all-natural meat for families to pursuing trophies to spending contemplative time in nature. For many hunters, it's a combination of those challenges.

Whatever the motivation, Father Greg Klump, associate pastor at Ste. Genevieve Parish in Ste. Genevieve, urges Catholic hunters to remember their role as stewards. He said hunters can't be out there just to take. They have to give, too.

Just like the charities of the Church that provide housing and meals for people, charitable wildlife organizations work to provide habitat and food for animals almost entirely on donations.

“Along with charitable contributions to the Church, I do give money to Ducks Unlimited and other organizations,” he said. “I take on the same mentality I do when I help provide for the less fortunate.”

Along with the nonprofit organizations, state and federal conservation programs work to promote sound conservation practices. They rely on millions of outdoorsmen to buy permits and pay taxes for funding.

According to a 2006 study by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 12.5 million people hunted a total of 220 millions days and spent \$22.9 billion on hunting that year in the U.S. The money has helped fund wildlife restoration programs and brought money to businesses and communities that often rely on hunting as a revenue source.

In 2008, nearly 2 million hunting and fishing permits generated almost \$30 million in revenue for the Missouri Department of Conservation, the agency responsible for managing the state’s fish and game resources.

“Catholics can feel good about the money they give the Missouri Department of Conservation through their hunting permit fees because that money directly supports wise stewardship of Missouri’s wildlife,” said Jim Low, news services coordinator for the department. “This includes providing habitat for all wildlife, including game and non-game animals. Revenue from hunting and trapping permit sales also pays for research and population surveys to ensure that these consumptive activities are sustainable.”

Having the responsibility of managing God’s resources comes to us from Scripture. In the first chapter of Genesis, we are told that God created the earth and all beings for humans to manage: “Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth.” (Genesis 1:28)

Helping the herds, helping the poor

Non-hunters often struggle with the idea that hunters have great respect for animals even though they kill them. Killing some animals is necessary to help wildlife populations flourish, according to Low.

“The elimination of mountain lions and other natural predators has left some wildlife — white-tailed deer for example — without effective population controls,” he said. “We have many examples of the ecological havoc that can occur when hunters and trappers do not control wildlife populations.”

Population control is something animals are not capable of by themselves. But killing for the sake of killing — without regard to ecology and ethics — is to be avoided.

“I think there is a great challenge to hunting,” Father Klump said. “But I’m not going to go out and hunt something I’m not going to make full use of. I don’t go out just a callous killer.”

States have strict laws that dictate that animals killed while hunting are not to be wasted. To facilitate sharing the meat of wild animals, most states have programs that allow hunters to share wild game with the poor. Missouri’s Share the Harvest program gives almost 250,000 pounds of venison to 186 food pantries every year.

Family time

Many families hunt together and use the time to bond and teach children about life and faith. John Antonacci hunts with three of his four children — the youngest is not yet old enough to hunt — and says hunting has increased his children’s awareness of God’s will.

“I think they have a real appreciation for creation,” said Antonacci, a member of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque Parish. “It’s a whole new level of teaching to share with your kids how God’s plan is playing out right in front of their eyes.”

That time teaching his children about hunting has paid dividends for his oldest daughter, Kirsten, a 17-year-old senior at Cor Jesu Academy. She has filled a deer tag for each of the six years she’s hunted, a feat few hunters accomplish. Hunting has taught her valuable lessons on the distinct roles life and death play in hunter’s lives. One year, her aim was a little off and she shot a deer in the abdomen instead of its vitals.

The injured deer suffered and had to be killed with a second shot.

“It was a very difficult time for her,” she said. “The reality of taking the life of an animal hits you more when you injure them and they suffer. It challenges you more as a hunter to respect that animal and take ethical shot. It calls you to a great level of respect of the animals that you hunt.”

A spiritual quest

Time in the woods is generally quiet and is a great time to reflect. At times, the silence can be intimidating. Father Klump said the silence was perhaps the greatest challenge he faced on a recent moose hunt in Alaska with Father Classen.

“We’re so used to background noise,” he said. “Being up there in such an isolated spot, it was more of a retreat-type setting. I definitely found a spiritual connection and found God saying ‘why don’t you just slow down?’ If you’re open to seeing yourself, you’re going to learn about yourself, both in seeing strengths and deficiencies you need to work on.”

Most hunters develop a deep understanding of how humans relate to the rest of the world and how important it is to cherish it. They can — and should — develop immense

gratitude for the gifts God has given, both personal gifts and gifts of nature, Father Classen said.

“I’ve learned many, many life lessons and developed in character, spiritual fortitude and virtue from the multitude of challenges and rigors that come along with hunting,” he said.

With that gratitude comes a passion for caring for the earth’s resources.

“People who hunt and trap are passionate about ensuring the future of wildlife,” said Low, of the Department of Conservation. “These pursuits give participants a direct, visceral stake in protecting nature. We don’t just watch Animal Planet, we live it.”

Teak Phillips is the editor of the St. Louis Review. He is an avid hunter of waterfowl, upland game and deer. He and his wife are parishioners at St. Ambrose in St. Louis.