

>> The National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods was declared a national shrine by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on September 15, 2006. With the largest crucifix in the world, it has become one of the most famous and most frequently visited shrines in Michigan. Each year between 275,000 and 325,000 people come to visit the shrine. Msgr. Charles D. Brophy, of the Diocese of Grand Rapids, was instrumental in the creation of the Cross in the Woods.



What are your plans for summer vacation?

I love words. I love reading, writing, speaking and listening to them. I love learning words' etymology and meaning. I love lyrics, limericks, languages and (at the risk of being literally, too loquacious), I love alliteration.

This being said (with pun intended), when I was asked to write an article on the topic of vacation; I began by researching its etymology. The word vacation is derived from the Latin *vacare*, which means to "be empty, free or at leisure." It originated in the 15th century referring to the formal suspension of activity in schools and courts - during which time the buildings would be vacated. In the late 19th century, Americans began using the term vacation in the way we use it today. For example, "I'm taking a vacation." Rather than using the word to describe the time during which a

building stands empty, we use it to define a period of time we take away from school or work.

In contrast, British speakers of English stayed with the expression, "I'm taking a holiday." (You guessed it, more etymology is coming!) The word holiday came from the 14th century Old English term *haligdaeg* (holy day) meaning a religious festival and day of recreation. From the 16th century on, the Brits have used the word holiday, the way we Yanks use vacation.

Whether we speak the Queens English or Uncle Sam's, we may or may not think of holidays or vacations as being

especially connected to faith. Granted, we sometimes take vacations during times that coincide with holy days such as Christmas or Easter. We might even use some of that time off to spend at worship. But typically, when we think of vacations, we are thinking of time off from work or school, to use however we want, doing whatever we can afford.

It might be that we can afford a luxurious, expensive trip away somewhere to relax and explore. More likely, during these precarious economic times, we might be able to afford only a few day trips to the beach or some other inexpensive fun activities. Some must use vacation time for home repair projects or for doctor appointments for ourselves and our families. Sadly, too many of us long, not for vacation time, but simply for employment.

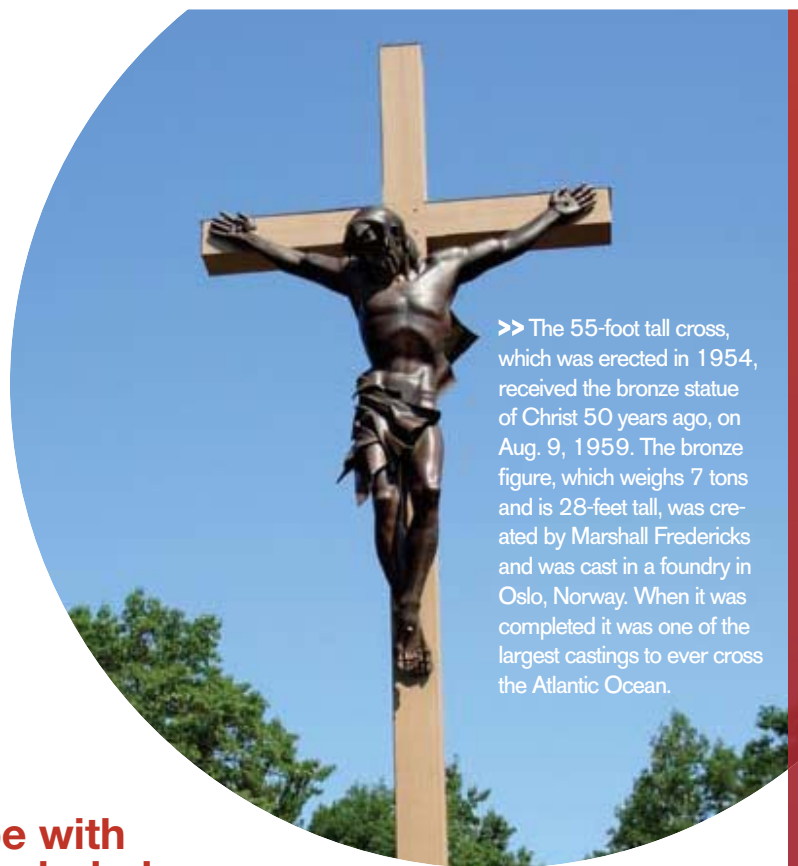
Whether we are rich, poor, sick, healthy, underemployed or unemployed, there is a way we can all choose to spend our time away from work. Let's return to that old Latin term, *vacare* – to “be empty, free or at leisure.” What if we thought of our time away from work, not as a time when our work building is vacated, not as time to fill up with whatever activity we can afford, but truly, as a time to empty ourselves? Now, I'm not proposing that we shouldn't relax and have fun when we can. Of course we should. It is both healthy and holy to do so. But I am saying we should avoid filling every minute God gives us. Because when we stuff every nook and cranny of our lives

with our own thoughts and activities, we leave no room for the good things God has to offer us. The only way for us to make room for God to come into our hearts is to empty them of whatever else is taking up all the space.

What do you need to vacate from your heart? Is your heart filled with

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worry about being able to provide for yourself and your family? Parker Palmer calls this “functional atheism.” We might say that we believe in God, but if we live and work as if everything were up to us and our doing, we are functioning as if God does not exist. We can come to think the burden lies entirely on our shoulders, forgetting that Jesus calls us “to take my yoke upon you ... for my yoke is easy and my burden light.” (Mt 11:29-30) Jesus does not say, “I will help you with your work,” he clearly states the yoke and the burden are his. When we take time apart each day to vacate our worries, to sit quietly and listen, to just be with God, we are reminded of whose burden we carry, and we can come to trust more fully that we do not bear it alone.



>> The 55-foot tall cross, which was erected in 1954, received the bronze statue of Christ 50 years ago, on Aug. 9, 1959. The bronze figure, which weighs 7 tons and is 28-feet tall, was created by Marshall Fredericks and was cast in a foundry in Oslo, Norway. When it was completed it was one of the largest castings to ever cross the Atlantic Ocean.

vacated heaven to come and be with us. The God who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2: 7-11)

Whether we can afford to vacation in Hawaii or Holland State Park, to snack on Haagen Daas or Hudsonville ice cream - we can all choose to spend our summer vacation making room for the God who loves us enough to have vacated heaven in order to be with us. ☺

Perhaps your heart is not filled with worry, but instead with shallow diversion. Are you pre-occupied by dreams of the next toy you will buy, the next technological gadget or status symbol to attain? Are you allowing magazine ads and television commercials to dictate what will make you happy? If so, have you noticed no matter how much you spend, nothing you buy ever makes you as happy as you thought it would? Rather, it just makes you long for the next upgrade. Perhaps it is time to vacate “the stuff you thought you needed” out of your heart. Let it be empty for a while. Let God fill it with good things – that probably won't be things.

I began this article by saying how much I love words. Perhaps my love for words leads me to love the God who is called the Word made Flesh – the God who

¹Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 2000) 88-89.