

THE REALITY OF MIRACLES

It was “hell on earth.” The place to which I refer is located at Andersonville, Georgia. We now know it as the infamous Andersonville Prison of the Civil War. Of course, none of the horror is present anymore, even though one can be reminded of it simply by observing the site and visiting the local cemetery with nearly 13,000 graves of those who died.

The prison was simply an enclosure of over 26 acres where over 33,000 Union soldiers were held by the Confederate army. There were no barracks for them, as it was merely to be a holding site prior to a prisoner exchange. Tarps and blankets stretched over poles were to serve the purpose of a temporary dwelling. The Union generals (for reasons of their own), however, rejected the offer of an exchange.

Conditions became horrific. The sea of humanity was controlled by guards who would shoot on sight anyone who so much as reached across the “deadline,” a line marked out around the perimeter of the inside of the prison. The little stream (and only source of water) that flowed through the prison area became polluted, causing the death of many. In the midst of this squalor, a number of the prisoners formed prayer groups that met on a regular basis. And, then, in the summer of 1864, following a violent thunderstorm, a spring sprang up just outside of the “deadline.” The prisoners were allowed to channel it into the prison area. It was considered to be a miracle and flows to this day.

I was reminded of that phenomenon last week when we celebrated the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. Just six years earlier than the miracle at Andersonville, our Blessed Lady showed Bernadette where water would be coming out of the ground. That water, also, flows to this day and is the cause of miracles at Lourdes.

Miracles do still happen. Sometimes they are so “close to home” that we do not recognize them. The fact that United Flight 93 crashed into an empty field and not into the city of Johnstown is a miracle. And, then, we have the rescue of the nine miners at Quecreek Mine. They were trapped for over three days and came out alive. That was a miracle. I remember interviewing one of the miners on our Sunday morning *Proclaim* program. He said that he was convinced that there were not only nine but ten down in that mine, referring to the tenth as the angel of God who saw them through.

Bishop Gordon Bennett, SJ, of the Diocese of Mandeville, was the presenter for the retreat of the Bishops of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York earlier this year. On that occasion, he quoted Phillip Yancey from his book The Jesus I Never Knew: “Faith produces miracles, but miracles don't always produce faith.” That is not the way that it should be. Nevertheless, that appears to be the way that it is with God's people.

I never could understand why the miracle of Flight 93 has not changed our Faith life in these Allegheny Mountains more than it has, - if it has changed it at all. Perhaps, remembering Andersonville and Quecreek will prompt us to recall more vividly the reality of God's presence among us. We continue to be touched by his miracles. We simply need to recognize them. However, that takes Faith.