

Memory of St. Bernard Teen Lives on in India

by Erin DeGregorio, Staff Writer

WINDSOR TERRACE — The legacy of Kaitlyn Rose Bernhardt, a beloved 15-year-old from St. Bernard Parish who died in 2018, lives on in Mill Basin, Brooklyn — and in a small rural village in India.

A new school — located near St. Theresa of Child Jesus Parish in Kakkanour, India — was built and opened in memory of the late Bergen Beach teen who touched the hearts of Catholics half a world away as she continued to pray the rosary throughout her two-year-long battle with osteosarcoma, a form of bone cancer.

Five furnished classrooms, as well as two labs and a playground, were opened to local students at St. Little Flower Higher Secondary School in Kakkanour this past winter.

The school's opening followed the construction of a grotto dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes in the same area, which was built in Kaitlyn's memory in March of 2019. Both projects were spearheaded by Father Benjamin Chinnappan, a priest who grew up in St. Theresa of Child Jesus, and retired Deacon Jim Stahlnecker of Staten Island.

St. Theresa parishioners — especially the youth — prayed with Kaitlyn in mind after



The school, which opened this past winter in memory of Kaitlyn Rose Bernhardt, followed the construction of a nearby grotto which was also dedicated in her name.

Deacon Stahlnecker and Father Chinnappan shared the story of the courageous teen, who held on to her faith and remained unfailingly upbeat as she underwent multiple surgeries and treatments.

The hope for the secondary school, according to Father Chinnappan, is to provide Dalit children with opportunities for a quality education to help them break the cycle of poverty.

"With this new facility and environment, children have excitement," said Father Chinnappan, who currently serves as a chaplain

at the Department of Veteran Affairs in San Diego and is the executive director of Dalit Solidarity (a nonprofit group that seeks and promotes justice and equality for Dalits, members of India's lowest caste). "It's a morale boost for the local community, encouraging children to come to school and finish their education."

Jennifer Bernhardt, Kaitlyn's mother, said she still hears from those living in the Indian village and often receives pictures of the school and grotto.

"It's nice to see something so good is coming out of the tragedy," said Bernhardt, adding that she and her family continue to spread love and pay it forward to others — as Kaitlyn would have wanted — in New York. "It just makes it easier for me every day."

Though the school has been closed to students since March due to a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic that swept across India, Father Chinnappan said the grotto continues to serve as a place for healing.

"People from all faiths come and pray to God," Father Chinnappan said. "I've seen how the faith communities have a renewed vision within themselves that has brought transformation and social change every day."

The transformation at Kakkanour is not complete; plans for a 15-store shopping complex to be built adjacent to the school, as well as onsite dorms, are also in the works, according to both Deacon Stahlnecker and Father Chinnappan. A small rent paid by the shops' merchants, they explained, could assist with teachers' monthly salaries in the future.

"If everything goes okay, we're hoping to open this final building on December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception," Deacon Stahlnecker said.

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To Whom Shall We Go?

Continued from page 23

scendent quality in which both the excellence and overabundance of the food signify that it occurs in a transformed time and place, and that one gains spiritual blessings from it; and 5) that it is intended for all people (pp. 9-10).

It is easy to see the parallels between this heavenly, Messianic banquet described in the Old Testament and the celebration of the Eucharist, Jesus' Body and Blood, that is at the center of the life and worship of a Catholic. It is also easy to see other parallels in the actual experience of the Israelites. Kilmartin points out that the manna in the desert that the Israelites received from God is both "superior nourishment which gives [them] great strength" and also a "type of spiritual food, the word of God, which preserves the spiritual life" (p. 20).

Kilmartin explains that Jesus, however, introduces a new reality to His followers — the Incarnate Word of God in His Eucharistic presence (p. 13). As manna gave superior nourishment and strength to the Israelites, the Eucharist, which the early Church clearly recognized was foreshadowed by manna in the desert, must also be superior and extraordinary sustenance — a "spiritual food which preserves supernatural life." Furthermore, it is understood to be

a component of the Messianic age, furnished by the Messiah at the occurrence of Passover which ushers in the new age (p. 20).

An additional parallel pertains to the blood that is routinely sacrificed in the Old Testament and the Blood that is shed in Jesus' sacrifice of His life for the forgiveness of sins. As Kilmartin explains, "the sacrificial blood of the Old Law is a type of the sacrificial blood of the New Law." However, it takes on greater meaning with Christ. It is "when the redemptive significance of the sacramental participation in the sacrificial blood of the New Law is revealed, the meaning attributed to sacrificial blood in the Old Law throws light on the meaning of participation in the sacramental blood of Christ." Participation in the sacramental blood of Christ by a believer entails a more profound participation in the new covenant between Jesus and the Church and is reflected in the believer's relationship with his fellow man and community (pp. 20-21).

With all that was foreshadowed of the Eucharist before it was instituted by Christ, and all that can be said of its supernatural nature, the Eucharist is nothing short of God's miracle on earth and a testimony of His unwavering love for humankind. It signifies that God is always present with us. There can be no greater comfort and sustenance to the weary traveler journeying onto the greatest of destinations — eternal life with Almighty God, in Heaven.

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