

Portaging Life as Leaders in Training

BY CHRISTOPHER KRALL, SJ

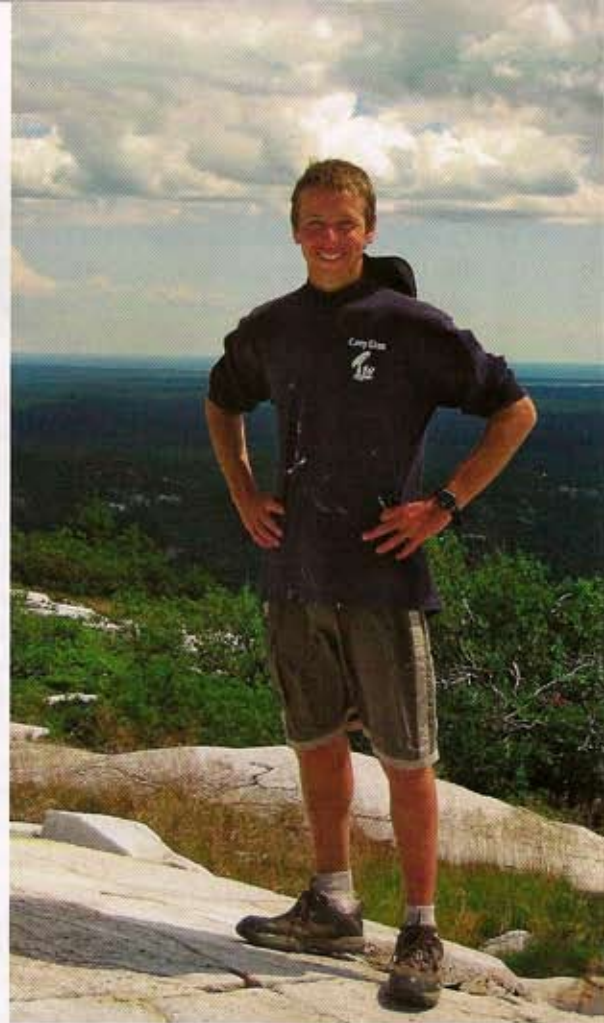
This summer, in a canoe, in Canada, I discovered our Jesuit mission is happening in a very real way on the frontiers of ministry.

The second decree of the Society of Jesus' General Congregation 35 in Rome last March is entitled "A Fire that Kindles Other Fires" and was written to revitalize the Jesuit charism of "Finding God in All Things" and falling in love in an absolute and final way.

There is a place where 100 grade-school-age children have free reign on a 10-acre peninsula jutting into a Northern Ontario lake with only high school-age counselors to supervise. There are only two "adults" for this great playground where the children have access to canoes, kayaks, sailboats, wind-surfers, climbing walls, a room full of costumes, paints, dodgeballs, and many more toys and the whole lake in which to play. This may sound like a child's dream summer and a parent's nightmare, but it is exactly the ministry in which the Jesuits of English Canada tapped into almost 40 years ago to light hearts on fire. This place is Camp Ekon. It was a powerful and holy place for me to work as a senior counselor/Jesuit scholastic and a place all the young staff will tell you is a way of life, the best place on this earth, a taste of heaven.

Camp Ekon is named after the Jesuit martyr St. Jean de Brebeuf, (Ekon is the name given him by the Ouendat people) who was not always reasonable himself, as he risked everything by going into the most remote and

dangerous parts of the new world for the sake of spreading the fire to the native populations. Brebeuf was courageous, adaptable, strong, able to carry the heavy load on long portages, and kept an eye out for the littlest. He suffered a gruesome death at the hands of the Iroquois people, but he truly appreciated the culture of the Huron tribes and integrated the Catholic faith into their lifestyle. The Spirit of Ekon is just that, meeting the hundreds of campers where they are at. Each week they come mostly from inner-city Toronto but as far away as Spain and from every economic level. Then, by providing them with activities they love and by sharing strong, yearly traditions of songs, council ring celebrations, campfires, Holy Mass, family-style meals, and prayer, all come to a deeper appreciation of the love of God. Ekon is no ordinary summer camp in that all the activity equipment



Jesuit scholastic Chris Krall atop Silver Peak in the Killarney Provincial Park of Northern Ontario, Canada, as he seeks to spread the Ignatian flame.



Finding God in All Things at Camp Ekon and the Canadian wilderness.

is modest and simple, the living arrangements are "rustic," but the community, the family, the joy of playing, singing, rowing, swinging, climbing, sailing, praying, and just being together is what makes the camp so special.

This theme is most evident with the oldest of campers. After returning to the camp for up to 10 consecutive summers, sophomores or juniors in high school attain the status of "Leaders In Training." These campers know all the traditions, have memorized all the songs, are familiar with every centimeter of the camp grounds, are surprised by nothing, and are seeking to be hired as staff the next year. To be considered for staff, however, these 'LIT's' need to survive a four-week, intensive, grinding, boot camp-like, initiation that challenges and stretches these campers physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. What became known as the "Strong Sisterhood of the Ooh Rah Tribe," were eight girls who came up to Camp

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Ekon for four weeks to be formed and shaped into "PFO's" (People for Others). These girls all came with their struggles of being sophomores in high school in this day and age. To pull them completely out of these millennial, teenage pressures, the first two weeks consisted of the most menial of tasks. They were to be the dishwashers, bathroom cleaners, floor scrubbers, and grunts of the camp grounds housing over 150 people. Day-in and day-out, they endured the brunt of complaints, the dirtiest of situations, late nights, early mornings and tight living situations. For the second two weeks, another senior staffer and I had the pleasure of guiding them on 'a trip.' We were loaded with supplies, given three canoes, and sent to the north woods of the Killarney Provincial Park where there were no toilets or

dishes to clean, or to have the pleasure of using at all. We became contemplatives in action as our schedule matched that of the sun. We could slow ourselves to enjoy the sacred moments of sunrises and sunsets at the beginning and end of each day on the pristine lakes while during the days we paddled, portaged, or hauled the canoes and supplies over land to the next lake, and of course, sang a lot. Since the iPod could not make the trip, the songs of Disney movies, "High School Musical," the hottest new releases, and oldies all melded with the cry of loons, the beat of the waves, the swaying trees, and the hum of mosquitoes. Right from the start, on the first portage, we were surrounded by nature as a black bear was just off our path.

The day that stands out was rainy and we seemed to be paddling through an endless, winding, muddy bog. Every 20 meters we needed to drag our canoes over large, muddy, foul smelling, beaver dams. We finally came to a portage trail that we hoped would lead to a clean lake. We found,

Team spirit was high as the "Leaders In Training" learned to be "People for Others" setting the whole world aflame.



however, the first 50 meters of this portage was deep mud, so deep that one of the girls, Sarah, carrying a canoe on her back, sank in knee deep, losing her shoe and falling under the canoe. In this muck, the mosquitoes swarmed us as we all worked to help get Sarah and her shoe out and back on track. The girls were quite frustrated, hot, swatting the bugs, dirty, and wishing they were anywhere but in this swamp with heavy yokes on their backs. We proceeded into the woods and pushed on, singing "I will survive ..." hoping there would be an end to this trial. Over hills of boulders and tree-roots, through rivers, and battling through the thick Canadian north woods, we finally emerged to a beautiful, glacial lake. Just as we came out from the trail, the sun broke through the clouds allowing us to see to the bottom of this deep, clear lake.

Instinctively, we all dropped the canoes and bags we were carrying and threw ourselves into the lake. The yoke was made easy and our burden light.

If it is possible to get a glimpse of what heaven is like after the portage of life, that refreshing moment would be it. That night, around the campfire, I could see that these girls had changed. These "Sisters of the Ooh Rah Tribe" had broken out of the pressures to which society and high school held them. They were more than just survivors of the mud of sin, depression, fear and doubts. They had truly caught fire. Through this "trip," these girls were no longer leaders in training, they were true leaders, coming to a sense of faith through the tough times, being dealers of hope, and doers of the deeds of love, ready to return to their homes and schools to continue to spread that flame themselves.

Fr. Jeronimo Nadal, an early companion of St. Ignatius, commented that we must make the road our home as pilgrims walking with our walking sticks on this journey through this world. Well, sometimes this road may come to a lake and the walking stick may become a paddle. No matter what, the journey ever continues. There may be times that will not always make sense, but as Brebeuf remained on course through the most severe of trials, so we live the spirit of Ekon. We live it with discipline, courage, and faith, spreading the flame of love with every paddle stroke, year after year, and of course, singing all the way! **||**

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MY SUMMER VOCATION

World Youth Day *a Universal Pilgrimage*

BY VINCENT L. STRAND, SJ

St. Ignatius once wrote, "The more universal the good is, the more it is divine." For the thousands of young pilgrims who gathered this summer in Sydney, Australia, for the 23rd World Youth Day (WYD), the truth of Ignatius' words was experienced in a profound way. For in Sydney, the universal Church was concretely gathered, represented by pilgrims who had traveled thousands of miles to be together for a week of prayer, formation and celebration.

The theme of WYD 2008 was taken from Acts 1:8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses." The verse continues, "... in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Indeed for most of the pilgrims – including the group from Fordham University I was accompanying – Australia felt like the ends of the earth! Upon arriving Down Under, our group joined 1,200 other pilgrims from Jesuit institutions throughout the world in the Jesuit-sponsored MAGiS08 program. These days were filled with much learning, as we prayerfully reflected upon the "magis"

