

**Homily for Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, August 20, 1153;
Jonathan Myrick Daniels, Seminarian and Witness for Civil
Rights, August 20, 1965**

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Ecclesiasticus 39:1–10; Psalm 85:7–13; John 15:7–11

Today we commemorate two heroes of the Christian faith who died on this day August 20, one in the year 1153 and one in 1965. Bernard was born in 1090. He would become a Benedictine abbot who led a renewal of monasticism, from which the Order of Cistercians developed.¹ We also remember the life and witness of an Episcopal seminarian, Jonathan Myrick Daniels, who was born in on March 20, 1939, in Keene, New Hampshire, where he grew up. He is buried there in a grave that he shares with his parents with these words, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”²

While preparing to publish our own parish calendar for 2018, I began to discover how much one doesn’t learn from the Church’s official book about the fixed

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “Bernard, St.,” 162.

² John 15:23. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/98336269/philip-brock-daniels#view-photo=68458387>, (accessed 20 August 2020). See also his individual marker: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/12600289/jonathan-myrick-daniels#view-photo=196379696>, (accessed 20 August 2020).

holy days and optional observances. The current edition is *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006*. A rough count this morning of optional commemorations came in at 153. Among the most surprising things I learned in process of preparing the calendar was the life story of Jonathan Myrick Daniels. He is commemorated officially in our calendar on August 14, the day he and others were arrested for civil disobedience in Fort Deposit, Alabama.³ They would be moved to a prison in Hayneville. He was among five who were released six days later on August 20. This is from *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, [quote] “Aware that there were in danger, . . . four of them walked to a small store. As sixteen-year-old Ruby Sales reached the top step of the entrance, a man with a gun appeared, cursing her. Jonathan pulled her to one side to shield her from the unexpected threat. As a result, he was killed by a blast from the 12-gauge gun.”⁴ The day was his mother’s birthday sixtieth birthday.

What I didn’t learn from *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* was that a skinny eighteen-year-old New Hampshire boy, chose to attend the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington,

³ William J. Schneider, *American Martyr: The Jon Daniels Story* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1972, 41–45.

⁴ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006 [LFF]* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2006), 346.

Virginia. There the tradition is for the senior class to elect their valedictorian and he was valedictorian in 1961. It's worth reading the recognition given him at VMI on its website.⁵

What I immediately realized when I learned that he was a graduate of VMI, was that it was his military training that led him to push a sixteen-year-old Ruby Sales, a black teenager, for many years now an aside and to take the shotgun blast.

Lesser Feasts and Fasts says, "From high school in Keene to graduate school at Harvard, Jonathan wrestled with the meaning of life and death and vocation."⁶ I don't think the church should be at all ashamed of the graces of his life and family that led him to a challenging military education.

Daniels grew up in Saint James Church in Keene. At one of Saint Mary's sister parishes, if you will, the Church of the Advent in Boston, God's grace grabbed him on Easter Day 1962. He went to Alabama in 1965 because he believed God wanted him there to stand with his brothers and sisters. It's clear from his

⁵<https://www.vmi.edu/archives/genealogy-biography-alumni/featured-historical-biographies/jonathan-daniels-civil-rights-hero/>, (accessed 20 August 2020).

⁶ *LFF*, 346.

writings that he went because of a profound religious conviction.⁷

I know of one book about him by an Episcopal priest who was his chaplain at Harvard, the Reverend William J. Schneider, a retired priest of the diocese of Massachusetts. He knew Daniels for two years and collected papers and information from those who knew him well. His book is *American Martyr: The Jon Daniels Story*. Three years ago, I bought a used copy on Amazon for \$9.70. If we ever have another young seminarian come out of this parish, I'll pass on my copy to him or her. Daniels' writings about his spiritual convictions and doubts after college will resonate, I hope, with those are called at that period in their life. He was twenty-six when he died, my age when I entered seminary.

His funeral at Saint James' Church in Keene was attended by a former presiding bishop, the bishop of New Hampshire, the dean and a professor of his seminary, and the Episcopal Theological School, then in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was buried next to his father who had died in 1959. His mother died in 1984. Keene is just a couple hours from my brother

⁷ Schneider, 50–52.

and his family in Massachusetts. I'd like to go visit his church and his grave. Reading the book about him reminded me of the spiritual intensity at the age of twenty-five that led me to Christ afresh and to becoming a pastor and priest.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright © 2020 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.