

JUBILEE REFLECTION

July 30, 2011

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These last four days – themes of discovering, dreaming, designing and yes, even some debating – have dominated our conversations, disturbed our complacency (if indeed any of us might be so inclined) and dilated out hearts once again as we claimed, cherished and were challenged by facts and portents of a future for the congregation that does not allow us, “entirely,” in the words of Louis Florent Gillet, to “... *leave it to God alone to prosper.*”

But today, as if by some kind of divine instinct of spiritual alchemy, our Assemblies – this time of exchange of views, experiences and differences of opinion and perception – have been followed by the celebration of Jubilee, the most joyous, *par excellence*, of all IHM festal gatherings.

Jubilee! In praise, love, thanksgiving for the lives of you, our sisters, companions, friends, colleagues with whom we have journeyed these many, many years – you, who have cheered and inspired us and who have stayed the course 75, 60, 50 and 25 years. It is *you and your lives*, your faith and your *fidelity* that allow us – enable us – to celebrate, to raise the challenging questions again and again and to paint emerging scenarios of our future with courage and with faith.

How can we ever truly understand the depths of religious life and of *your* commitment to it all these years, in which we rejoice on this day? How explain *to* or unfold *for* another, or to *ask* of oneself, the mystery of its call?

“*Why this waste?*” ask the skeptics. “*Why this pouring out of the precious ointment of life in response to an invitation heard only in the depths of one’s heart? And which asks for nothing less than the gift of a lifetime?*”

And what of the hundreds of lives of our sisters who have gone before us? Each visit to the cemetery inspires us over and over, and we tell the stories to ourselves and to others of the lives of those whose tombstones are engraved so simply – Sister Theresa McGivney, Sister Theresa Coulter, Sister Lois Logan, Sister Mary Frances Gilleran.

The answer to such questions, and to the lives of such women, surely does not come from logic’s science of reasoning, or anything expected in the *normal run of things* for that matter. Nor *was* or *is* it an invitation, it seems for a lifetime, pursuing what the world holds in such high esteem – wealth, well-being, independence, the pursuance of one’s dream, a progeny to continue one’s name.

A life of poverty, celibacy and obedience is a *mystery of faith and a miracle of grace.*

“*Do not plunder the Mystery with concepts...*” write the Zen Masters.

And how else could the words of Mother Justina Riley – novice director and general superior in the congregation’s early years – ever make sense ... and inspire us, paradoxically as well?

“Do not think that I am sitting here to pass the time away telling you that religious life is poetry. It is the roughest kind of prose.”

The readings from this 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time offer rich and challenging reflections as we celebrate the gift and meaning of your lives, their poetry and the roughest kind of prose.

The invitation of the first reading, an excerpt from *The Book of Consolation* written by Second Isaiah to the exiled and penniless Jews in Babylon, pictures the Lord God as a lavish storekeeper who keeps a kind of inn. He speaks poetically ...

“All who are thirsty, come to the water!

Are you penniless? Come anyway.

Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk,

Buy without money – everything’s free.

The Gospel reading from St. Mathew relates one of the four times that the story of the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes is recounted in the accounts of the evangelists.

Why so many times? we ask. What gives it such significance?

Is it because of the sheer magnitude of the miracle itself? Or is it something else?

“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish – meaning it is not enough.

We try to imagine the apostles turn of mind at Jesus’ words, *“You feed them yourselves ...”*

The enormity of the task, its seeming impossibility, and yet ... *“all ate and were filled and they took up the fragments ... what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.”*

And the fragments, the left-overs? What of them?

In our own lives, can we not find and feel a kind of resonance for a seemingly impossible task we too had to face? A challenge, an obedience that appeared overwhelming? Beyond our capacities? Or so unattractive as to try our faith to the limits?

In the *Little Blue Books* that record some of the thoughts of Bishop Ken Untener is a reflection on the Gospel of the Loaves and the Fishes. ...

These are not his exact words but they illustrate his simple wisdom and profound spirituality.

We all have days when we feel our inadequacies especially when the work ahead of us looms very large. We never have enough time, or talent, or wisdom. We cannot do it all with the little and seemingly insufficient gifts or money or helpers. And yet the work is ours to do. The kingdom must be built. So we pray, "Take the little." And here is the miracle: it is enough. And even more than enough.

And so it is, on this Jubilee Day.

It is enough.

The gift you offer, the gratitude we feel.

The lives you have lived, the bread of life you have shared and the leftovers that remain – *"the fragments ... they too, are miracles of life"* (Jessica Powers).

As we enter into this liturgy, let us be mindful that in another day the Church celebrates the memory of St. Alphonsus Ligouri, founder, Doctor of the Church, moral theologian *par excellence*, patron of the congregation.

But this afternoon, we leave the last word to Teresa, who, Alphonsus declared, taught him to pray.

May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith. May you use those gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you...

May you be content knowing you are a child of God...Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love.

It is there for each and every one of us.

Margaret Brennan, IHM