



Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time November 7, 2010 C

WHO ARE CATHOLIC SISTERS?

This Sunday we celebrate the gift that women religious have been to our church in the U.S.A. I am most grateful to Mary Kay Kantz for coordinating this event and for writing today's Pastor's Column. I am grateful to Mary Blucker, our Junior High Youth Minister for cording the "Alleluia: Celebrating Women of Spirit" festival.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious tells us that "Catholic Sisters are women called to a life of Christian service in prayer and community [who] live in close contact with other members of their community or congregation and take vows to live simply, and be obedient and celibate."

This life is "founded on a love relationship with Christ, first and foremost," says LCWR 2010 president Sr. Marlene Weisenbeck. Today, there are more than 600 such communities in the United States with more than 63,000 members.

We glimpse the spirit of these women in the words of Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel, a missionary who served in El Salvador during a terrifyingly violent period in that country's history.

Not long before she was martyred there in 1980, Sr. Dorothy wrote to friends back home about "our 51,000 parishioners who we try to help realize their dignity as persons who can reach full development by being able to read and write... to open to them the ways of learning and the rich possession of truth, both human and divine, that we enjoy. It is almost impossible to reach half our parishioners (living on islands or the sides of a volcano), but you can trust us to do our best to help wherever we can. And so we continue, living through earthquakes, eating beans and tortillas in the cantones, walking in dust or water up to our ankles (depending on the season), removing knifed victims from the main streets, building houses, rebuilding churches, enduring the heat and mosquitoes, fighting malaria and dysentery, and just generally having a great time in the name of the Ursulines and the Christ who is Lord. God love you all!"

This is the same Christ-focused, positive and joyful spirit that led Sisters to build thousands of schools, hospitals, and other religious and social service institutions throughout the United States since the first of them arrived in New Orleans in 1727 on a ship attacked by pirates on its voyage from France.

They came from Europe at the invitation of priests and bishops, arriving a few at a time, unfamiliar with the new language, living in great poverty, but ever faithful to their call to build the Church in America. They served as nurses on both sides of the Civil War, founded the hospital that we now know as the Mayo Clinic, tended victims of epidemics when no one else would come near.

They were often the only women in Wild West towns other than the women who lived above the saloon, and they walked with Civil Rights leaders at the head of marches in the 1960's. They built up the Church and its institutions everywhere they went, and they founded new communities in the New World.

And they died – trying to save their orphaned charges from the Galveston hurricane of 1900 by tying the little ones with rope to their own bodies; providing care and comfort to peasants being tortured, kidnapped and massacred by a repressive government in El Salvador in 1980; defending the rights of the poor whose land was literally being stolen from them by wealthy logging companies in Brazil in 2005.

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister writes, "For hundreds of years they have consistently, persistently, confidently and courageously chosen for a necessary future – whatever difficulties the doing of it meant for them in the present. Over and over again, they chose for tomorrow rather than settle for a more convenient past."

Daughter of Wisdom Sr. Maureen Hurley, reflecting on the 2007 World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life, wrote "We are sons and daughters of the Church. The Church receives our vows and asks God's grace for us by its public prayer. We, in turn, live a life of service to the Church and to the welfare of all humanity. We believe that many ways of life are part of revealing the Kingdom of God. We believe that God is still calling

and inviting men and women to Consecrated Life. We ask you to encourage others that you may know who seem to have a sense of God's presence in their lives. Support them and pray for them."

Sr. Maureen also asks us to pray for the Sisters, "Because we try, by our total dedication to Jesus, to bring his presence, his love, and his hope to others. We witness to the world by our vows – by our vow of celibacy, we witness that love is more than sex; by our vow of poverty, we witness that material things do not bring fulfillment; and by our vow of obedience, we witness that power is not freedom."

While there is much talk about the declining numbers of religious today, the Daughters of Wisdom website points out that the large numbers of religious in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was an anomaly. The Spirit seems to have called great numbers to respond to the needs of the tens of millions of immigrant Catholics in the years of great growth of our country. "Since religious life began in the early years of Christendom, there have never been large numbers who have been called and responded to this way of life." It appears that the Spirit may today be deepening the faithfulness of these communities, so they in turn can call forth a special response to Gospel-living among men and women in the "lay affiliate" groups that have been birthed by many communities.

Learn more about the Sisters at www.womenandspirit.org, the site of the traveling museum exhibit on the history of Sisters in America, currently on display at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. www.catholicsoncall.org offers young adults a variety of resources to help with discernment of a religious vocation. Google the name of any religious community to find its web site and information about their formation programs and their lay affiliate groups. Most also offer a link where you can ask the Sisters to pray for your special intentions.

ONE SISTER'S STORY

Sr. Julie Brown grew up as part of a small Catholic minority in a logging town in the mountains of Montana. "My first memory of the Sisters coming to town for a summer program in first grade was pretty traumatic. I had never seen a nun before, let alone one in the complete black and white habit with the funny hats. My Sister teacher got too close when she greeted me, and her rosary brushed against my face. I began to cry – my brother had told me I would go to hell if I touched one of the Sisters. The poor Sister tried to comfort me with a hug, and you can imagine what was going on in my head!

Throughout my teenage and college years, there were no religious women or religious communities near where I lived, so religious life was not even on the radar when I was looking at possible careers. I finished my degree in medical technology and microbiology; then with no jobs in sight in my field, I returned home to work for the U.S. Forest Service, fighting wildfires.

In the meantime, God had plans for me of which I was totally oblivious – like I said, religious life was never in my conscious, let alone the Sisters of Mercy. I met one of the Mercy Sisters at a retreat, and we got to be good friends. One day she told me I should "take a swing at the novitiate." Even though I had no clue what she was saying, I felt a huge door opening for me, and it felt right. I didn't think "nuns were made anymore" but she told me otherwise. So, I would have to... go to Iowa!!! Are you kidding me, "who would want to go to Iowa?"

In the next few months, because I was open to explore and experience the lives of the Sisters of Mercy, I ended up moving to Iowa and completing my internship for medical technology. During that year, I was granted permission to enter the Sisters of Mercy of Cedar Rapids.

In the 30 years since then, I have had so many opportunities that I wouldn't have had if I had not been a Sister of Mercy. I've had many trials and doubts along with joys throughout these past years, but I wouldn't trade this life for anything else. I am so blessed with the many people I've met and I know that God is good. So now I'm off to see what God has in store for me this day."

This Sunday, take the opportunity to meet the Sisters from many different communities who will be in the coffee hall from 8:30 am to 3:00 pm. It's a great chance to say "Thank you, Sister" and to learn something about their lives and ministries today. The poster in today's bulletin gives a schedule of events for our "Alleluia: Celebrating Women of Spirit" festival.

Have a blessed week,

