

UNIQUELY GRACED . . . FOR MISSION

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Presbrooke, Ontario, *Antelope*
St Paul,
1979

As a Congregation, existing now for three hundred and twenty-nine years, our purpose has always remained the same:

Goal To bring about the union of ourselves and all people with God and with one another in and through Christ Jesus.

As Sisters of St. Joseph we move always toward the achievement of this goal in a particular way, that is, with a particular spirit and spirituality. Our spirit and spirituality are based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as seen through the eyes of our Founder, and as lived by our first Sisters, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In recent times we have stated our goal as follows: We are called to . . . and I quote

... an identification with Jesus Christ in his self-emptying and obedience, so that, drawn ever more fully into the mystery of his death and resurrection, we may die to self and live in God and for others. We are also called to develop a deep relationship with the persons of the Trinity and with Jesus, Mary and Joseph. We honor the Father by desiring always to respond to his gift of life, the Son by seeking to imitate his humility and self-surrender, the Holy Spirit by trying to realize and express God's love in our lives. As far as possible, we imitate Jesus in his untiring zeal to bring about the Kingdom of God, Mary in her constant fidelity to the Holy Spirit, and Joseph in the loving manner of his service to others.

The foregoing is a quote from the Core Constitution of the Sisters of St. Joseph, articles 5 through 8. I suggest you look at Médaille's expression of this same goal as found in the Consecration to the Two Trinities. The Core Constitution's statement of the goal is a restatement of Médaille's.

The atmosphere in which we live out our goal is one of gentleness, peace and joy. Of the Gospel values mentioned above, our constant movement toward excellence, the MORE is our spirit, the rest our spirituality.

Desiring to be perfect, growing in humility, self-surrender and great love, becoming zealous, being faithful to the Holy Spirit and serving with love - these values are "bare bones". Médaille knew that each sister, by the quality

of her living, would have to en flesh these characteristic virtues day by day. With the person that I am, in the circumstances in which I find myself, and imbued with the spirit of my Congregation, I respond with the help of the Holy Spirit, in a way that will best bring about salvation and perfection for both myself and those whom I serve. No one can tell me what the humility, the zeal, the charity of a Sister of St. Joseph is. That I have to pay serious attention to these virtues is certain, but only I know what each demands of me, or only we know what each demands of us, in a given setting. In the living out of the purpose of the Congregation, Medaille reverences the way in which each is being moved toward it.

I would like to spend a few moments developing this important concept, namely the personalized way in which the Spirit of God leads each one according as He finds her.

The Spirit Leads Each As He Finds Her . . .

To those of us who are followers of Jesus, this concept is most concrete and experiential. The Church teaches that each person is created by God, created in His image, and created by the Father in a special gesture of love. As we look around in this room we see the evidences of our physical uniquenesses. As we relate with one another, we become more aware that this uniqueness extends to each individual personality, to our emotional and psychological characteristics. The more we share of our life with one another, the more we become aware that our life experiences are uniquely ours, and when we begin to exchange faith experiences, we are struck often by the individual, personal way in which God deals with each. From the moment I was in the mind of God, He called me by name, He knows me through and through, I am precious to Him because I am a little word in the Eternal Word.

In the Old Testament, Yahweh usually dealt with His people as a nation,

Unique-
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Personal
God

but He raised up individuals as prophets, leaders, priests and guides to carry out His designs for His people. We see how personally He inspired Abraham, Moses, Judith, Esther, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ruth. In the psalms, the psalmist shares with us the depths of his intimate relationship with God.

Jesus

Jesus respects the creation of the Father wherever He finds it. We have only to think of His relationship to Peter, to John, to Magdalen, to the woman at the well, and to countless others, to see how personally He entered the lives of His friends.

Spirit

Since the Spirit bears witness to the Son, He too reverences the Father's work in each. Paul, in instructing the various Christian communities impresses upon them the personal way in which Jesus is their Saviour, and that His Spirit will continue to animate them as a community and individually if they but adhere faithfully to His promptings and inspirations. He will call and send each according to his gifts. Paul tells the Corinthians, ". . . everyone has his own particular gifts from God, one with a gift for one thing and another with a gift for the opposite". (1 Cor. 7:7) The Spirit of Jesus informs my unique spirit, by encouraging me to put my strengths at the service of others and by helping me to acknowledge and transform my weaknesses into strengths. For me, this is always an invitation to live the MORE.

the
MORE

The spirit of always moving toward the MORE . . . whether it be love or gentleness, zeal or reconciliation, is the movement of the Holy Spirit in us. He has but one movement, a movement of love that brings us to the Father, through Jesus while at the same time moving us to be one with the community of men. This life of the Spirit given to us in Baptism and fostered by faith communities, makes us one as sisters and brothers in Christ. The way in which the Spirit will urge me to share Christ with others

will be different perhaps than you are led to do the same. The Spirit knows who I am, how best He can communicate with me, how He can use my personal resources for the upbuilding of His people. In the face of such respect, how utterly respectful we need to be with one another!

The Spirit is constantly "calling me forth" to be the person God intends me to be. I am being called to a "moment-by-moment" renewal in the Spirit. Paul writes to Titus:

It was for no reason except His own compassion (God's) that He saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by renewing us with the Holy Spirit which He has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our Saviour. (Tt. 3:5)

Very often renewal, revivification, new life begins by the renewal of our minds. "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus". (Phil. 2:5) "Keep always in mind the aim of your vocation ..." (M1) My thoughts, reasonings, desires, urges and promptings are very personal, and often these are the seat of the movements of the Holy Spirit. He enters here, respectful of what He finds. Many times He can build on and perfect what is only embryonic there; many times His entry into my mind and heart must dispel other spirits foreign to His. This is why Medaille insists on the Sister of St. Joseph acting out of grace, not before it, but with it.

Renewal
by
Holy
Spirit

No two of us have impulses and desires alike, The Spirit of Jesus comes to me in the depths of my being, a being that is entirely unique and irrepeatable. St. Ignatius understood this principle well, He taught that it is partly in the understanding of the affective movements of my heart that I come to have a discerning heart. It is in my feelings, urges and impulses that I come to know a congruence or a non-congruence with the Spirit of Jesus. operative in me.¹ Perhaps the epitome of Paul's imagery,

¹. George Aschenbrenner, S.J. "Consciousness Examen," Review for Religious, XXXI, No. 1 (January 1972)

Paul and
a
personal
God

in describing this intimate relationship of the Spirit and the follower of Jesus, is expressed in these words to the new Christians at Corinth, "Didn't you realize that you were God's temple and that the Spirit of God was living among you?" (1 Cor. 3:16) More precisely, the Spirit of the living God dwells in the innermost part, in the core of our being. In another place Paul writes, "Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you since you received Him from God." (1 Cor. 6:19) As we have become alive by the Spirit, Paul urges us to walk by the Spirit. (Gal. 5:16, 26) Christians are "spiritualized" by the Spirit since the function of the Spirit is to create and recreate life in Christ.

What can we say of Father Medaille's Respect for the Action of the Holy Spirit in Another?

Love

Medaille, being a master of the spiritual life, knew that the Spirit progressively effects our regeneration as children of God. The greatest power that the Spirit releases in us is love. Paul tells us that "the fruit of the Spirit is love . . ." (Gal. 5:22) Someone has described it this way: the Father laughs with the Son and the Son with the Father. Their laughter becomes Joy, which in turn becomes Desire and Desire becomes Love. Love given and Love received is the Holy Spirit.

The Founder was so desirous that we be true to this Gospel love that he urges us to consecrate ourselves to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and he goes on to say

that the Sisters should so live
that their Congregation may bear the name of the Con-
gregation of the great love of God; and that in all
things and everywhere they make profession of the
greatest love in daily practice.

(Primitive Constitution, p. 12)

I am reminded here of a phrase in the Constitutions we had when I entered.

In speaking of the relationships of the Sisters to one another, the text ran something like this: "They shall not show the least sign of coldness to one another, whether in gesture or expression." This idea is synonymous with what we read in the Primitive Constitution regarding Community Life, As for the charity which should prevail among them, suffice it to say that they should have one heart and one soul, living in such a union that no one will ever give the slightest displeasure to her sisters, and that all, with a forbearance filled with kindness, will endure one another's natural imperfections without ever giving any sign of vexation or annoyance.

(Primitive Constitution, p. 8)

Love is very personal. Médaille understood and expected that each person would be led by the Spirit to live 'profound love' according as she is able. His humane phrasiology is a recurring theme, phrases like "as far as possible with the help of divine grace" (P.C. p. 6) "in the best way you can" (M. 11), "as well as is possible to you", (M. 76). His deep respect for the Spirit's action in each one prompted him to write,

they (Sisters) will openly practice whatever they believe is most perfect and most pleasing to God as it pleases Him to enlighten them through the help of His grace and the guidance of those in authority. (Primitive Constitution p. 7)

Each time I read through the Primitive Constitution I am left with a sense of awe. I am awed by the awe Father Médaille communicates when he refers to 'grace'. Reading between the lines, I wonder if he, in his intimate direction of others, is left like Teresa of Avila, awed at the thought of a soul graced by God. He frequently urges the members of the little Community to a "great fidelity to the promptings of grace." (Primitive Constitution, p. 66) In Maxims 96 and 99 he instructs us to cherish the least grace we receive from God because all is gift. He cautions us "never to go ahead of grace by an imprudent overeagerness, but quietly await its movements." (M. 84)

This theme recurs often in the Maxims of the Little Institute.

Maxims

Maxim 15 reads:

" . . . be very faithful to the grace of the Holy Spirit, listening to Him attentively, obeying Him promptly and entirely, attributing to Him, as is indeed just, the honor resulting from the success of your good actions.

There simply is no other way for a Sister of St. Joseph than to be constantly in tune with and ready to move with the promptings of the Spirit within and about her. Maxim 91 says it well:

Be a person of such greatness that what is not God will be nothing, and embrace gently and eagerly great apostolic undertakings when the Holy Spirit urges you to do this

Superior

In the fourth part of the Primitive Constitution, Médaille outlines the attitudes of heart necessary for the Superior, whom he sees as the Guardian of the Goal of the Congregation. Permeating through these recommendations is her attention to the inspirations of grace.

As she cannot of herself maintain a community which professes the greatest perfection in all things and embraces all the works of zeal of which woman is capable, she must frequently have recourse to God, trying to make herself worthy of His grace, by the practice of an extremely profound humility, great fidelity in everything to the graces of the Holy Spirit and very intimate union with God.

(Primitive Constitution, p. 15)

For me, the most striking evidence of the Founder's marvelous understanding of the workings of the Holy Spirit, are found in that rather famous chapter in the Primitive Constitution on the Novice Director. I would hope that every Sister of St. Joseph would take to heart the challenge of this chapter, and that we not leave it only to Formation Personnel. The majority of Sisters of St. Joseph, it seems to me, are in some position of leadership. The attitudes expressed here are more than valid for everyone of us, who is concerned with not only the salvation, but also the perfection of the dear neighbor. A CSJ Novice Director is meant

Novice
Director

to be the most loving and gentle person, most attractive by both natural and spiritual virtue, yet lovingly firm, one who embodies the characteristic virtues to an advanced degree and is capable of inspiring the new members to do likewise. I would have to say that sometimes in my Congregation, this chapter of the Constitution got buried. In there we read,

She will be gentle and affable to all her novices, and by this gentleness and affability try to gain their hearts so that she may more easily lead them to the virtues characteristic of this Institute.
(p. 21)

Médaille saw this woman to be a very human and well-integrated person. She needed to understand that novices do not become holy all at once, nor are they immediately able to practice great virtue. According as she grew to know the natural and spiritual tendencies of each, she could then direct what was good to become more perfect, and correct what was faulty.

However, he would have her go further:

Let her try also to understand the attraction of the Holy Spirit and the way by which He wants to direct each of the Sisters in order to help them all to follow this divine attraction without wishing to mold them to follow the method of her virtue and model themselves on her ideas or her practices.

(Primitive Constitutions, p. 21)

This is Formation at its best - helping others to form themselves according to the promptings of the Lord. She is instructed to bring them to a "great and deliberate fidelity to grace" and to "animate them to do their utmost to profit from the grace of the Holy Spirit to the best of their ability." (Primitive Constitution, p. 22)

This kind of direction presupposes a familiarity with the workings of the Holy Spirit in her own life in order that she have the necessary sensitivity to His transforming action in the lives of the novices. It also presupposes that she is a woman moving always to a more self-emptying

love, striving to help the novice respond to God as He prompts her to respond, not necessarily as she herself is called to respond. Médaille is very definite. There is no place for moulding the life of another within a set pattern. This would be to interfere and place obstacles in the work of the Spirit. He keeps before the Novice Director that basic principle of spirituality that "it is the pure grace of God which must bring them" (novices) to the exalted end for which they are becoming Sisters of St. Joseph.

When Father Médaille urges the Novice Director

to gently bring them to understand that the distinguishing mark of the Sister of St. Joseph is to profess in everything and everywhere in great joy and gentleness of heart the greater perfection with as much exactitude as if they had vowed it, (Primitive Constitution, p. 21)

he is underlining the ideal about which a Sister of St. Joseph must be clear. Yet being the masterful spiritual guide that he was, he leaves the details of this 'greater perfection' to be spelled out by each person according as the Spirit leads her. Each one has her own capacity for virtue at a given moment, her own natural gifts and leanings upon which grace builds, her own level of freedom and maturity with which to respond, The fine lines are left to us. Who can tell you or me what that 'greater perfection' is at this moment, in this set of circumstances? But when I live with my eye on the goal, with my ear to the ground always for the MORE, and with my heart open to Jesus' Spirit at work within me and in people, events and things, I come to know the details that will effect greater unity with God, neighbor and myself. I am reminded of the line George Burns speaks in the film "O God", "The details I leave to you to work out."

We have spent considerable time trying to deepen our awareness of how the Spirit of God comes to each one of us as individuals and how Father

Medaille reverences this movement. The other half of our personal spiritual history is equally important to consider.

TO WHAT END IS THIS MOVEMENT DIRECTED?

FOR WHAT PURPOSE ARE WE SO UNIQUELY GRACED?

Medaille believes that the Sister of St. Joseph is graced FOR the sake of accomplishing Jesus' goal, purpose and mission. As I was preparing for this presentation, I asked a few people what they thought Jesus' mission was. One said He came that we would have life and have it abundantly. Another believed Jesus came solely to do the will of His Father. A third felt He had come to bring all men to the Father. When we look closely at the Primitive Constitution and the Maxims, we see how Father Medaille understands that the unique action of God within each Sister of St. Joseph moves her to be zealous, in imitation of the zealous Jesus, for the Total Double Union.

As the Father consecrated and sent Jesus so we are consecrated and sent through the Church to accomplish the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, particularly those works which are neglected by others. The whole 'bent of our being' moves us to unite, as we can, neighbor with neighbor and neighbor with God in reconciling love. We are called to do this by working toward an ever deeper reconciliation of ourselves with God, with our Sisters in Community, among all persons with whom we associate, and indeed among all men.

I quote . . . it is clear that our new Congregation has in view a double end: It aspires, in the first place, to establish and maintain in very high virtue all of its members. In the second place, to practice all the spiritual and corporal works of mercy of which woman is capable and which will most benefit the souls of our dear neighbor.

(Primitive Constitution, p. 5)

By these works of mercy, "the Sister of St. Joseph will bring numerous souls to salvation and perfection, aiding them in the practice of virtue.

(Primitive Constitution, p. 10)

The Maxims reflect a constant urging to live the two Gospel loves and to be moving always to greater unity of neighbor with myself and both with God. Maxim 48 is but one example:

Pursue above all the pure glory of God, your salvation and perfection, the salvation and perfection of the neighbor and not the satisfaction and consolation often found in these pursuits.

Maxim 7 urges us to the same.

It is of the utmost importance that we, as Daughters of St. Joseph find ourselves rooted in Christ's mission and becoming, day by day, absolutely possessed by zeal for the holiness and wholeness in body, mind and spirit of the dear neighbor. Each personal response I make in grace must eventually move me to a greater apostolic response, to establish his Kingdom a little more in the place where I find myself. In this way I am with Christ in his mission. I am a branch solidly grafted to the Vine, a spark of the Divine Flame. I am a little word within the Word of God. If I am to fulfill the mission I have been given as a Christian and as a Sister of St. Joseph, I can never be indifferent, passive, unconcerned or untouched by the least disunity, injustice or exploitation of any one of my sisters or brothers at any level. Part of the gift of my apostolic charism is my sixth sense to establish, as I can, and in the manner of the zealous Jesus, a reconciling love among all persons with myself and with one another, and all with God. As a result of this sensitivity, I will suffer much, I will desire much, and hopefully will be moved always to do what I can and all I can to bring my sisters and brothers together and to the Lord.

In this I am called to be one with Christ in his mission.

Is it not refreshing to realize and to touch again, or for the first time a little of the reverence Médaille has for the uniqueness of each person; to capture ever so little how he cherishes the delicate work of the Holy Spirit in the depths of another?

One serious implication of this for me, is that my zeal for the dear neighbor will gently but firmly urge me, and indeed drive me to do all I can to continue freeing "my" people, whether it be in the ^{human} ~~human~~, emotional, psychological or spiritual spheres, to be more and more the persons God created them to be. Only then can I be a finely - tuned instrument in the hands of the Divine Artist. Only then can I truly put flesh, my flesh on the bare bones of the goal Médaille holds out to me as a Sister of St. Joseph.

Hear in a nutshell, from Father Médaille himself, what I have been attempting to say,

In living your life have only one desire: to be and to become the person God wills in nature, in grace, in glory for time and for eternity.

(Maxim 7, MP Chapter X)

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