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Sister Mary Pat Hastings

CORE CONSTITUTION THEME: Women of the Church

The theme I chose to share with you tonight from the CORE CONSTITUTION is: We are Women of the Church. I read a statement not too long ago that said ...Religious Life! Is it a dying symbol of a world that has gone beyond its twilight hour? Or is it, rather, a glowing ray, a harbinger of the coming dawn, the dawn of an eighth day in the Spirit? ...

As I listened to Father Stanley today and heard stated through the voice of one who is no stranger to the Sister of Saint Joseph, but one who is not a Sister of Saint Joseph, and who told us so articulately what our founder had to say to us, I personally was in reverence of the man's wisdom... and I thank you, Father Stanley for that.

In the CORE CONSTITUTION, in the Introduction, we have a reference to the Church. We speak of the CORE CONSTITUTION as " ...a response to the directives of the Church for renewal and a public affirmation of the vitality of an apostolic way of life in the Church and the world today." At the outset of our little Document, on page 6, under Nature, we say that " ... we are religious women who have freely responded to the call of the Holy Spirit to lead (or, "to live"), within the Church, a life dedicated to the love of God, to continual growth in Christ, and to the service of the neighbor." In developing the concept of Mission and Ministry, on page 8, we say, "...It is rooted in the mission of Christ, the same mission which continually unfolds in his Church:..." Again, on page 14, in speaking about our Prayer life together, we say, "... by participating in the liturgical life of the Church...(and continue)." On page 15, in speaking about our Government in the Congregation, we say, "... to foster our life and spirit and to free us for service in the Church and the world." And, finally, in speaking about the ministry of the major superior in the Congregation, we say, "Her leadership is a service to the Congregation and the Church and is exercised in the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

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If I had a little more time I think what I would do is pull that phrase, "Women of the Church", apart and treat the concept of "woman" first ---what it means to be a woman -- and then,---what it means to be a woman of the Church. But for the sake of brevity as required by the situation tonight, I'll start with what it means TO BE A RELIGIOUS WOMAN, A WOMAN RELIGIOUS, if you will, IN THE UNFOLDING HISTORY OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH... TODAY.

For those of us who love the Church (and Father Stanley used that in responding to a question tonight so I quickly borrowed Isabel's pen and put a circle around the phrase because we do LOVE THE CHURCH!)... for those of us who love the Church, who embrace her in filial fidelity, who have been renewed by her life-giving sacraments and fed the living bread of her Word and her Eucharist, this is a time of suffering and a time of joy. Among those who love the Church deeply are the women religious who have responded to the mandate of Vatican II (that was 1965) with an obedience that both astounds and terrifies some members of the Church, both clerical and lay. Perhaps there is no greater testimony to the deeply rooted sense of obedience of religious women than that they undertook renewal more rapidly and more radically than most male observers of the scene would have believed possible. (And I'm saying that only because I'm addressing the women religious of the Congregation of Saint Joseph.).

This experience of freedom to undertake the renewal of their own lives unleashed new awakenings within women religious. In the process many have discovered their own maturity as Christian women. They are able to affirm their own self-determination, self-identity, and, consequently, their own self-respect. This growth in freedom and in maturity, has not always been easy. It has not been easy to break through strictures and structures that would keep them "safe" and "protected" and "subservient". At times they have, in frustration, fought for the wrong causes. Or, as the case may be, fought in the wrong way for the right causes. But, for the most part, I believe, those battles are past. What women religious need today is "freedom for" the mission of proclaiming

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the Gospel. (And, I believe, we really heard it enunciated for us today.)

We seek freedom to be full human persons, unafraid to take our place in the heart of the world in order to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. We seek freedom to be what our Congregation was founded to be -- a group of apostolic religious women of the Church.

We were called into being in response to the concrete and crying needs of the neglected, deprived and alienated peoples of the "world". Unfortunately, in the not-too-distant past, the "system" had not infrequently determined the need, rather than the "need of the neighbor" determining the ministry. Many of the same social forces that oppressed women generally have been and still are at work in the Church. The Church, human, fallible, and sinful in its human dimension has oppressed women just as surely as it has (in the past) persecuted Jews and executed heretics.

Religious women have been and will probably continue to be on the cutting edge of renewal in the Church. Renewal is on-going. Those of us who are still here are so because we believe in the Church, because WE LOVE THE CHURCH. Our lives have no meaning aside from that ecclesial character. As women of the Church our lives must be open to the Holy Spirit, responsive to that consuming fire that drives us into the heart of the world, into the embrace of "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the peoples of this age, especially the poor", as John XXIII told us. We cannot fail to hear the call of the Church to a ministry of justice and peace so clearly enunciated in EVANGELICA TESTIFICATIO. We cannot turn our backs on the alienated, the weak, the disenfranchised of the world. The cry of the poor, of the imprisoned, of the oppressed, pounds on our hearts and gives us no rest.

The CHURCH CANNOT CALL US TO RETURN TO THE GOSPEL, to the following of Jesus as the highest rule of our religious lives, and then protect us from the exigencies of that call to service. THE CHURCH CANNOT BID US REDISCOVER THE SPIRIT OF OUR FOUNDER and

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then dampen the fires of apostolic zeal that force us out into the highways and byways of the world in search for the blind and the lame and the deaf.

THE CHURCH CANNOT CALL US TO RENEWED MISSION in the contemporary world and for long close to us the ranks of ministry in the Church.

TO BE A SISTER OF SAINT JOSEPH IN THE CHURCH TODAY: We are a motley crew, we Sisters of Saint Joseph, living testimony to one of Paul's favorite themes: "We are only earthenware jars that hold this treasure", to make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us.

Another rather frequently

of Saint Joseph sprang up, it was always for the sake of the Church. And yet, strangely, the new foundations were not infrequently a CHALLENGE TO THE ESTABLISHED SYSTEM, suspect in the eyes of the institutional Church. They were often a problem for bishops, a pain for pastors, a paradox, an enigma.

We Sisters of Saint Joseph are from our very conception an apostolic religious community. We have no meaning apart from that burning desire to spend ourselves, to abandon ourselves, to empty ourselves, (as we learned today, of our false self), in service of Medaille's "dear neighbor". We are called to a profound, yet very earthy apostolic spirit. We are to live the Gospel, to keep Jesus dead center in our lives.

If we are in tune with Jesus of the Gospel and the charism enunciated by our founder, we will be the centrifugal force for today's world that Father Stanley alluded to this morning in his comments on the TOTAL DOUBLE UNION. We will not be preoccupied with ourselves: we will have a deep and active concern for the world, for the society in which we find ourselves. Our vision will be the vision of Jesus himself, who came to do the Will of his Father. "That all may be one..." We will proclaim the Gospel with our lives. Persons will see in us the Paschal shape of Jesus' life. We will not fall into the danger of self-centeredness as we contemplate our personal religious experience: rather, we will strive for a dynamic balance between freedom/liberation and responsi-

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ity for our brothers and sisters who come to us in pain and suffering from our world. Our freedom will be a conformation to Christ. His resurrection, as Father Stanley mentioned, has not obliterated the passion.

We are WOMEN OF THE CHURCH, but we are women who must ask the right questions, some times even the hard questions, of the Institutional Church, so that it will continue to remain the Church Christ founded. How does a religious community today, as a community, succeed in achieving that radical following of Christ that was to be found at its origin and inspired it? It seems that when a Congregation conceives of its identity as an open history of following Christ, it will obtain decisive significance for the Church as a whole and bring its own religious life into the perspective of the entire Church. If we as religious Congregation understand our own identity and continuity in the sense of an un-self-contained family history marked by the demand of living out the following of Christ, then we will find ourselves intervening in the life of the Church to remind it of that LAW OF THE FOLLOWING OF CHRIST.

Finally, I think, we must ask ourselves: How are we Sisters of Saint Joseph to be women of hope? Women of promise? Women of the Church in today's world?

This is the challenge, I believe, that we set before Medaille's "Daughters of Saint Joseph" in the CORE CONSTITUTION when we said, and I quote:

AS SISTERS OF SAINT JOSEPH, WE ARE WOMEN OF THE
CHURCH, WOMEN IN LOVE WITH GOD AND ATTENTIVE TO
THE NEEDS OF THE WORLD, WOMEN FILLED WITH
ENTHUSIASM FOR OUR MISSION OF UNITY

CORE CONSTITUTION, p. 10.

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