

April 29, 2020

Dear Friends of the Lord and Each Other at Espiritu Santo Catholic Church and School:

In the recent issue of *America Media/Magazine-the Jesuit Review of faith and culture (April 27, 2020)*, we once again find deep insights for our lives of discipleship and service. Hopefully, by now, all of you are part of *America Media/Magazine* which is an incredible resource for these times of challenge, suffering, ministry and hope. I would like to address you with regards to two of these enriching selections. The first has to do with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and the notion of change in the light of faith. The second article has to do with creating sacred space in your homes and the use of Catholic art to promote dialogue, evangelization and inspiration.

Julia Walsh, FSPA, writes about her feelings and spiritual growth as the community of sisters discern a very large change in their religious practices. As the article states: "For more than 141 years, since August 1, 1879, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration have maintained the practice that gives us our name. Along with our lay prayer partners, one of us, at all times has been praying before the consecrated host in our adoration chapel in La Crosse, Wis." This practice has continued through the best and worst of times without interruption and it is one of their most treasured sources of identity and mission.

At the start of this Lent on Ash Wednesday, February 26, 2020, the Tabernacle would be closed and "adoration would pause until the next morning at 6 a.m." The sisters had known about this change which was communicated to them by Eileen McKenzie, FSPA, President of the congregation, in the middle of January, 2020. The change was monumental since "the practice of perpetual adoration has been for us as subtle as breathing, always in the background while we serve the people of God." The sisters knew that this difficult decision was necessary and right in every way, but they still experienced a number of mixed deeply felt emotions. They felt lonely, depressed, sad, doubtful, irrational, sluggish, sleepless and some carried a "heaviness of grief."

The change, which goes to the very core and heart of the community, was necessary. In 1962, the community numbered 1,172 sisters, most of whom were young or middle-aged. Today the community numbers 185 with "only seven of us younger than 50." To assist in this change, the sisters created a ritual of transition as they began to understand perpetual adoration in a new way. There is a very moving photograph of Sister McKenzie carrying the monstrance in procession and adoration during their very moving prayer service the day before Ash Wednesday when the change was to take place (*America*, pp.38-39).

It was a ceremony that was filled with the presence of God and illustrated trust in Divine Providence. Religious practices sometimes must be transformed and understood in new ways. Julia Walsh, FSPA, notes that she visualized two hands: "One hand was open wide, releasing what was beyond our control.

The other hand was closed in a fist gripping and embracing reality...this is the simultaneous letting go and acceptance that is required...a practice required of all who are disciples of Jesus Christ, a skill essential to the human condition."

All of this took place just before the eruption of the coronavirus pandemic. The practice would have been eliminated by the virus plague since now it would be impossible for the sisters to cover the hours alone without the lay partners and other sisters living away from St. Rose Convent. The Vatican gave permission for the sisters to retain their title of "Perpetual" adorers since the sisters of "yesteryear" now with God continue the night hours of praise. As Sister Walsh says: "I let go of the past and accepted the gift of a new reality."

I couldn't help but think of the great Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin, SJ who envisioned his Mass "on the altar of the world" and who knew we are all connected with the universe, all creation and life and with each other. This is what is meant by the "communion of saints" in the Cosmic Christ who perfects and consumes history in final definitive purpose. Just as plants bloom several times in one season, so it is with the mystery of the Church. In these times, we have already seen how God's temple is the entire universe, the whole earth, all creation and all time. We realized that we are "living stones" being built into an edifice not made with human hands. We see ourselves as "living tabernacles" carrying the Risen Christ from the empty tomb into the world. The real and true presence of Christ is magnified and we hunger and thirst for the great gift of the Eucharist which we have taken for granted. Now, we have been slowed down to see Christ outside Church walls and structures and to witness to hope knowing that God is with us and always desiring our good.

While these times are difficult, challenging and sacrificial, they are not devoid of God's presence or love. Our prayers go out first for those who have died and now rest in God's own hands. We think of those who have suffered or are suffering from the virus or the loss of loved ones. Some are feeling emotions of intense anxiety and fear. They feel God has abandoned us or is punishing us. Now is the time for us to reach out to them with the message of Easter joy and new horizons. God is always victorious. We proclaim this message with boldness and conviction because we know it is revealed to us by Jesus and is true and trustworthy.

Pope Francis, our great Jesuit Pope, has brought our attention to these moments of opportunity and growth in faith- a growth that always comes through the cross. We sing with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee", not escaping from reality or denying it, but embracing it as "gift" of grace, transformation and promise. The Holy Father asks us to remember daily those who care for the sick and those who bury the dead as we pray for a cure and divine aid. We see now more clearly than before our complete dependence on God, our inter-dependence on each other, our connection as a global family of humankind and a universal global ecclesial family. All are brothers and sisters to us because all are children of God. This includes those who do not acknowledge the Lord for whatever reason and those people who have hurtful obstacles standing in their way of faith.

In *America Media/Magazine*, there is a fascinating reflection on sacred space and religious art in the home. The article explores pious artifacts that may lack any truly artistic significance and yet may have meaning attached to them. I have urged repeatedly over the years for each of you to create sacred spaces in your home and garden. Employ the use of nature, beauty and creativity. Use "art" and piety to evoke reminders of God's presence and inspire dialogue with non-believing neighbors and friends. Such religious articles can be instruments that help us evangelize and deepen our prayer lives. Some have catechetical

meanings that can be shared with our children and teenagers and passed on to future generations. Some tell a story. Some are an embarrassment. Some need to be abolished. Some need re-definition. Some need to be revived and some need to be displayed for all tell a story of who we are and who we wish to be. Once again, please create your home as the "domestic church" and subscribe to *America Media/Magazine*. You will not regret either decision

Together with you in ministry,

*Father Len*

Father Len

P.S. Miss seeing you in church as you are precious and dear to us. God be with you all!

