

Sister Maureen D'Onofrio, CSJ

Celebration of Hope
All Saints' Church
Syracuse, New York
April 29, 2009



I'm sure most of us have heard the story of the little girl in the third-grade religion class who was intently drawing a picture. Her teacher asked her what she was doing, and she replied that she was drawing a picture of God. So the teacher gently told her that no one knows what God looks like, and confidently and innocently the little girl said, "They will when I am done!" Her faith is an inspiration to us as Church, the people of God...we will be known by the way we live out the Gospel message!

This evening we have been called together with the Sisters of St. Joseph to celebrate the gift of hope! The dictionary defines hope as "the desire of something together with the expectation of attaining it." How does the gift of hope fit in meeting the needs of our parish communities going through reconfiguration? We know that change always brings both challenge and new opportunities as well. Hebrews 11 tells us, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see"...that's certainly what I would call having confidence in the future of who we are as Church!

I thought I'd share a bit about who we are as Sisters of St. Joseph and our history with the Church to show how much we are women of HOPE!

Our story as Sister of St. Joseph, from the war-torn French countryside of 1650 to the thousands of Sisters of St. Joseph who live mission and ministry around the world today, certainly gives me much hope for the future. Who would have ever thought that six women, who came together to form community, could weave themselves together in a colorful tapestry of the Community of St. Joseph, of which our CSJ Associates and those we serve are so much a part of. I believe we are giving birth to a new future full of hope, and I also believe that our community and Church have only one obstacle to the future, and that is the unwillingness to let go of the past! We know that with the power of the Holy Spirit within us, nothing is impossible!

Ted Loder in his book, *MY HEART IN MY MOUTH*, put it so well, "The Spirit labors for our healing and resilience!" Our story as Sisters of St. Joseph began in seventeenth-century France during a time of great poverty and need. Six women, assisted by a Jesuit priest, Jean Pierre Medaille, came together for prayer and good works. Now, nuns in those days were cloistered, so these women who wanted to work outside the cloister, wore the widows' dress of the day since women were never to walk the streets without their husband or a man unless they were a widow! Dressing as a widow in the tiny village of LePuy allowed the Sisters to go about doing good and reaching out to minister to people in need, or as they called them, the "dear Neighbor!"

The young community grew rapidly and soon dotted many parts of France and, by the time of the French Revolution (1789-1799), more than 150 communities were scattered throughout several

dioceses in France. However, we were almost extinguished when Robespierre's Reign of Terror made it impossible for religious to live together in community. Five of our Sisters were executed at the guillotine for sheltering priests, so many Sisters went into hiding or returned to their family homes. When Robespierre fell, the Sisters were free to come together again, and the rest is history. Since, as I mentioned before, we were not nuns, since nuns were cloistered, our founder, Jesuit Father Medaille, said to us the same words as St. Ignatius said to the Jesuits, "We are to be contemplative but portable." (in contact with the dear neighbor!)

In 1834, a call from the United States came to our congregation in France, from a place called Missouri, and six Sisters left France for America in 1836, settled in Carondelet, a suburb of St. Louis, and now you know, as Paul Harvey would say " the rest of the story...the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, from their log cabin in Carondelet, MO, serving the poor and educating children, established four provinces in St. Louis, St. Paul, Los Angeles and in 1858, our province, the Albany Province which serves both the Albany and Syracuse Dioceses, and all over the United States, Japan, Peru and Africa.

As I reflected on our history as a community and saw what our religious women lived through, they were such women of hope and such an example of what we, as Church are called to! We know we are living in a time of much turmoil, but we are called to be people of hope! This is a critical time for asking questions about the future of our Church! As parishes and schools close or merge, there are so many ramifications, but need we be afraid about our future? Absolutely not! We, the people, are the Church, not our buildings! We will probably be smaller, but God is with us as we journey through these days of diminishment. We know we will have fewer leaders: vocations to both the priesthood and religious life are way down. In 1965 there were 216,000 women and men religious in the U.S. Today there are approximately 106,000 and, of that number, only 3.5 percent are under age 45! And it's very similar for the diocesan priesthood.

What is the Holy Spirit telling us in all of this? Sandra Schneiders in her book, **NEW WINE SKINS**, says, "Though religious institutes reflect all the hallmarks of declining institutions, the members do not act in ways that are expected, but continue to initiate new works and have a spirit of hope and confidence in the future." S. Sandra calls the Spirit the "turbulent twister of settled systems." Look to scripture - the Spirit is forever choosing Abel over Cain, Isaac over Esau, the prodigal child over the dutiful one, a widow's mite over larger donations, a lost sheep over 99 safe ones, and on and on!" Our scripture passage that was just proclaimed from Romans stated that "The Spirit cooperates for good with those who love God and are called according to God's purpose!"

Didn't St. Paul say he was convinced that there is nothing in death or in life...nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord? I believe we are giving birth to a new future full of hope. We have everything to gain as we step into the future! As I quoted earlier from Hebrews: "Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see."

When Vatican II told religious women to update, they answered the call immediately. Sister Joan Chittister in her article, "If they really mean it, it's about time" writes of how Sisters had, for all practical purposes, built the Catholic Church in the United States. These women, who built the largest private school system in the world, turned it over to those who had been educated in it

and began to build again...to mention a few: they sold hospitals, opened nursing homes for the elderly and dying, began free clinics, built housing projects for the poor and disabled, created spirituality centers, childcare centers, began GED programs, became hospital chaplains, did prison work, developed spirituality programs and retreats, ran half-way houses for battered women and daycare centers for Alzheimer patients, founded homes for the dying and the list goes on and on! To quote Joan Chittister directly in regards to all that women religious have accomplished, "They had no desire to be a higher vocation. They simply set out to be an authentic one!" Wherever there were sick, poor, or suffering, the Sisters were there and not only Sisters, but all of us who call ourselves CHURCH.

And what about us today as CHURCH. We've gathered together this evening to experience a celebration of HOPE! Something happens when a believing community comes together. We've been hearing since Easter those beautiful powerful scripture stories, and if we are truly a people of hope, we will not allow ourselves to become discouraged! We know we're still journeying through the clergy abuse crisis, the decline in vocations to the priesthood and religious life...which says to me the Spirit is leading the people of God to take ownership of their church...the survival of Catholic school systems and the need for quality religious education programs, which I believe are very much alive and well in our diocese, dwindling financial support from parishioners not happy with their parish church closing, but with leadership like Fr. Fred here at ALL SAINTS who has beautifully led the two parishes of Our Lady of Solace and St. Therese to a wonderful experience of Church. We have many things to be HOPEFUL ABOUT. We just can't wait for the hierarchy of the Church to tell us what to do. By virtue of our baptism, we have been empowered to truly be Church to one another and not be afraid to take a stand in what our hearts are calling us to!

I'd like to conclude with a quote by the Jesuit, Pedro Arupe: "Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude."

Let us never be anything less than a people of love and hope! And let us be like the little girl whose teacher told her we don't know what God looks like and her response? "They will when I'm done!"

As people of HOPE, we don't know what the future of the Church will look like, but let's hope they will when we are done!