

St. Joseph Day Homily / March 19, 2010

By Sister Felicia Wolf

When Sister Toni Anne Gradisnik asked me if I would give the homily for today's feast, I was honored and said, "Yes." Then as we talked I became less sure of myself. I remember the Novitiate feast day suppers when the sight of bowls of peas told us that we would see a movie that night. But I wanted a refresher on some of the deeper realities. I said, "Now, Toni, remind me why we are celebrating this day?" Toni reminded me of the dedication of the chapel and Mother Alfons' devotion to all that was beautiful. "Okay," I said. "I got it."

A few days later I realized that if I had it then, I lost it. I was on my way to my weekly session with Sister Marita Zeller. We mentor each other through our various writing projects. Sometimes the mentoring gets quite vigorous and therefore very helpful. That day I asked Marita, "What are we celebrating when we celebrate St. Joseph Day?" Marita said, "We are celebrating the building of the chapel which Mother Alfons said was for the greater honor and glory of God. Nothing is too good for God." I squinted my eyes at Marita and said, "God doesn't need any more honor and glory. He has all the glory and honor he needs. He has closets full of the stuff. We celebrate giving God something that God doesn't need!"

As I was driving home after the meeting I was wondering what giving honor and glory to God really meant. A memory came to me. I was in a classroom at Dominican University; it was an electronic classroom and had a computer that connected to the Internet. I had just clicked a button that gave me the video that I needed for the class I was teaching. I exclaimed, "Thank you sweet Jesus!" One of the students said, "Gee, we have a member of the old school here." The implication was that I thought the historical Jesus just showed up to make sure the button on the computer worked. As I continued the rest of the class another part of my mind remembered why I say "Thank you sweet Jesus." It was because Sister Madonna Ann Boyance said it.

Years ago during a Friday afternoon novitiate sewing class I watched Madonna Ann, the instructor, work with a sewing machine that was jammed. When she was able to extract the thread that was stuck in the bobbin, she gave a sigh of relief and said, "Thank you sweet Jesus." At that moment something shifted in me. All of a sudden I knew that life was good and everything would be all right. She gave me an experience of God that has lasted up until today. This must be similar to what the sisters experienced when they saw Mother Alfons kneeling in the back of the old chapel with her arms outstretched in prayer. While watching her, something must have shifted in them also. Alfons' prayer gave the sisters an experience of God that told them life was important and they would be OK. The honor and glory we give God is the awareness of the presence of God.

Mother Alfons intensified the community's awareness of God through her passion for beauty and the spiritual life. She moved the community to build this chapel making her experience of God a communal memory. Generations of sisters to come, their families, friends and coworkers would experience the beauty and sacredness of God's life whenever they entered this place.

In today's first reading we hear of another experience of God, Jacob's ladder filled with angels. Our spiritual ancestors celebrated Jacob in a way similar to how we celebrate Alfons. He generated the awareness that God's presence is directly available to every individual person. In this memory we acknowledge that we do not have to find a special place that is holy to speak to

God. We make a place holy by how we speak to God in that place. Jacob made his sacred memory communal by piling up some stones into a shrine and pouring oil on them. Today, thousands of years later, archeologists working in Bethel will never find the specific stones that Jacob dedicated. But the memory is so embedded in us, the believing community that we all know we can speak directly to God and God will answer wherever we are. We, the living stones, have this memory embedded in us. It lives on in us.

When we read today's Gospel we hear how Joseph gave Mary and the new life within her a home. He did this when Mary was frightened and confused. Alfons, Alexia and Clara came to the United States in 1873. They arrived in New York in September, a month before the Bank Panic of 1873 and the beginning of the Long Recession. They knew no English. Their attempt to make Baltimore their home failed. They then traveled to Alexia's aunt and uncle in Chicago. These relatives belonged to a parish named St. Joseph. The priests of this parish immediately began working the system to get the sisters settled in their own convent. St. Joseph provided a home for the sisters and the new life of community that was in them. How they got to Milwaukee is a story for another day.

Devotion for Joseph's protection was a stream of cultural energy that ran through the universal Catholic Church during the fear and confusion of the late 1800s. When Pius IX began his term of office in 1846 he was a popular and progressive. He was the perfect choice to manage the universal Catholic Church with all its holdings. By 1870, a few years before our sisters left Germany, Pius IX had survived assassination attempts, the loss of most the Church's holdings and he became a prisoner in the Vatican. In his decree of 1870 he said:

“The Church has always most highly honored and praised blessed Joseph next to his spouse, the Blessed Virgin Mother of God, and has besought his intercession in times of trouble. And now therefore, when in these most troublesome times the Church is beset by enemies on every side and is weighed down by calamities so heavy that ungodly men assert that the gates of hell have at length prevailed against her, the venerable prelates of the whole Catholic world have presented to the Sovereign Pontiff their own petitions and those of the faithful committed to their charge, praying that we would sign to constitute St. Joseph Patron of the Church.”

Pius proclaimed the date of March 19 as the feast day of St. Joseph, Patron of the Church.

Why are we celebrating this day? We are not only making Jesus more present to the world in the Eucharist we celebrate, but we make the awarenesses of Jacob, Alfons, Alexia, Clara and Pius IX more present. This community knows that God speaks to us directly, that God is beauty and goodness, that life will be OK if only we cling to our dreams. Even if archaeologists can't find the mortar and brick of this place thousands of years from now, the energy and blessings that are generated from how we grow in the awareness of God here today, will ripple through the universe for all eternity. Because of what we, the living stones of this memorial do here, the world will be more beautiful, it will speak more directly to God; the world will have more goodness and will be safer for all future generations.

References:

*He Sent Two* by Sr. Francis Borgia, O.S.F.

<http://www.osjoseph.org/stjoseph/magisterium/QuemadmodumDeus.php>