

**Foundresses' Day Homily**  
**April 28, 2022**  
**Sister Mary Diez, President**

Good evening, sisters, associates, and friends, and welcome to our celebration of the 148<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the School Sisters of St. Francis.

The readings for this evening's Mass have a powerful theme that echoes the theme of our upcoming General Assembly: "Be Witnesses to God's Love in the World."

There is much in the stories from the Acts of the Apostles that inspires us to accept the call to be witnesses of God's love. There is a new spirit and courage leading the apostles to tell of their experiences with Jesus, and to invite people to believe and follow the way of life he left us.

In this story, the high priest and his companions have put the apostles in the public jail and locked it securely. You can almost see the people in power smiling with the knowledge that they have put a stop to the apostles' preaching.

But it was not to be. God sent an angel to open the doors of the prison and to tell the apostles: "Go and take your place in the temple area and tell the people everything about this life." So the apostles went to the temple early and again taught the people.

Again the apostles were brought to the high priest and, when accused of disobeying the order not to preach, they said in reply "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree. . . we are witnesses of these things!"

The apostles were indeed witnesses of God's love!

The Gospel reminds us of God's love for the world – so great that God gave his only-begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

John calls Jesus "the light" and contrasts those who reject the light with those who come to the light—so that their works may be clearly seen as done in God.

Those who come to the light, choosing to follow Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, will be witnesses of God's love in the world. Their witness is in their works—their words and actions.

Finally, we are told that the one who comes from heaven is above all. Jesus testifies to what he has seen and heard. Whoever accepts his testimony certifies that God is trustworthy. The one whom God sent speaks the words of God. He is a witness to God's love.

Over the years since the apostles, God has raised up others who come to the light to continue to witness to God's love in the world. Among them are some names familiar to us as Franciscans:

Francis . . . Clare . . . Alexia . . . Alfons . . . Clara

On this, the day of our founding, we look especially to these three valiant women who left Germany to found our congregation in the United States – women who came to the light as witnesses to God's love in the world.

What words and actions marked these women? How did they speak the words of God?

**First: They trusted in God.** Actually, that is an understatement. As a bishop once said to Mother Alexia in exasperation, “You have a shameless trust in God.”

There is ample evidence in *He Sent Two* for his comment. On May 2, four days after the sisters arrived in Campbellsport, although she had no money, Alexia serenely borrowed a pen to sign a contract that she would pay John Fellenz if his company would “in workman-like manner well and substantially erect, build, set up, and finish one School in the Village of New Cassel, Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin.”

The cost was \$10,950, not including the cost of the land, the work to dig out the basement, and the materials – lime and sand and brick – that needed to be brought to the site.

Yes, Father Michels and the parishioners helped, while the sisters sewed vestments. St. Joseph provided anonymous donors who appeared at the

convent door with envelopes of money just in time to meet a deadline of payment to the builder. Yes, God's hand was in it all. Shameless trust indeed.

**Second: They lived simply and shared all things in common.**

*He Sent Two* records that Mother Alexia and her sisters had nothing but their confidence in God and their willingness to do all in their power to serve him.

When they arrived in New Cassel on April 28, 1874, they found an unfurnished house – well, there was one chair. On that chair they balanced a large board that they found in the yard—a makeshift table. On that first evening, they ate kneeling, and later they spread their blankets on the floor to sleep.

Thanks to the generosity of parishioners, they were given beds, and chairs, and a table. But there was little, if anything, extra in those first years and beyond.

One of the first postulants described their first Christmas with joy. They were in their own home, in poverty that rivaled Bethlehem, but they transformed the simple table by using some boxes, white sheets, and some brilliant red potted geraniums to make it a Christmas altar.

**Third, they showed Christ's love in their respect for the dignity of each person.**

Again, *He Sent Two* describes Mother Alexia's work with the boarding school, where her approach models that of Christ:

She wanted first to develop a family spirit, so that all might experience the happiness of living in love with others. Although some felt that she was too strict, she was known for her warmheartedness as well as her firmness. She wanted these young girls to live in a spirit of joy. . . she also wanted each student to become self-disciplined. Uniform inspection and dormitory checks were part of her curriculum in self-control. In her impromptu faculty meetings she would urge the teachers to meditate upon the great responsibilities of their profession and, also, to study each student to discover her strengths and weaknesses and then to take special care in educating each one.

As we live into the theme for the 2022 General Assembly, we can turn to these three women, our foundresses. I invite each of us this evening to pray in thanksgiving for their example, and I encourage us all to renew our own

commitment to trust in God, to live simply, and to respect the dignity of all people. Happy feast day!