

Foundresses Day Reflection

April 28, 2018

Remain in Me as I Remain in You

Today we School Sisters of St. Francis around the world celebrate and thank God for our congregation. This Eucharist is our shared thanksgiving for being called to this congregation and for all the blessings we have received during the 144 years of our existence on this earth. We especially honor the memory and legacy of our foundresses—their courage and faithfulness. We pray that we will always find joy and strength in our bonds as sisters, and that we **remain** faithful to the charism and mission entrusted to us. Our Mothers Alexia, Alfons, and Sister Clara, may be invisible to our bodily eyes, but as surely as we are gathered here, they are spiritually present to us, accompanied by the thousands of our sisters who have crossed the threshold into eternity.

This evening, I wish to reflect on the reading from John's Gospel for this 5th Sunday of Easter. The context in which the story unfolds is the evening of Jesus' last meal with his closest disciples, gathered with him to celebrate the Passover Feast. Jesus must have felt a strong premonition of impending danger. With a sense of urgency, he bares his heart and soul to them in a series of lengthy but very moving discourses. To the end he is ever their teacher, instructing them—not from his head, but from the depths of his heart. While there is yet time, he must impart what will be most important to prepare his disciples for finding their way forward without him bodily at their sides.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus identifies himself as the true Vine and his Father as the vinedresser. He makes a clear and unambiguous claim: *I am not just any vine, but the **true vine, the kind that is genuine and dependable.*** Referring to his Father as the vinedresser, Jesus explains that the Father's essential work is to prune away all the branches and stalks that don't bear fruit. In so doing the Father enables the vine to direct its vital energy into new branches that will produce leaves and abundant fruit.

I don't know about you, but for me, sometimes when a gospel reading is so familiar to my ears, I might not listen as thoughtfully as I should. Maybe that happens to some of you too. So, I thought I would read aloud what Jesus says in the gospel, but from another translation—to help us re-set our listening mode, because Jesus really wants this message to enter our hearts.

“I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you are joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant.

Separated from me, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourself at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—**when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples...** I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy wholly mature.” *

I don't know about you, but I hear Jesus today longing for true relationship with us. To his disciples then and now he repeats this longing like a mantra: **“Remain in me as I remain in you.”**

As School Sisters of St. Francis, we embrace the Rule of the 3rd Order of St. Francis, which exhorts us “to be **a dwelling place and home for God**--Father, Son, and Spirit--so that with undivided hearts, we may grow in universal love by continually turning to God and to neighbor.”** Our foundresses were women who made their home and dwelling place in the heart of God. They **remained** steadfast in their union with the True Vine. They did so in good times and in hardships. And, very important, they did not resist the necessary pruning that God worked in each of their lives so that they and their Sisters would grow and flourish.

When they first arrived in the United States as immigrants in 1874, Alexia, Alfons, and Clara didn't speak English. They were completely new to the American culture. They didn't have a clue about where they would go or what they would do. But these dear women depended fully on God's providence to guide and care for them. They prayed long and hard. They weren't ashamed to ask God for anything they needed, or to risk themselves, trusting that God would always show them the way. What an example we have in our foundresses! And what a high bar they set for all who would follow them.

We look upon Mother Alexia as our lead foundress. She had a very strong and clear sense of mission, shaped by a keen awareness of what was going on in the world around her. Through deep listening and discernment, she discovered what God wanted from her. She had a firm conviction that the needs of the time were God's will for the congregation she would found.

We claim these words of Mother Alexia as our charism statement: “The needs of the time are God's will for us.” This charism functions as the life-sustaining vine channeling the essential flow of energy and guidance for how we are to remain faithful to God's call and purpose. If we lose the connection to our charism, we will lose our way in the mission. Only by holding fast to it, like branches to the vine, are we empowered to respond to the needs of God's people, especially those whose lives and well-being are most at risk.

Imagine for a moment that Mother Alexia had been with us in the flesh at our recent General Assembly in India. She would have stirred up our passion for recognizing the urgent needs of today's world. She would have insisted on our prayerful, communal discernment of God's will for us now, given the suffering of Earth's people and of the Earth itself. She would have applauded the call to become more deeply intercultural in our life and mission, given her life's dream of a world-wide congregation.

Knowing how challenging that call is, she would have reminded us that, no matter how old or young, we can still reach out in kindness to the “other” wherever we are. In our globalized world, there are people of different races, cultures, languages, people who are

lonely or “different” with whom we can interact each day. And Mother Alexia would have reminded us how much our younger members need the prayers, support, and guidance of the elder members. They need our help to prepare for responding to new and urgent needs with all their youthful energy and creativity. Most of all, they need the witness of our lives. With Pope Francis, Mother Alexia would have directed us to take up the risks of going to the margins wherever God’s people are hurting and most in need of us.

So, dear Sisters, I leave you with this question: How will each one of us continue to make visible in our lives the love we have for our congregation and our charism—God’s precious gifts to us? May our Eucharist this evening be a joyful celebration of gratitude! May it also be a graced opportunity to re-connect with our founding spirit, to hold fast to the vision of our foundresses, and to re-commit to the charism entrusted to us as Sisters and, by extension, to all our Associates, Benefactors, and Partners, who generously join with us to carry the mission forward.

To one and all, happy Foundresses Day! And heartfelt thanks to you, Father Chuck, for being our presider at this liturgy. May God bless us and keep us. May the Holy One grant us mercy. May the Face of Love shine on us and give us peace. Amen.

*Taken from The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, by Eugene H. Peterson, 2002.

**From the Third Order Franciscan Rule, Chapter 2, Number 8.