

Jubilee Homily
June 15, 2019
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As Isaiah said in our First Reading: the Spirit of God is upon us for the Most High Anointed One asked us to announce and bring good news of God's love and mercy, not only during a year of favor (a jubilee year) but for our whole lives, for every hour and for every day, as we went and continue to go about our ministry of service and love as Jesus asked us to do for 40, 60, 70, 75, and 80 years. We encouraged others to share our mission and three of our associates are celebrating 25 years of doing just that.

But what keeps us going? What keeps us going? What gives us the strength?

It's the fact that we are not alone: that we are branches connected to the vine, fed by the vine, energized by the vine, encouraged by the vine, the vine who is Jesus, our life source.

But our individual little branch does not stand alone. It is also supported by a stronger branch – a branch that our foundresses, Alexia, Alfons and Clara, carefully grafted into Jesus the vine in 1874. They knew for the new branch to live, it had to be grafted on to a strong vine with a deep tap root to give sustaining life to that new Franciscan community.

And what better vine is there than Jesus? We tapped into that vine, that stronger branch – right here, in this place, in this chapel – when we professed our vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; when Jesus chose us to be his friends and asked us to go out and bear fruit by loving one another as he loved us.

We discovered who Jesus is and what he asks through prayer, the scriptures and Eucharist—right here in this chapel—so many years ago. And as our relationship with Jesus deepened and strengthened and developed through the years, we shared prayer and our knowledge of God with each and every person we ministered to or met over all these years.

Long ago, someone once asked me: "Sister, what is your vision of ministry?" I thought for a while and came to the realization that my vision was: *to be available to others as Jesus was, and to enable others to go where Jesus wants to be.*

This, I believe, is what we as sisters do. All of us are present to others and share what we have to enable them to go forward.

I am sure there are many memories that come to mind for all of you in your long ministry in education, health care, social services, pastoral ministry, companioning those in need. Allow me to share a couple of mine.

The School Sisters of St. Francis were available to me and enabled me to go where Jesus wanted to be from the time that I was five years old through St. Philomena Grade School and Alvernia High School. How many people have been touched by my ministry of teaching, counseling, preaching and chaplaincy because those sisters were there for me? They loved and cared about what I would become and my vocation.

I have a story to tell about Sister Archelaus. I hear the rumble in the pews. We all have stories about Sister Archelaus. And, I found out in reading Sister Barbaralie's book on Mother Stanislaus, with its timeline in the back, that Sister Archelaus was made novice mistress on August 15, 1939. Now that would be the class celebrating their 80th jubilee this year. Was she your novice mistress? Were you her first class in 1939?

Well, she was still there when our class of 1959 came along. And, I was looking over some of the Jubilee pictures of our class taken at our 25th Jubilee. I found one taken in St. Joseph Hall and guess who was in the picture? Sister Archelaus—still there, and this was 1984.

But my story goes later than that. I hadn't seen her for many, many years and, in the early 1990s, Sister Madonna and I went out to Rockford, to Maria Linden, to visit our retired sisters. I saw Sister Archelaus' name on the list and thought, "Why not?"

So, I went up to her room. The door was open, she was sitting up in her bed reading. I knocked on the door, walked in and said, "Hello, Sister Archelaus." She kind of looked at me and said, "Well, Jerome Michael, what are you doing with yourself these days?" I just stood there. It was at that time I had already retired from teaching and had started chaplaincy in long-term care. I had only been doing that for about six months. I said: "Well, i am doing services in the Alzheimer's unit at the nursing home, but i am not sure what they get out of it when I do a Communion Service or a Bible study." She straightened up a little higher and said: "Jerome Michael, you go do and be where Jesus wants you to be and you let Jesus decide what they get out of it."

Now that was in the early nineties and I've carried that all through these years of chaplaincy. And, when other pastors and priests came in to visit their congregants, they would come to me and say: "I don't know, Sister, they are not getting anything out of it." I say, "Let me tell you what my novice mistress said."

I share this story with you today because that's what we do when we encourage people. She was still shoving me towards where Jesus wants to go.

And in a second story: In the early 1960s, I was sent to St. Francis School in Yazoo City, Mississippi. One of my students was an African-American lad growing up in a segregated rural town in the Deep South. He would become the first African-American, as well as the first person from the Deep South, to serve as Secretary of

Agriculture under President Clinton. He was a member of the House of Representatives and is running in 2020 to be the first African-American Senator from Mississippi since Reconstruction after the Civil War. Yes, we sisters were available and nurtured him; we gave him the skills and the knowledge and the spiritual background, enabling him to go where Jesus wants and really needs to be today in Washington, D.C.

But now as we retire, and many of us are retired, there is next to our name in the directory—ministry of prayer and presence. I thought we were doing that *all* our lives—being available and being present.

But now it affords us the time so we can be more available to each other as sisters, something we may not have had time to do when we were busy about so many other things in our ministry. We can share our time companionship and supporting one another. We can nurture that relationship by writing (yes, we still are able to even do e-mails), phoning or visiting in person. Now we even have a bus that allows us to visit our sister friends in any of our nearby retirement homes.

In reflecting on what I would share today about the ministry of presence, the words of a hymn came to mind that elaborates on what Jesus said in today's gospel:

*Love one another, love one another as I have loved you,
Care for each other, care for each other as I have cared for you,
And bear one another's burdens and share each other's joys.
Love one another, love one another and bring each other home.*

Yes, we have loved as Jesus asked us to do; we have filled the world with love our whole life through, and we still do!

To paraphrase our second reading in Ephesians—the prayer: God's power in us has done infinitely more than we could ever have asked or imagined. We have been planted in love and built on love. We have heard and lived Jesus' command: "Love one another as I have loved you."

And so today, dear Lord, on this day of our Jubilee, we thank you. We thank you for giving us the grace to be faithful to our vows for all these years as we continue to love others as you have loved us.

Amen! Alleluia!