

Reflection for Sunday, March 18,
the closing of the Centennial of St. Joseph Chapel
Sister Mary Diez

Let me add my welcome to the beautiful words of Sister Maureen and Father Mike. As we celebrate the conclusion of the Centennial Year of St. Joseph Chapel, we appreciate your joining us to fill this house of God with prayer and praise.

The scripture readings for the fifth Sunday of Lent are rich in their explanation of the Paschal Mystery, which is the focus of our reflection in these last weeks before Easter. These readings bring us compassionately before Jesus in his agony, death, and resurrection. The new covenant upon our hearts brings tears to our eyes as we realize the faithful love of God offered to us. We weep with “loud cries and tears” and are drawn to Jesus “lifted up” upon the cross.

We find an intense union with Jesus and are re-dedicated to our Lord and Savior. As we complete the celebration of the Centennial Year of this Chapel, these readings bring us into the beliefs of our foundresses, who saw this holy place as a sign of the new covenant confirmed in Christ’s sacrifice for all Christians.

The first reading is a tender account of God’s mercy in Jeremiah’s description of the new covenant that God offers to an unfaithful people. It is a sign of the richness of God’s mercy, offering not only forgiveness, but God’s promise to remember their sin no more. God offers to place God’s law within them and write it upon their hearts, and then with deep intimacy says, “I will be their God and they shall be my people”!

In the mind of Mother Alfons, who desired to build a fitting house of prayer for the Lord, St. Joseph Chapel was a sign of another covenant—the commitment of the Congregation of the School Sisters of St. Francis to our God. This chapel symbolizes our Franciscan spirituality, centered in the Gospel and lived out as we enter into the lives and needs of people, especially those who are poor and on the margins of society.

In our recent General Assembly, held in Bangalore, India, the delegates renewed this commitment and examined how we are reaching out with compassion to migrants and refugees, to women who have been trafficked, to the lonely and abandoned, and to those thrown away by society because of physical and mental disabilities. And we pledged anew to join in the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation in collaboration with others and the local Church.

Mothers Alexia and Alfons understood the centrality of the Paschal Mystery, expressed in the second reading. They knew that it was through Christ's suffering and death that we come to union with God. In words expressed by Franciscan Father Richard Rohr, they also knew that in union with Christ, we can transform our pain—and keep from transmitting it to others.

Our Foundresses also knew that this chapel would be a place for all of us—Sisters, Associates, benefactors, co-workers, friends, believers, and fellow-seekers to bring our pain and our challenges, to seek the union with God who allows us, in the words of the psalm, to renew a steadfast spirit and find the joy of salvation. This chapel is a visible sign of the centrality of our spiritual life as Sisters and of our willingness to share the joy of our life with others.

The Gospel today has all the complexity that we expect from John the Evangelist. We might wonder what the reference to the Greeks who wanted to “see Jesus” has to do with what follows. I wonder if John was signaling to us as readers that the point was to “see what Jesus means,” which we are certainly called to do in listening to what Jesus says about death—and especially about the death he was to undergo.

Jesus' reflection on the grain of wheat explains how death is necessary for new life—in nature as well as in the spiritual realm. That had to be a puzzling message—hard for people of his time to see. And I think it is still hard for us to see in the current age, because we try so hard to avoid the small deaths that would overcome our egos and open us to the action of God in our lives. Especially in these last weeks of Lent, we're called to admit our faults, to seek forgiveness when we have hurt others, to forgive those who have hurt us. Those small deaths to ego become the path to our life in Christ.

When Jesus says, “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself,” John comments that “He said this indicating what kind of death he would die.” Again, I wonder if the disciples were really able to make that connection. How would the humiliation of crucifixion draw people to Jesus? It's counter-intuitive and, again, puzzling. Yet, what seems like a horrible death became the source of new life, what seemed like a defeat become the victory that leads to eternal life.

We come to understand that Christ teaches us to overcome pain, suffering, and death by his letting go of his life. In the Paschal Mystery we come to understand that his resurrection is the overcoming of death itself, so that it no longer has power over us who share in the life of Christ.

To those who believe, the Paschal Mystery is central to how we live our faith, in our willingness to let Christ into our lives to shape how we open ourselves to transformation. The message here is clear: What seems like our life—our ego image of ourselves as the center of everything does have to die for what is really life for us—our being in Christ.

When we bring to prayer our need for transformation, a place like St. Joseph Chapel can help us open ourselves to God's action in our lives. Here in the peace of this place, we can face our weakness and sin, ask forgiveness, open ourselves to forgive others, and gain the strength to start anew.

As we enter into the lives and needs of people, we have a deep realization that this beautiful chapel is not just for ourselves, as Sisters and Associates of the Congregation. Mothers Alexia and Alfons saw the role of St. Joseph Chapel as broader than its reality as our spiritual home. They believed that every part of the chapel—from the architecture to the art and music—was to glorify God and to bring people closer to God. And they saw it as a gift for all who seek a place of beauty and solace, a source of healing connection with God's spirit, and a place of celebration and worship.

We are grateful for having had this year of celebration of the Centennial of St. Joseph Chapel and we thank everyone who joined us in the celebration across this time. We invite all of you to continue making this chapel a place where you come to meet God in quiet and prayer, in liturgy and music, and above all in willingness to be transformed through the Paschal Mystery.