

When I received the material for your Oblate Sisters of Providence/Immaculate Heart of Mary 10 year Gathering I was immediately struck by the beautiful image of the tree displayed on the cover of the conference information packet and the liturgy program.

My first reaction was that it reminded me of the front of many family reunion tee shirts I have seen over the years with the words Jones Family Reunion, place and date and sometimes even a nice slogan such as “our roots run deep, our love runs deeper”

Maybe you’ve seen them yourselves - they’re very popular these days as summer is family reunion season.

Now I must confess that I didn’t read what your particular tree symbolized until much later. It’s quite a complex and intricate image and whoever designed it did a wonderful job intertwining so many aspects of your identity both human and divine. The different colors representing the different groups and the indwelling flame are just marvelous. Kudos to the artist!

I stayed stuck on the notion of a family tree, after all the whole reason you’ve had these Zoom gatherings over these past three days with the Oblates of Providence and the IHM’s of Scranton and Monroe, MI is that you’re related to one another. You’re cousins basically, you have the same DNA, you’re part of the larger Alphonsian family tree which includes countless men’s and religious congregations throughout the world which share St. Alphonsus’ great love for the poor and marginalized and seek to bring God’s plentiful mercy and love to all.

It’s important for all of us at times to get back to basics, to the root if you will, of who we are and why we do what we do. I believe the readings for this 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time can assist us in reflecting on our shared identity as baptized disciples and in your specific case, as Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, at this particular time in history.

In the first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy we find Moses pleading with the people of Israel.

I’m sure many of you who are or have been teachers can relate to poor Moses as you recall times in the classroom when you’ve pleaded with your students to please pay attention, do their work and these days maybe put away their phones.

Moses says, “when you return to the Lord, your God, with all your heart and all your soul.”

It’s a statement of conversion. That’s very Alphonsian right there, metanoia, remembering, recognizing and accepting God’s unconditional and crazy love and going back to him.

One of the tools that you’ve used over the past three days is Asset Mapping.

I was very intrigued by this idea as I'd never heard of it before.

To prayerfully and consciously reflect on how the Spirit is working in and among you as an individual and as a community is an act of trust.

As Sr. Kathleen told me on the phone last week – “we don't know where it's going to go.”

That can be a little scary and anxiety inducing but it can also be empowering.

And it's even more so when each of your thoughts and reflections is then shared in a small and then a larger group.

To remember the Fr. Gillet and Mother Theresa Maxis who founded your order, all of the women who have gone before you, those you have accompanied from the beginning of their vocation, those you have ministered with and those you have lived with helps to put flesh on your charism and amplify it.

The questions you raise are important just like some of the queries in our readings today.

As Moses tells the Israelites, God's commands are not so mysterious as to make you question, “Who will go up in the sky to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?”

No, Moses says, “it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out.”

I would suggest that it is the same for all of you and your charism.

All too often, I can speak for Redemptorists, is we can dismiss and even deny the good works we are doing.

Yes, things are different than they were 10 or 20 years ago. We are fewer, we are older.

But unless we keep mining the depths of our inherited Alphonsian spirituality and continue to raise the challenging questions we'll never be doing what it is that we are called to do.

Over the last three days all of you have more or less asked the first question posed by the scholar of the law in today's gospel from Luke– What must we do?

It's intentional, it's focused and it's important.

How can you as the three branches of the IHM Sisters and the Oblates of Providence leverage your God given legacy, talents and abilities that perhaps up to now you've taken for granted to look at new and creative possibilities for ministries.

Another key question occurs in our gospel today. The scholar of the Law after correctly answering Jesus by repeating the law to love God and your neighbor as yourself asks, "And who is my neighbor?"

I would submit that at this particular moment in our Church and in our country this question cannot be asked too many times.

All of us are called to action to serve the least and last among us.

As Religious, we can't be like the Priest and the Levite indifferent to the wounded one's lying in the ditch.

Who are the IHM's called to pour oil and wine on today? The addict/the immigrant/the homeless/the underserved student/the illiterate

I can't answer that question for you, but we all know that unfortunately there are lots of people to choose from.

The oak tree's beginning is from a tiny acorn.

As the years go by it continues to grow. Under the right conditions it can flourish but under stress-filled, harsh conditions it can struggle.

They need sunlight, rain and good nutrients from the soil to thrive much like all of us as followers of Christ need the Word, the Sacraments, the Eucharist, our Mother of Perpetual Help, our Charism and our faith.

Trees are both strong and supple. Older trees have strong root systems that keep them firmly planted and also allow them to sway and give a little in a strong wind so that they do not topple over.

The Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary have grown into a strong tree and your branches have spread over the United States and into Peru.

Your branches have become places of rest and refuge for numerous students, families, catechumens, immigrants, parishioners, co-ministers and all those seeking to experience the plentiful love of our God.

As you continue to pray, dialogue, discern and decide may Our Mother of Perpetual, St. Alphonse and Mother Theresa intercede for you so that you may bring God's will to fruition.

