

Prologue to Chapter Opening.

Good Morning, Sisters

It is such a good feeling that we have arrived at this moment. Thank you for all your preparation during these months preceding Chapter. A warm welcome to our Sisters on Livestream, the majority of whom are watching from Camilla Hall. I am happy to say that all our Sister Delegates from our out of State missions and from Peru are also with us today. Certainly this is a blessed gathering.

I wrote my opening remarks to Chapter about a month ago. However during this week it dawned on me that perhaps I should write an addendum to those remarks. So I did and as I prayed during the week it became clearer to me that the addendum should really go first. So I guess in essence I really wrote a prologue to my opening remarks. So if you don't mind before I begin with the original opening I offer some preliminary thoughts.

Since we were together at our last Pre-Chapter meeting, we have experienced the deaths of ten of our Sisters. Most of those deaths were the cause of unexpected happenings, two of those deaths came at the end of a long struggle of battling cancer. We experienced two funerals a week and for one week we laid three of our Sisters to rest. As we meet this week, two of our Sisters wait for us to finish our Chapter so that we can give them the proper attention and reverence they deserve. This coming Tuesday while we are engaged in Chapter, our Sisters in Camilla will be gathering with Sister Marcie McCann RSM to process the mystery of death and to talk about the manifestation of grief.

I mention this because I think it is important to acknowledge that there is a connection to be made in this moment and I don't want to lose it. You see, we are about to engage in big picture conversations. To do so is critical to our going forward as a Congregation. However, what we have experienced in the past two months has shown us that our God has the bigger picture that we can't control or at times completely understand. It pierced my heart when sitting with a medical team, a family, the team from Camilla trying to ask the right questions. Will this procedure prolong life or extend death? Can sister make the ambulance ride to Camilla so that she can die among her Sisters? It touched my heart when the Doctor replied, "I really don't know. There is so much beyond my control. I can only give you my best opinion." I have watched a Sister hold vigil through the night for one of our Sisters only to spend the next five days in COVID isolation to deal with grief on her own. Two of our Sisters stood at the death bed of their religious sibling and while putting their own heartache aside ministered to their family as well. There is not a time when I have gone to Camilla where our Sisters who are in that liminal space between earth and heaven are not attended to by their friends or their band or by a Sister who volunteered to be with them. One of the first Sisters who died was fully engaged in delivering breakfast trays at Camilla and if it were all up to us, one of seats at the very tables in which you are seated would have been filled by her. I am humbled by the prayers of different religious traditions that are offered by staff members at Camilla Hall who speak of how the

recently deceased ministered to them by offering their gratitude for the care that they were receiving or by asking the caregiver how was their day going.

No strategic plan, no TRENDS Analysis, no five year report can capture the essence of what we as a Congregation have experienced in the past two months. It is crystal clear that what we are called to is a deeper understanding of the fragility of life and the importance of our relationship with one another. This understanding will be the basis of our Big picture conversations. Knowing that in the eyes of our God the picture is bigger than we can ever know or imagine. It will help us to let go of the non-essentials as we struggle with the reality of our place in the world today. We are called to accompany each other to grapple with the questions of our own and our Congregational liminal space. Our ten Sisters have been transformed by seeing our God face to face. They now know the essence of Redeeming Love. May this Chapter experience transform us as we look to see the face of God in one another, in those we serve, and in those who minister with us.

Sisters, I would ask that at least once during this week, you visit Camilla and your visit a Sister that you may or may not know. Camilla is holding the collective grief of the Congregation and your uplifting presence will do more than you can imagine.

Opening of Chapter 2023
June 2023

Good Morning

In Chapter 21 of the book of Revelation we read: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race.” (Revelation 21: 1-3) The one who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”

“Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race.” As Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary who as members bind ourselves to God and to the Church by the profession of public vows of chastity, poverty and obedience; live the common life and share a corporate apostolate state in Faithful Witness that fidelity to this commitment is an affirmation of the Gospel, a witness to the presence of Christ in the world. (FW p. 17)

“Behold God’s dwelling is with the human race.” As Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary we believe as stated in Faithful Witness (FW p.12) that our “desire for holiness and our apostolic zeal are nourished by loving intimacy with Christ in the Eucharist; by devotion to Mary, the handmaid of the Lord; and by fidelity to the specific virtues and practices of the Congregation.”

“Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race.” This eucharistic mystery is beyond our full comprehension and yet imbedded in our title Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary lies fertile ground for us to contemplate the divine feminine aspects of God’s dwelling through our ardent devotion and imitation of Mary.

“Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race.” This incarnational message announced to a young woman by the angel Gabriel has been the foundation of our Alphonsian Spirituality as we ponder throughout our lives the redeeming mysteries of the Incarnation, the suffering, death and

Resurrection and the Eucharist. As we gather today let us reflect on our Marian devotion and imitation within the context of Virgin, Mother and Queen.

Mary as Virgin

“Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race.” In Luke’s gospel we read: In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.” (Luke 2: 26-27) In this passage, St Luke highlights the reality that the Savior’s mother is a virgin. And while we typically associate virginity in a body-negating perspective, Luke expands our understanding of this universal theme in the Savior’s story, that is, “he transcends opposites and overturns nature’s law.” (Richo) Mary offers her virginal body to the Divine as a gift so that the Divine can embody a human. The author, David Richo posits that “Virginity in the realm of the spiritual psyche refers to the strength and clarity of purpose that opens one to the Spirit/Self so that a new consciousness can be born.” (Richo) In Faithful Witness we read: “In imitation of Mary, a sister, by her vow of consecrated chastity, offers her entire being to Christ in a total surrender of love. In the Alphonsian tradition of devoted charity, she manifests the primacy of the love of God. The Paschal Mystery finds expression in her self-gift which becomes more effective as the renunciation inherent in her vow liberates her heart to greater freedom for the building up of his Kingdom.... a sister stands as a sign of hope, reminding others of a world of realities beyond this present one. (FW p.17) Mary’s virginal stance allowed her to respond to the divine invitation without fully comprehending the future and the Angel Gabriel assured: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” The theologian Elizabeth Johnston comments on this virginal theme of the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit that “carries the notion of on rushing overpowering vitality, it tells of divine presence on the move creating something new. (Johnson p. 251)

“Behold, God’s dwelling is within the human race.” Mary, the Virgin overshadowed by the Holy Spirit opens herself to know that the creative power of God’s spirit will always be with her as she participates in being a co-creator of somethings new. Every morning since 1845 the IHM Congregation has mirrored this virginal stance as we pray:

The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.

And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.

And each time we pray a new consciousness is born in the heart of each IHM that the creative power of God's spirit is with us as the events of creation unfold this new day.

Mary as Mother

Behold, God's dwelling is within the human race." That human dwelling began in the Virgin Mother whose Fiat changed the course of the world. That "affirmative response to the divine initiative sets her life on an adventure into the unknown future." (Johnson p. 251) In the container of Mary's womb, Christ began his earthy life. Mary nurtured and fostered his physical and spiritual life. This motherhood an act of the divine Spirit and the Virgin women is affirmed in Luke's Gospel as Mary's cousin Elizabeth proclaims, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." (Luke 1: 45) As a catalyst of her Son's public ministry, Mary flowed with life, being fully present to every "Hosannah" and every "Crucify Him" moment. (Coutinho p. 69)

In Faithful Witness we read; "Apostolic sanctity, based upon the Alphonsian heritage as lived by Father Louis Gillet, Mother Theresa and the other early sisters, integrates personal holiness and apostolic service."

(FW, p. 43)

"Behold, God's dwelling is within the human race." Mary, the Mother of God, nurtures the divine life within the human form knowing that God's initiative to dwell among us is a call to nurture the divine life through an all-encompassing love that embraces all people. Her yes is a free act of the will to participate in co-creating a new way of being in the world through a nurturing loving presence. Every morning since 1845 the IHM Congregation has mirrored this nurturing stance as we pray:

Behold the Handmaid of the Lord.

Let it be done to me according to your word.

And each time we pray, a new consciousness is born in the heart of each IHM that our evolving Gospel Mission calls us to be a catalyst, a co-creator in the life of all we meet this day.

Mary as Queen

“Behold, God’s dwelling is within the human race.” In the gospel of Luke, we read the words of the Angel Gabriel: “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and with his kingdom will be no end.” Mary, the Virgin Mother is forever connected with the work of her Son, to bring about the Kingdom of God. Mary therefore is Queen of both heaven and earth. “The queen of all of us—the new Eve who rules the world of spiritual promise.” (Richo) The Queen, a wisdom figure, who in serving her son from the moment of his divine conception, his incarnation, his suffering and death, leads the community of believers in the Pentecostal Upper Room. The power of her discipleship defines her queenly leadership in gathering the community of believers to prepare them for the abiding of the Spirit within each of them so that the reign of God would continually evolve and flourish.

In Faithful Witness we read. “The call in holiness which every Christian receives is answered by religious in community. This life together derives its meaning from the familial or communitarian life of the Trinity in which each divine person is uniquely and distinctly him/herself yet related to the others in divine unity. (FW p. 27)

“Behold, God’s dwelling is within the human race.” Mary the Virgin Mother of God exercises her queenship through her discipleship that provides for and protects all people as in her evolutionary wisdom as evidenced in her prophetic hymn of praise, the Magnificat. That membership in the community emphasizes the sacrifice of the limited ego to higher purposes of that kenosis which supports and protects all humanity. (Richo) Every morning since 1845 the IHM

Congregation has mirrored this queenly stance as a community of believers we are called to lift up the lowly, as seen in the incarnation and to believe in the energy of Spirit-filled new beginnings, as we pray:

And the Word was made flesh.

..... and dwelt among us.

“Behold, God’s dwelling is within the human race.” Our world is so desperately seeking the feminine face of our God. Mary is our Model as Virgin, Mother and Queen which brings us to that prayerful generative stance of openness, the nurturing stance of fostering and collaborating for mission and that transformative membership that seeks unity. Isn’t that what the big picture conversations are beckoning to us. Sisters, the book of Revelation is speaking to our Marian hearts in this moment telling us that the one who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Our God, our world, our Church and our IHM Congregation need each of us to be virgin, mother and queen so that the daily fiat of our lives will manifest the redemptive love of our God Every morning since 1845 the IHM Congregation has mirrored this new creation as we pray:

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, thy grace into our hearts; that we, to whom the incarnation of Christ, Thy Son, was made known by a message of an angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His Resurrection through the same Christ Our Lord.

So, with the knowledge that our identity as Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is rooted in a Marian cosmology and with the assurance that our God is offering us to participate in the very act of creation, let us begin. I now call to order and officially open the Chapter of Affairs and Elections of 2023 as we say each day:

Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.

That we may be worthy of the promises of Christ.

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