

Sermon given at Spring Assembly 2009 by Fr. Michael Gemignani

The theme of this Assembly is “Blessings and Bothers: Being Part of a Religious Order.” In the Roman Catholic Church, most organizations of men or women living by vows under a rule are known as religious communities. The word “community” comes from two latin which mean “with unity.” Another word having this same root is “common.” Members of a community share something in common. Members of a religious community share common vows and a common rule.

This is how we might look at a religious community in the cool light of the intellect. But it is inappropriate to view a religious community with the head. For those who belong to such a community, it must be an affair of the heart.

When I was a member of a Roman Catholic religious community, I was taught that if one kept the rule of one’s community faithfully, one was certain to grow in holiness. At the risk of being presumptuous, I cannot entirely agree with this teaching. Someone does not necessarily become holier by obeying a rule than the Jews of Jesus’ day were guaranteed holiness by keeping the Law. Indeed, Jesus repeatedly states that why we do something is even more important than what we do. He rebuked the Pharisees, not because they kept the Law in all its particulars – Jesus praised the Law itself – rather, he rebuked the Pharisees because they did the right thing for the wrong reasons. They wanted the best seats at banquets and in the synagogue. They wanted the praise of human beings. What they did was not intrinsically wrong. In fact, what they did was right. It was the spirit in which they did what they did that was corrupt. It was their inappropriate and selfish motives that led Jesus to call them hypocrites.

If, however, the Pharisees had sought to glorify and love God and their neighbor through their obedience to the Law, they would indeed have grown in holiness and led others to holiness as well. If they had rightly understood the Law as framework within which to serve God and others, they would indeed have grown in holiness and led others to holiness as well. But they did not have this understanding, or, if they did, they failed to live by it.

You, as Daughters of the King, live not only by the teachings of our Lord and Savior, but have pledged to live according to your vows and a rule. No woman is required by either the Gospel or the Church to become a Daughter of the King. There is no shame, nor a lesser standing in the eyes of God, in not being a Daughter. It is not an honor to be a Daughter of the King. It is a calling from God to walk a particular path, to carry out a special ministry within the Church. It is, in my opinion, a sacred responsibility that a woman accepts because God asks her to accept it. If a woman does not feel she has such a call, she should not become a Daughter.

And so, what lessons might I draw from this? First, if God calls a woman to a particular ministry, she should accept it in order to obey and serve a God she loves and wants above all to please. But the ministry must be carried out in the spirit in which God issues the call: to love God faithfully and conform her will to God’s will as she understands that will.

Second, a Daughter should try to obey her vows as best she can in her particular circumstances. For example, each Daughter is charged with praying for her clergy, her church and those who have sought her prayers. I have often been asked how best to fulfill this obligation. Must a Daughter mention each intention by name? Must the prayer be of a certain length or in a certain format?

My response has consistently been that someone should pray as she is led to pray. Some will feel most comfortable reciting every intention out loud. Well and good. Others will offer a general intention while they engage in silent meditation. Well and good. Others may offer a task they don't enjoy, such as washing the dishes or fixing supper, as a prayer for those for whom they are committed to pray.

Perhaps some find this last suggestion inappropriate. I ask then if Martha's preparing dinner for Jesus was not a prayer. I ask if Brother Lawrence was wrong when he felt that kitchen duties were a profound way to serve God. Prayer is, after all, directing our thoughts, words, intentions and actions – in general, our whole lives – to God in love. All of lives should be prayers. But our lives are different, so will our prayers not also be different? St. John told us, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." Should not obedience to a rule out of love of God cast out scrupulosity?

Yet another lesson we might draw for those following a special call: You are to reflect the love of Christ in a special way. When I wear my clergy collar, I am a representative of Christ, whether I want to be or not. When you wear your Daughter's pin you also are representatives of Christ, whether you want to be or not. Those familiar with the Daughters will know that you have taken vows and live according to a rule. Those who have never heard of the Daughters of the King will see the cross and recognize that your faith is on display.

As Daughters, therefore, you are to live as examples of what a Christian life should be, both toward one another, within your congregations, and within the world. Just as wearing my collar does not guarantee me immunity from foolish conduct, so, too, your cross is not a vaccination against folly. But we all should do the best we can, asking to Lord to keep us safe and faithful. Daughters must never undermine their clergy, speak ill of anyone, spread unwholesome gossip. You must be seen as examples of prayer and service so that you will be, as much as our fallen human nature will allow, a window unto Christ and not a wall of separation.

Let me now go back to the Roman Catholic idea I mentioned earlier: A member of a religious community who faithfully obeys the rule of his or her order is certain to grow in holiness. Let me rephrase this thought in the way in which I think it is meant to be understood: A member of a religious community who faithfully obeys the rule of his or her community with the intention of opening him or herself in love to God's transforming power is certain to grow in holiness.

This rewording recognizes first that all holiness flows only from God, and God alone can effect the transformation that draws us more and more deeply into the life and love of God. It further

recognizes that the rule of a religious community provides a framework within which we can be more open to God's action in our lives through living out the rule in love. The rule also should be a sign that we are not satisfied with an "ordinary" Christian life, but we want to gain the fullness of what God offers us.

We are using the propers for the Feast of the Transfiguration in our service. The account is familiar to all of you, of course. Jesus gives his startled disciples a glimpse of his glory as the Incarnate God. But this also ought to be an inspiration to us, not just because it attests to Jesus' divine nature, but because it is a glimpse of the glory that awaits each of us as we grow more and more deeply into the life of God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. We, too, are being transfigured. I dare say that if we could see God's presence in those gathered here this evening, we would be as terrified and astounded as Peter, James and John were at what they saw.

Being a member of a religious community is an opportunity to be transformed – yes, to be transfigured – in a special way. As a Daughter of the King, a woman should be intentional in her openness to God's transforming power and a witness to the Good News. She should value the Rule of the Order as a framework within which she can more faithfully serve the Lord and allow him to work through her. And through her own transformation, through her own transfiguration, she can be an instrument through which God transforms and transfigures the world.