

Homily for the First Profession of Sister Melissa Renee Cessac, CDP

July 24, 2020

Divine Providence Motherhouse
San Antonio, Texas

Fr. Paul F. English, CSB

(Silly story about a Basilian from Texas, serving in Mexico, who congratulated sisters making their profession for their “*nuevas botas*” – their new boots, rather than their *nuevos votos*, new vows.)

“Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.” That’s good advice from the Letter to the Hebrews.

The story of the remarkable Dorothy Day is told in a movie about her life called “Entertaining Angels,” a belief that certainly illumines the life, work and ministry of the Catholic Worker movement. But here’s something: we can be assured, the angels seldom show up at Catholic Worker houses or anywhere else that poor people know they will be received, as scrubbed supernatural beings in flowing gowns! The work of hospitality and service in Christ requires love first, but grit and perseverance, too.

Why is that? Because, as we heard in the wonderful scriptures Melissa has chosen for our blessing, they are: brothers and sisters who are hungry, thirsty, oppressed, homeless, naked and afflicted strangers, often fresh out of prison.

Ladies and gentlemen, the daily clientele of those who dedicate their lives to serving people who are poor!

And yet, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says to any of us who, to the best of our ability serve needy brothers and sisters: “come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” I’ve always been fascinated and drawn to this. God, the all-powerful monarch says to people who dedicate their lives to compassionate action, “come here, right next to me, and share my reign, rule along with me, be an equal partner with the Almighty in my reign forever.”

I asked the novices with whom I have had the privilege to share life this year, what is a kingdom? One thinks of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or Great Britain, where a sovereign is invested with total power and one hopes she or he will exercise it with magnanimity and justice. Often we think of a kingdom as a land mass or several under the sovereign’s control. Or maybe we think of a time period when, for example, Queen Elizabeth has a reign spanning 67 years. These are human notions of a kingdom, a reign.

Look though, at what Jesus exemplifies and preaches. And realize that the reign of God is first and foremost all about an amazing relationship. Not a place. Not a period of time. In fact, in the complete and generative love relationship of the three Divine Persons, Love is who they are. Love is how they are – and this God, out of that love, created us, beings with whom God fully intends to share that awesome love always, forever.

Imagine taking part in that love with the God who loved each one of us into existence, and being a full partner in their dance of love with all the other people God loved into existence.

This is our true citizenship. We live here on Earth temporarily, of course, and while we're here, we can choose to live and act as we would in our true home, sharing Love – the only true force, with everyone who shares this planet with us.

Because, you see, when we reach out in love to another human being – whose very existence is caught up in the love of Christ, of the Father, of the Holy Spirit – in a real and mysterious way we reach out to Christ himself. And when we do, we are acting already as co-heirs to the reign of God. That's why Jesus says, "whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me."

The novices astutely noted that if we were to live this way (and I hope we already do), people are bound to look at us, and say that we're out of our minds. And, I suppose, looking at things from the perspective of our broken human kingdom, this would be a fair assessment. But they also noted that when looking at things with the loving eyes of Christ, it's the best thing, the only thing really to do. And in order to do the actions, to live the values, to exercise the attitudes of the Reign of God here on earth in 2020, we rely totally on Providence.

I asked Melissa why she chose to throw her lot in with the Congregation of Divine Providence and she told me that when Sister Anita invited her to meet the sisters, it felt as natural as walking into her family's home; it just fit. She spoke to me of how much it means to her to rely completely on Providence, and how energizing and consoling it is to understand that Providence, in her words, "brings all things to good, that somewhere in there, God is working. In the end, it will be good."

This spirit runs through your congregation's documents – what you say about yourselves, and about the Provident God who loves you. "Providence is God's act of continuing creation." That "movements of history in which [you] participate are guided by the loving power of God", and that with God you have an active role in the creative redemption God works in and through you. That you are partners with God in bringing about the New Creation. God sharing glory with the Congregation of Divine Providence!

Melissa pointed out to me that this sharing with God implies more than a working relationship. It implies something much deeper – loving self-giving. God does this continually in Christ. You, in following the vision of Fr. Moyer, devote yourselves courageously, depending only on Providence, to bring education and knowledge of God to people in need. In what better hands could you be? A provident God – guiding, loving and caring for all creation!

So today, as Melissa stands before all of us, both in this beautiful chapel in which so many sisters have offered praise and prayer over the years to Almighty God, and in rooms and homes out there by the marvel of electronic communication, she will make a profound commitment to

- abandonment to Divine Providence,
- simplicity,
- poverty, and

- charity or the works of mercy.

The Congregation has already blessed her with experiences of living this way. Melissa spoke of the blessing of living in the CDP community with Sisters Helen and Ramona. She speaks with a beautiful joy and love for the people of Querétaro, where she served last year.

It was right at the time that I met her and I recognized that her entering into the abandonment of love for God's poor children had touched the center of her soul. After loving that way, you will never be the same – and that's good!

Fr. Moyer envisioned courageous, devoted young women whom he could prepare and send wherever they were needed, with no other dependence but Providence, so that the mission of Jesus – that mission of filling the earth with God's love – would be furthered in the world. He wasn't interested in founding a cloistered order, nor a typical religious community. They were to be among the people, knowing them, sharing their lot, being Christ with and for them. It was the people, Melissa informed me, not the founders who named the Congregation. They saw the women's true dependence on God's providence and identified them with that word, that trust, that truth.

Melissa, just as God has chosen you to be his messenger, you too have chosen well.

As messy and as beautiful as is the hungry, thirsty, naked and poor body of Christ, religious life can have its surprises, too – its ups and downs. Providence... Rely on God and call on the Blessed Mother. Light those candles the first of every month and pray each day for your sisters, that together with our beloved Jesus, you can always be beacons of faith, sharing a simple life, embracing true poverty and mercifully expressing that love and faith in charity.

May God bless you in your community life and in your ministry!