

Feast of the Ascension of the Lord and 50th Jubilee Celebration
May 16, 2010 St. James Cathedral

“This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad!”

Dear People of God:

It is truly a joy to celebrate with you our 50th Jubilee as Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary on this great feast of the Ascension of Jesus. You, our families and friends, our co-workers and community: all of you have nurtured, supported, loved and sustained us in our life of consecration and ministry these 50 plus years. We thank you with all our hearts!

I am humbled and honored to speak today in the name of our Sister Jubilarians, Mary Garvin, Kathleen Hearn and Janet Ryan, and those who are unable to be with us, Dee Marie Reeder, Prisca Hui and Mary McNassar. The seven of us chose as the theme for our Jubilee celebration the words of the prophet Isaiah with the amazing photo of the Hubble telescope on your liturgy program: “Look, I am doing something new; now it emerges... Can you not see it?”

God is always doing something new, but we don't always see it! For the disciples of Jesus, the Ascension should have been a sad leave-taking, knowing that Jesus would no longer be close to them in the familiar and intimate ways they had known. But somehow they glimpsed that this wasn't really a farewell, but a new beginning. Jesus would not leave them; rather, he would be with them in a new way! As they gazed toward heaven, they heard the angels' words: “Why are you standing there looking up at the sky?” The same Jesus you have known and loved is sending you forth to create a new community where God's reign of love, mercy and justice will embrace all people and all of creation. You are to be his *witnesses* to the ends of the earth! Go to Jerusalem, roll up your sleeves, there is work to be done! And Luke tells us that the disciples returned with great joy, praising God in eager anticipation of “the new era of the Spirit: God doing something incredibly new!

We, his disciples today, have also experienced, the anointing of the Spirit in our Baptism and Confirmation, empowering *us* to continue the mission of Jesus: “to witness to the “good news” of God's Reign. Like Jesus, we are called “to heal and reconcile, to free captives and release the oppressed, to announce a Year of Jubilee where all is made new!” We Jubilarians see our Jubilee year as a new call, inviting God to do something new in our lives and in our religious community. We hear the Spirit “groaning within us like a woman in labor,” longing to bring to birth a new church and a new world.

When we entered religious life 52 years ago in 1958, the church and religious life were so different. We saw ourselves as responding to an inner call to give our lives totally to God by “leaving the world.” The spirituality of the time told us that the world was evil and would keep us away from God. So we separated ourselves by living in a cloister, wearing a dress or habit of another era, teaching

in classrooms, but rarely relating to the parish community, the families of our students, our own families, and certainly not to the larger world. True, we saw ourselves serving God and God's people; but we were "set apart" to live a life of holiness and perfection in a *monastic* way of life.

Only a year later, 1959, when Pope John XXIII called the 2nd Vatican Council, we could not have imagined the challenges and changes that awaited us. In opening the windows to the fresh air of the Spirit, something very new happened in our Church and in religious life. It was "*a new Pentecost*," the very power of the Holy Spirit breathing life and fire into our church, enkindling the embers that had grown cold, cold with the loss of the vision, cold with clinging to the external props of power. Vatican II called our church to be "the People of God", "Servant" to the very world "*God so loved*"; all of us pilgrims following Jesus, proclaiming God's Reign by the way we live and serve.

Our Congregation experienced the power of that Spirit when we responded to the call of the Council to return to the roots of our foundation and the Gospel. We listened anew to God's call and prayed for the wisdom to respond creatively to the needs of *our time*, even as Blessed Mother Marie-Rose and our early founders did in French Canada in 1843. As we re-immersed ourselves in our congregational story, it became clear that we were founded to be an *apostolic community*, to live and work *with* the People of God, not to be "set apart on a pedestal or hidden in a cloister." We were to be *contemplatives in action*, drawing our energy and passion from our abiding union with God, pouring out the gifts we were given in service to God's people, collaborating with all who desire God's Reign in our world.

Indeed, "God did something very new" in our Church and in our lives as apostolic religious in the second Vatican Council! Reaffirming our baptismal call to be "priests, prophets and leaders," witnesses to God's all-embracing love, our Holy Names congregation expanded our educational ministry to work for the "full development of persons", that each might contribute their unique gifts to the building of God's reign. In addition to teaching in schools, we began to serve as parish educators in faith, as outreach ministers to the poor, sick and elderly, to prisoners, immigrants and refugees. We created ways to share our spirituality in prayer groups, retreats and spiritual direction, empowering women to claim their own experience of God and their gifts for leadership and ministry. Responding to the "signs of our times," we committed ourselves to work for justice in our church and world, educating ourselves and others to be advocates and agents of change, both locally and globally. As the Spirit led us, we invited others who share our charism, Associate members, married and single, along with partners in ministry, to join us in helping to build a world of peace, justice and reconciliation...what we all pray for when we say the Our Father: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Vatican II also led us to a new understanding of our *vowed life*, as *more* than a *personal or private relationship with God*, but as a call to be totally in love with

God and God's People, especially those left out and marginalized. That love can only come from God, expanding and transforming our hearts to love with God's own heart: *the work of a lifetime, to be sure!* That's the meaning of our vow of chastity. Our vow of *obedience* moves us to live interdependently, relying on the strength of community and a common mission to carry out God's desires for us and those we serve. And our vow of *poverty* urges us to live simply, to share generously the resources we've been given, to care for our earth as God's gift for all. Our life is not understandable to many. It's meant to be a prophetic challenge to the individualist and consumerist values of our society; and likewise, a prophetic challenge to our church, whenever its leadership clings to power and status, putting the survival of institutional structures over and above the Gospel and mission of Jesus. And what keeps us going?: prayer, listening, trying to see as God sees, believing that God is at work in us and in you, the God who reminds and encourages us: "Look, I am doing something new...now it emerges...can you not see it?"

Ascension and Jubilee: feasts of hope and transformation, of God's ever creative energy and power to make us new...from the inside out. I close with lines from one of my favorite poems by the British poet, Christopher Fry:

"The human heart can go to the lengths of God...
.... The frozen misery
Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
Thank God our time is now, when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul we humans ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is exploration into God..."

In a few moments we will renew the vows we made 50 years ago. We ask you, God's people, to witness them and to hold us in prayer, that we may be faithful to the God who has loved us so faithfully. In this Eucharist, we pray that together we may become what we receive: the living Body of Christ, 'the fullness of the One who fills all things in every way.'

With Jesus and Mary, our strength and our glory, we proclaim:

"This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad!"

Judy Ryan snjm