

Homily for 125th Anniversary of Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph

Delivered by Fr. James McCurry, OFM Conv.

St. Francis of Assisi Church

Hamburg, New York

10th April 2022

Isaiah 50:4-7

Philippians 2:6-11

Passion-Luke: 22:14 – 23:56

Permit me to begin by thanking the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph for the invitation to preach at their 125th anniversary celebration. Fr. Michael Zielke, the principal celebrant of this Mass, is the Minister Provincial of the Franciscan Friars Conventual of St. Bonaventure Province in the Midwest. I am Fr. James McCurry, the Minister Provincial of the Province of Our Lady of the Angels in the eastern USA. We represent the two regions where the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph have been located throughout the century and a quarter of their existence.

My own personal bond to the FSSJ community began 52 years ago when I was invested in the habit of the Order of Franciscan Friars Conventual. The black Franciscan habits for the 26 novices in my class were all made in Hamburg by the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph. Literally, the Sisters clothed us young friar-novices with the religious garment that symbolized our common Franciscan commitment.

My bond with the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph has continued ever since then. After my Ordination to the Franciscan priesthood, my first assignment was in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and my first task was to preach the 8th grade retreat at St. Stanislaus School. The FSSJ community ran the school. Sr. Angelica was its principal, and the 8th grade icon of a teacher was the legendary Sr. Dolores Stachowicz. After the retreat, the aged Sr. Dolores and I took the class to a local amusement park for a day-long outing. Sr. Dolores immediately separated the boys from girls (of course!): “Boys, you go ‘dis way; girls, you go ‘dat way.” Sr. Dolores then said to me: “*Father, let’s go to the merry-go-round!*” She led me up onto the carousel, not onto the horses, but onto one of those fancy love seats. As we rode around the carousel in circles, the boys and the girls (still separated) were all snapping photos!

I see that “merry-go-round” seat as symbol of the intertwined lives of the FSSJs and OFM Convs. throughout all of the past 125 years. We have moved together as one family of sisters and brothers – intertwined in the work of “**sharing hearts and hands**” in service to the Church. How grateful to God we have been for all these 125 years of being brothers and sisters in the one Franciscan family! It has not always been easy. Some of our friars were not always as nice to the Sisters as they should have been. God love you, Sisters, for your patience with us friars!

It is appropriate that today, Palm Sunday, is the day on which we are celebrating this Jubilee Mass. The story of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph actually has a preface which began 133 years ago – on Palm Sunday. That was the day that the future foundress of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph,

Mother Colette Hilbert, arrived from western Poland to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with 4 other Charity Sisters of St. Charles Borromeo (She was the youngest), to begin her mission in the United States. Colette came from Polish nobility, but at a young age embraced a religious vocation of poverty and simplicity, with a missionary impulse. Sister Colette's first solemn Mass in America on that Palm Sunday 1889 literally saw the people waving Palm branches and shouting hosannas of welcome as these Polish Sisters rejoiced to arrive at their new home.

Palm Sunday has a double tone – ecstasy, then agony. Look at today's liturgy. We began with grand hosannas at the blessing of the palms – the crowds hailing and glorifying Jesus – and those hosannas then expanded our celebration to include a *Gloria*. This ecstasy, however, soon ends; it is followed by the Passion narrative, as we join Jesus in the journey from the Adoring crowds on the Mount of Olives to the Crucifying crowds on the Mount of Calvary.

So too Sister (later Mother) Colette Hilbert and the Charity Sisters of St. Charles Borromeo would experience in Pittsburgh that same double tone of ecstasy to agony. As a heroic woman of faith – with supernatural charity always prevailing – Sister Colette learned early on that the agonies of life are a “vale of soul-making” – moments of sharing Christ's passion so lovingly that your soul reclaims a new “ecstasy” greater and higher than the first.

Thus it was, that by 1897, having left Pittsburgh, Mother Colette, with her small band of new novices, obtained personal permission from Pope Leo XIII to leave the Charity Sisters of St. Charles Borromeo and found a new congregation: the **Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph**.

How did Pope Leo XIII get directly involved? Here's where the Franciscan Friars Conventual come into the picture. The Polish-born Minister Provincial of the Conventuals in the United States was Fr. Hyacinth Fudzinski. He had previously worked at the Vatican and was a close personal friend of Pope Leo. He intervened with the Holy Father on behalf of Mother Colette.

The rest is history! Mother Colette and the newly established Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph pioneered, beginning at their first foundation in Trenton, New Jersey, and expanding in the education ministry at schools, the care ministry at hospitals and nursing homes, and even in foreign missions. Mother Colette's animating vision – “*In All Things Charity*” – became the driving force that kept the community growing, as the Sisters kept offering themselves in zealous service of the Church. Mother Colette's inspiring witness kept the new community on track.

Our late Franciscan Fr. Cornelian Dende, former Director of the Fr. Justyn Rosary Hour, knew Mother Colette personally, and he described her in this way:

“The spiritual life of Mother Colette... offers her spiritual daughters a profound lesson. It reflects a peaceful stability that is founded in total consecration to God, an intimate closeness to Jesus Christ and his holy Will, a complete and humble obedience to the Holy Spirit; a zealous missionary spirit that adapts itself to the requirements of time and place, always acting with a childlike trust in Mary and her immaculate spouse, Joseph – these are the characteristics of this Chosen soul.”

These are the characteristics of her Institute! – of her daughters throughout 125 years! Today's first two readings bespeak these characteristics: The suffering servant prophecy of Isaiah: “*The Lord*

has given me a well-trained tongue, that I may know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled.” Like the servant in Isaiah, the Franciscan Sisters have spent their lives sharing their hearts and hands.

The second reading today from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians bespeaks the secret of their success: their sharing the *Kenosis* of Jesus. “Kenosis” means self-emptying. Just as Jesus emptied Himself of the privileges of his Godhead, so too Agnes (later Colette) Hilbert, who came from a wealthy and noble family in the Silesian region of Poland, forsook her wealth and privileges. This is what St. Francis of Assisi did. This is what St. Clare of Assisi did. We Franciscans call this self-emptying *minoritas* – “littleness,” “humility.”

How possibly could Mother Colette, and the Sisters who have followed her for 125 years, continue to maintain this stance of *minoritas/littleness/kenosis*, which assured the fruitfulness of their mission? How? They had continuing recourse to their patron saints: Our Lady and St. Joseph! One of the Sisters’ earliest foundations after Trenton was Shamokin, Pennsylvania. The convent they occupied is still standing there (although now it is occupied by the Muslim community). Across the street from their former convent in Shamokin there still stands the beautiful Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, where every day the Franciscan Sisters would stop to pray and invoke the intercession of their patrons, the Immaculata and her spouse St. Joseph. For the whole of their 125 years of existence, the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph have relied on Our Lady and St. Joseph to help them live their lives of service in the spirit of Jesus’s *kenosis* – in the spirit of Franciscan *minoritas*, littleness, humility.

The lifespan of a normal person in America today still ranges between 70 and 80 years. The lifespan of the FSSJ has long exceeded that. Its journey of ecstasy has endured perhaps as much agony (Passion of Christ) as it has ecstasy. Today we give thanks for both, and we look to the even higher ecstasy that partakes of the glory of Jesus’s Resurrection.

Let me share with you one final image: the scene at St. Stanislaus Cemetery in Cheektowaga, where Mother Colette Hilbert’s grave and Fr. Hyacinth Fudzinski’s grave are surrounded by over a hundred other crosses marking the graves of so many departed Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph. Every time I am in the Buffalo area, I go to that peaceful circle of graves. Here is what I always think as I look at each sister’s tombstone: *“This Sister probably touched at least 1000 people in her ministry of teaching or pastoral care. Each of those people she influenced probably in turn passed on Sister’s lessons to thousands of others. Sister’s influence had a rippling effect. 1000 x 1000 = ONE MILLION. Each and every Franciscan Sister of St. Joseph in the 125-year history of their congregation has left a million-person legacy of persons who are closer to God because of one Sister’s impact on their lives.”* The legacy of the Franciscan Sisters of St Joseph lives on with a generational rippling effect.

In today’s reading of the Passion from St. Luke’s Gospel, there was one particular scene that has more detail in St. Luke than in the gospel accounts of the other three evangelists. As Jesus hung on the Cross, flanked by the two criminals, St. Luke gives keen insight into the relationship between our Savior and the so-call “good thief” (sometimes called “Dismas”). Only St. Luke’s Gospel

records Jesus's consoling promise to the "good thief": "*Today you will be with me in Paradise*" (Luke 23:43). Indeed, beloved Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph, the destiny of Paradise is the ultimate Gospel message that Mother Colette and your sister-forebears never stopped proclaiming to all whom they were called to serve. It remains your own enduring and continuing mission as we give thanks to God today for your vocations and the gift which the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph have been to the Church. God bless you. Praise God!