

Homily

On the occasion of the Profession of Final Vows

Sr Elizabeth Young RSM

St Mark's Cathedral, Port Pirie

Saturday, 10th December 2016



Bishop Greg O'Kelly SJ

Diocese of Port Pirie

Dear Sr Elizabeth,

One cannot but be struck by the richness of the readings of Scripture that you have chosen for this Mass of Final Profession, readings so central for a Sister of Mercy. First, however, I would like once again to welcome members of your family, and all those who have helped form you through their love and example. There may be a certain astonishment among members of your wider family, that this young woman brought up in a denomination not Catholic now is about to profess final vows as a Catholic Religious Sister. I imagine that nuns are not common in the Young family! Anyway, the Sisters of Mercy and the wider Church owe you a great debt for Sr Elizabeth. You introduced her into the ways of the Christian faith, and communicated your reverence for the Word of God. As Elizabeth now communicates those gifts to others, may you give thanks for the power for good that you have been with her.

With regard to the readings chosen for the Mass, readings so significant for the spirituality of the Sisters of Mercy, we have from the Prophet Micah the image of people streaming to the mountain of the Lord, that God may teach them God's ways, and that swords may be hammered in ploughshares, and spears in sickles. And there is the homely image, "Each will sit under his vine and fig tree with no one to bother him". It is an era of justice and peace.

The Responsorial Psalm spoken in its poetry that "faithfulness shall spring from the earth, and justice look down from Heaven. Mercy and faithfulness have met; justice and peace have embraced." There are the challenging utterances of St John in his First Letter, "As long as we love one another, God will live in us and God's love will be complete in us. The richness of that notion, that God's love will be complete in us if we love one another. And there is the Gospel of St Luke, "Be compassionate as your Heavenly Father is compassionate. St Matthew has that same phrase as "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect", but Luke, the Gospel of compassion and mercy, with stories of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son and the Lost Sheep, reveals more of the meaning of Jesus, "Be compassionate...".

The images of the age to come, about which the Prophet speaks so poetically, like the wolf lying down with the lamb, are these straw images? Christ has come but not yet the Messianic era as described by the Prophets. Does that make their words poppycock? Certainly not. These images relate to the deepest longings of the human heart, for a world where there is justice and peace and fairness for all. They describe God's ultimate goal for us, and these images nurture our souls and hearts, giving us hope and courage when darker forces seem to prevail. These are visions that feed our deepest aspirations and give us energy and encouragement, as they did to women like Mary MacKillop and Catherine McAuley. And they encompass the ideals and aspirations of the Sisters of Mercy, among whom now Elizabeth is soon to make her final profession.

So this day is a day of great honour for our diocese, a day of great joy for Sr Elizabeth and for her Sisters in the Congregation of Mercy. It is a day of sadness for our poor diocese also, to lose four Sisters in one year as we will be, bringing us down to so few, but we have good hearts as we give thanks to God for all the wondrous good that has been done by the Sisters of Mercy amongst us since they first began their ministry here over forty years ago. When those first Sisters came to Davenport outside Port Augusta they struck a light. They were the first real commitment of our diocese towards the First Australians, and it was the Sisters of Mercy who moved in to their company and earned their love and affection. The Mercy work continued in our diocese in other different ways, and Sr Anne Foale maintained that light in her work with Aboriginal women, and now the Sisters of Saint Anne have stepped in to work at Davenport, to carry the light forward, there and in Ceduna in the near future, we pray, out on the margins.

We often speak of religious life, the consecrated life, as one of prophetic witness, a sign of the holiness of the Church, as Vatican II says. Pope Francis has been a Pope of surprises and uses further images that can startle us, and make us alert. In speaking on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, a favourite Feast for Religious, often the day of Vows, as it was for me, he described it as the Feast of the Encounter, and said "Consecrated men and women are called first and foremost to be

men and women of encounter. Those who truly encounter Jesus cannot ever remain the same as before”.

He talks to religious about “The gazes of Christ”. The Pope notes that when Andrew went to his brother Peter and brought him to Jesus, Christ “fixed His gaze on him and said, you are Simon, son of John. You shall be called Peter”. That is the first gaze, the gaze of choice, of vocation, of being named.

The second gaze was when Peter denied Him and Jesus turns and gazes at him, provoking the intense remorse of Peter. The second gaze is a gaze that changes the heart, and is a change of conversion to love. It is the gaze of mercy and forgiveness.

The third gaze was when the Lord gazed at Peter and gave him a threefold commission, balancing the three acts of denial, to feed the lambs and the sheep. The third gaze is a gaze of mission, of being sent forth to care and nurture.

In talking on the Jubilee for Consecrated Life this year the Pope spoke of what he called the three pillars, three words to indicate the importance of the consecrated life. They were prophecy, proximity to the needy, and hope. These three help constitute the vocation of the Religious.

The image that startled me is one that Francis gave in February this year when he said that we (as Christians and) as consecrated people are “Guardians of astonishment”.

An astonishment which requires ongoing renewal; woe to routine in spiritual life; woe to the crystallisation of our charisms in an abstract document: the Founders’ charisms – are not to be sealed in a bottle, they are not museum pieces. Our Founders were moved by the Spirit and were not afraid to mix their hands with everyday life, with the problems of the people, courageously moving along the geographical and existential peripheries. They did not halt in the face of obstacles and the misunderstandings of others, because they kept in their heart

the astonishment over the encounter with Christ. They did not tame the grace of the Gospel; they always had in their heart a healthy apprehension for the Lord, a heartfelt desire to bring Him to others, as Mary and Joseph did in a temple. We too are called today to make prophetic and courageous choices.

Astonishment is the word when thinking of Catherine McAuley and those other Irish women who founded Congregations in the nineteenth century. There was an energy and daring in those Irish Orders that developed then, with the Sisters of Charity, the Irish Loreto Sisters, the Sisters of Mercy, the Presentation Sisters. Energy and daring, and going to the edges. All had problems with the clergy, part of their charism! Energy and exuberance and the daring of youth. One thinks of the first Irish Loreto Sisters going to India, where their average age was twenty-two. The Sisters of Charity, who when the Congregation numbered only twenty nuns, sent five of them to Australia in the 1830s. And then there were the Mercy's, going to the edges with energy and daring. Only seven women, they became engaged nursing cholera victims before any of them were professed. They were challenged by the deaths of so many of their early Sisters. But the energy was there, with Catherine founding nine autonomous convents in five years. At her death after only ten years there were one hundred Sisters and convents dotted throughout Ireland, and England, and foundations were also to be made in England, the United States, the Crimea, Canada and New Zealand and Argentina. In Australia Ursula Frayne came out in 1846, one of six Sisters in most pioneering circumstances. There was the disillusion of disinformation. The Argentinian foundation transferred to Adelaide. They were women prepared to go to the outskirts, to the margins, where Pope Francis says we should be. Sr Berneice, we have more margins than most.

Catherine McAuley spoke often of "Christ's dear poor". Her faith was nurtured by other Christians, devout Protestants, and Quaker's. Her spirituality developed, from wanting at first to imitate the Carmelites and the actions of the Charity Sisters, then the Presentations, then to grounding itself in the thoroughly biblical spirituality of mercy. How Francis has given so much matter for reflection for any Sister who calls herself

Mercy. As Francis has said, “Mercy cannot become a mere parenthesis in a life of the Church”. The closing of the Year of Mercy was heralded with his letter *Misericordia et misera* how Augustine described Jesus standing next to the woman taken in adultery, mercy next to the misery-struck. As Francis said, “Our life, with its joys and sorrows, is something unique and unrepeatable, that takes place under the merciful gaze of God.” And that mercy gives rise to joy, because our hearts are opened to the hope of new life. As you live your consecrated life, Elizabeth, may you know that spirit of encounter, know the gazes of Christ upon you, know the pillars of your Religious life, and be a guardian of astonishment keeping in your heart “the astonishment over the encounter with Christ”.

May you be mercy, Elizabeth. And may you grow and serve under that gaze, the merciful gaze of God, and be that mercy to others, as you live your vows perpetual. Poverty all that you have; chastity all that you are; obedience all that you ever will be.