

Ritual of Thanksgiving and Taking Up of Office - Congregational Leadership

Reflection by Sr Colleen Sullivan rsj
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Both Mary MacKillop and Julian loved music. Given Mary's cultural heritage I'm sure she had a fondness for bagpipes, a difficult instrument to play. One of the quirks of playing bagpipes is that you sometimes cannot tell where one note ends and another begins, so you have to insert a moment of waiting, a moment of silence. This moment is called a grace note. It can heighten what has already been played and also prepare the listener for the next segment of the melody. It allows the music of life to continue.

Today is a grace note, that moment when one part of our Josephite journey is completed and another part of our life journey has not yet begun.

When we stand in that graced moment we stand in a place of unknowing, the same place the CLT would have stood when they took leadership in 2014.

The 2013 General Chapter spoke of an abundant and creative God, inviting us to a new Communion. We were allured to the edge, to an evolutionary point of no return. The CLT invitation was to take us to that unknown place envisioned in the Chapter document. Monica and her team have led us in the way the mandate intended: doors to contemplation, ecological understanding, unity within our Congregation, (where the many learn to move together as one), continual formation, invitation to new members, repairing the old systems and letting go what needs to be let go.

The 2019 General Chapter, with its focus on Matthew 14, emphasised the amazing abundance of God in Jesus' response, 'what you have is enough', and in taking it God multiplies our gift a thousandfold. Our present CLT have brought us to this place as they travelled through the last six years. This is a place of trust and hope. Much has happened; much will happen. Our new CLT have the same challenge of the unknown facing them.

We live in a world in which violence causes much suffering. It's a world where scientists have moved the Doomsday clock forward to very near midnight because of nuclear fears and the reality of climate change. Earth is suffering as the wildfires that have caused loss of life, human and animal, wild and tame, and the devastation of property and habitats show us. It is a quantum leap to reach out and trust that the Divine Energy is enough. It is certainly not just our energy and yet it is also our energy. We have seen suffering responded to with love and physical help over these days. Communities have bonded. People are reaching out to comfort and heal each other. We have also seen, and will see, the shadow side emerging.

As we reach out in trust, as we stand in trust in this graced moment, we realise we are living out in our lives the heart of the Scripture stories told to us many times. These are stories, just that, stories, and they are often about the amazing abundance of God in times of deep suffering. This is the God who amazes when it seems all is lost and a hopeless resignation seems to prevail.

These stories always invite us to trust no matter what the situation. It is a trust in God and in ourselves and in creation.

Elijah is the prophetic figure of the first story we read today. He has been in hiding and fed bountifully by ravens. Then everything dries up. The ravens apparently go to roost. The stream is dry. Yet Elijah speaks with God given authority and his word gives life but it is the unnamed woman he speaks to in Sidon and who does what he tells her to do that is a most powerful image of trust. She stands in the moment of her grace note, thinking all is over, resigned to her fate and suddenly a request is made to her to give of the little she has left.



Let us focus on two elements of this story that link to the Gospel story chosen for today. The God of abundance takes Elijah from his place of security and points him in another direction. He must now ask for what he needs from someone with very little. She must choose to risk her own and her son's life to feed a stranger. It is her life she is giving when she gives that small scone and she is a woman of Sidon, non-Jewish, a gentile. Compassion flows from the stranger. Where do we look to find compassion? In the unexpected, in the moment of silence between the old and the new, in the stranger! The old form must give way to the new; this is the evolutionary call and the graced call as well. Unwittingly Elijah becomes the first prophet to the Gentiles and begins forming a God relationship beyond where Jahweh has been known.

Matthew's story echoes the same message. Compassion has flown from Christ and brought much healing to the suffering, now the pause, the moment of grace which is also the moment of decision. "I have compassion on the crowd". Now it is the turn of the crowd to provide what is needed from what they have. Loaves and fishes! Mary Coloe reminded us at the regional day that God will multiply whatever we bring. It requires fierce faith to stand in the unknown and wait.

Mary Coloe also reminded us that this particular story took place in the land of the Gentiles, in a strange land, Decapolis. Now God's powerful love is no longer confined to one place or nation. This story takes us beyond the normal Jewish mindset about God, about the Gentiles and about themselves. Jesus' ministry in this area reveals that the kingdom is for Jew and Gentile alike. Christ's work here shows that His blessing is for the nations, a concept foreign to the Jewish nation in Jesus' day. The disciples' perspective had to change.

So we too move with compassion and with gratitude into a new space, a new land. We take with us all we have, with confidence that God trusts us to be bearers of that compassion beyond our known biases, perspectives and boundaries. Ours is not just to give but to be willing to receive from the stranger and from those we least expect have the power to give.

Let us honour all that is old and all that is new for us in this graced moment with all its light and darkness, trusting not just God but ourselves, the way God trusts us each day.

Let us also trust and honour our new CLT as they accept the mandate they have been given:

To lead us so that we can respond to God's call to be audacious Josephite women, raising the powers of love to the next level of consciousness, imagining and acting on new possibilities wherever we are, that will heal, include, untether, set right and serve.

And so together, as the mystics suggest, as the scripture stories encourage us to do, we can say in trust, a holy 'yes' to what has been and to what will be.

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