

Homily
November 7th and 8th
Celebration for Religious Women in the Church of Eastern Montana
Most Rev. Thomas J. Murphy

Introduction

Each year at this time, a unique phenomenon takes place in American society. A great many people begin a lengthy and expensive project called "Christmas shopping." We page through countless catalogues, run from store to store in order to obtain the right gift for a child, a husband or wife, or a friend. The gift we purchase is a sign of the friendship and love we have for others. The person who receives the gift expresses gratitude and appreciation to the giver. In many ways, we try to live out at this time of year the incredible action of a God who shares the gift of His Son with the human race.

Yet, gift giving is not a phenomenon restricted to Christmas time alone. It is a reality that is part of life expressed in countless ways throughout the year. There is the gift of love and care shared by mothers and fathers with their children; the gift of dedication and commitment of teachers, doctors, nurses and so many others in the helping professions; the gift of friendship between people. In turn, those who are the recipients of these gifts should continually stop to give thanks for the blessings we have received.

This weekend, the Church of Eastern Montana stops to reflect on a gift that has been shared with us for almost 100 years, a gift that takes form in the lived service, dedication and religious witness shared by religious women in the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings. This gift is being shared with us now by over 250 religious women. And there is only one possible response we can offer - gratitude and thanks.

I. THE GIFT OF WISDOM

The readings for today's liturgy speak of wisdom. Wisdom is described not as acquired knowledge, but rather as God's grace. The Old Testament description of wisdom challenges us to seek wisdom as a way of life. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians tells us that if we live in wisdom and faith, we shall stay with the Lord forever. The Gospel relates a parable of Jesus describing ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom to enter. This was a custom among the Jewish people which called for a gigantic celebration to occur when the bridegroom arrived. Part of this celebration involved what would be termed today "a torchlight parade." But half of the bridesmaids did not take the time to prepare for the occasion and were eventually locked out of the house. The parable challenges the entire Christian community to be ready at all times for Christ's coming. We are asked to be a "wisdom people."

The Old Testament reading which describes wisdom does so not in abstract terms, but in the personification of wisdom as a "resplendent and unfading woman." How appropriate it is that the Scriptures reflect the celebration of the Church in Eastern Montana this weekend - an appreciation of the gift of religious women as God's grace to the communities in which they serve and help us to wait for the coming of the Lord.

II. RELIGIOUS WOMEN AS GOD'S GRACE

Our celebration this weekend asks us to acknowledge, respect, and appreciate the ministry which religious women have shared with the Church

of Eastern Montana for almost 100 years. From a ministry that began in education and health care, religious women have now expanded their ministry to include almost every area of Church life - and I believe the Christian community is better because of the gifts that religious women have shared with us.

Religious women are also a reminder to the Christian community of the value of Christian feminism in the Church today. We should recall the words of Pope Paul VI who described the task of the Church today as one which would "awaken women and advance their cause at the grass-roots level, both in civil society and the Church." Pope Paul VI added that we should "endeavor everywhere to bring about the discovery of, respect for and protection of the rights and prerogatives of every woman, single or married, in education, in the professions, and in civil, social and religious life." (Pope Paul VI, April 18, 1975)

Religious women have been a source of wisdom, the presence of God's grace to us here in Eastern Montana for many years. Changes have taken place in the Church as well as in the religious communities of women. Accidental factors have changed in our lifetime such as the traditional habit and large convent living has taken on new expression. But what has remained has been a constant and essential witness to the value of the Gospel, a ministry of service, prayer, care and love with and for the Christian community. As we give thanks at this time of year for the rich harvest with which God has blessed our land, may we also give thanks for the harvest of blessings which religious women have shared with us in our Diocese.

As Bishop of the Diocese, I give thanks for the presence of religious women as a source of wisdom and the presence of God's grace among us. I thank them for their leadership among us, especially in the issues of social justice. I thank them for the many and varied ways in which they help us experience the touch of God in our lives. I pray that other young women may consider joining them in a commitment to religious life.

Conclusion

As a wisdom community, we join today around the table of the Lord to recognize His presence in these gifts of bread and wine. But as a wisdom community, we must also recognize His presence in those who serve us and minister to and with us. May God's grace fill the lives of the religious women gathered here and all religious women everywhere. Thank you for the gifts you share so generously. You help to make Christmas happen every day because you help to make the Lord incarnate - and we give thanks.

And that's worth celebrating!