

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 24th General Chapter of the School Sisters of Notre Dame

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Bon Secours Retreat and Conference Center

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A few days ago, I paid a visit to the Institute of Notre Dame in Baltimore and was reminded of the long and storied history of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. As most of you know, IND is celebrating its 170th anniversary, having opened its doors in 1847 with a grand total enrollment of two students.

As I reviewed the history of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in preparation for that wonderful occasion – I was struck by the interaction of the Holy Spirit with the heart and soul of your founder Blessed Theresa Gerhardinger. In 1833, a time of cultural ferment, upheaval, and violence in her native Bavaria, when the world that she and her family knew seemed to be crumbling, Caroline Gerhardinger heard the call of the Holy Spirit, a calling which, by mere human calculation, did not seem destined to succeed.

With a few companions, she prayed: O Holy Spirit, enlighten us, strengthen us, so that we may comprehend our divine call and recognize what we are, what we should be, what we must and really want to do in order to reach this goal.

And the goal was to lead a life wholly consecrated to God and to the mission of transforming the world through education, especially the education of young women . . . a work that is now carried out by your Congregation in 34 countries, and happily, here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

The Holy Spirit answered Caroline Gerhardinger's prayer in a superabundant way

that perhaps exceeded even her expectations. The Spirit bestowed upon her not merely talent, energy, and good will but indeed a charism, a special gift, a spiritual endowment that led not only to the founding of your Congregation but also its animation down to this very day. In this Mass of the Holy Spirit, offered at the outset of your 24th General Chapter, let us give thanks to the Lord for this beautiful gift and let us ask that this charism be renewed and deepened in these times, which Pope Francis has described, “not as an era of change but the change of an era.” For the world as we’ve known it is passing away and so, like Caroline Gerhardinger, you rightly pray to the Holy Spirit so that you may discern and accept anew your charism and calling to bear witness to Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in the wide array of settings and ministries in which you find yourselves.

Yet, by human calculations, just as the odds seemed stacked when your Congregation was newly founded, so too they sometimes seem stacked against the mission in these latter days. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Caroline, now Mother Theresa of Jesus, was unafraid just as in hope you are unafraid to face a future with so many unknowns. At the risk of quoting Bl. Theresa’s “top forty hits”, let me repeat one of her most famous sayings, one engraved upon your hearts: “United and content with little, we go out into the whole world, into the tiniest villages, into the poorest dwellings, wherever the Lord calls us, to bring poor children the good news of God’s reign.” I don’t know about you, but that sounds a lot like Pope Francis’ call to live simply, to go to the peripheries, and to walk with the poor and needy.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Bl. Theresa of Jesus understood what many others in her day did not understand, namely, Things did not have to remain the way they were. Things could change and they could change for the better. She was not imprisoned by the obstacles she encountered. She would help forge a new way of living consecrated life that was suited for the times in which she lived and ministry to which she was called.

Perhaps, in the course of your days of reflection and discernment you will see parallels between the situations in which you find yourselves and the situations which Bl. Theresa and her pioneering religious sisters faced. We invoke the Holy Spirit so that you may also see, in spite of obstacles, new possibilities for living out the beautiful spirit of Bl. Theresa in contexts vastly different from those she

encountered in 19th century Germany and America.

Yet, for the Spirit to work in us and in midst of the Church, the good soil of our hearts must be tilled and nurtured. We must be on the way to living the Beatitudes and keeping the commandments of the Lord in spirit of the Beatitudes, loving God with all that is within us and loving our neighbors as ourselves. For that reason, St. Paul urges us in our reading from Ephesians “to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received” - the same call that Bl. Theresa received so long ago!

Paul goes on to describe what it means to live that call worthily: “with all humility, patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” As we listen to those words we may be reminded of the portrait Jesus painted in the Sermon on the Mount of himself and of those who would be his followers in the power of the Spirit. It is in living these qualities of mind and heart, deeply and intentionally, that you open yourselves at every stage of your history to the working of the Spirit who accomplishes through you “more than [you] could ever ask or imagine.”

Seeking to live the commandments in the spirit of the Beatitudes, you contribute greatly to the building up of the Body of Christ, to the transformative work which the whole Church has been called to do - the proclamation of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism!”

And so, during the days of your 24th General Chapter, may the Spirit of the Lord be upon you, guiding you to manifest to the world the joy of the Gospel, guiding you in your quest to transform the world through education, and guiding you as well in the ways of renewal and growth.

Please accept my warmest and deepest thanks for your presence, your way of life, your untold good works -and may the Lord bless you and keep you always in his love!