

## **Jubilee Homily**

**Mary (Loras) Martens, BVM**

**Set of 1954**

The Visitation gospel chosen for our Jubilee liturgy is about celebration and gratitude. September 8 in the church calendar, our entrance day, celebrates the birthday of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Like other Marian feast days, it has significance for all who are Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Luke recounts a journey that Mary, pregnant with Jesus, undertakes from her Nazareth home. She travels to visit her older relative Elizabeth who is six months pregnant. We can imagine the scene as the two women embrace, smiling at each other with pleasure. "The minute I heard your voice," says Elizabeth, "the infant in my womb leaped for joy!"

Mary responds, "I celebrate with joy God's great goodness to me!" With that brief exchange of conversation, we have a glimpse of how God works with and within humanity. At a certain time in human history, salvation is on the way because of Mary's "yes," to God at the Annunciation. Through Christ, and with the Spirit, God's presence continues in the world today through us.

In reaching out to Elizabeth, Mary brings quite literally the presence of God to Elizabeth. Elizabeth offers Mary the hospitality of her home, and the two women settle into the daily village life of ordinary Jewish people "in the hill country." Each simply gives the gift of self to the other. So can we, who are "the hands and feet of Christ reaching out today," when we bring God's presence to those we encounter.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah proclaims God's message to the Jewish people, "Fear not, for I have called you by name: you are mine. I love you and I am with you." In 1954 some 60 of us who felt God's call to religious life arrived at Mt. Carmel to test that call.

Before our ceremony of Reception into the community, there was a ritual question to be answered by each one, "My child, what do you ask of the Church of God?" The ritual response was, "The holy habit of religion and the charity of the congregation."

Much has changed within religious life through the years. The actual "holy habit" gave way over a period of years to the individual choice of simple and appropriate clothing. Most sisters chose to reclaim their baptismal name. Living situations gradually shifted away from parish convents to apartments for one or a few sisters. However, the "charity of the congregation" has been a constant part of our lives, through the love we've experienced since our entrance day. We belong to "a circle of friends," and we believe that "where one BVM is, there we all are."

Most of us had entered as high school graduates, and our "set" was the first one privileged to complete a college degree before we began teaching. Previously, BVMs had been mentored by other sisters at their respective missions. Their college credits were earned incrementally through years of Saturday classes and summer sessions. We were grateful for that professional preparation.

There followed other significant changes as religious life continued its evolution. The Second Vatican Council in the sixties emphasized renewal of this life form as well as a renewal in the Church itself. U.S. women religious took seriously the mandate to re-visit their original founding charism, and the history and mission of their founder-- in our case, Mary Frances Clarke. We were grateful for this focus on spirituality and growth in prayer.

Opportunities occurred for sisters to gather in our various geographic areas to learn new or additional skills for working with others. Weekend workshops provided everyone in the congregation with a better understanding of individual differences and gave us improved communication skills. We were grateful to start on the path of "lifelong learning" through workshops, other educational courses and travel grants.

Instead of being sent or "missioned" to a specific school, the community experimented with "totally open personnel application." A sister could discern about her ministry, considering her personal gifts and the common good of the community. The emphasis on elementary, high school and college education broadened to include needs beyond traditional classroom settings. We were grateful to have a choice of how and where to use our talents to serve others.

The biblical concept of "a preferential option for the poor" drew sisters to live and minister in inner-city locations, in rural areas and in other countries; to work with immigrants in a variety of ways, to do social work and advocacy for vulnerable minorities. Documents from Vatican II had described the Church in the Modern World as the "People of God," including the laity along with clerics. The needs were many and varied. We were grateful for community support and encouragement in navigating the challenges involved.

More recently, the Apostolic Visitation during 2008 to 2012 was initiated by Rome. Women religious in the United States received on-site visitors who gathered information about how each active congregation was living out its vows and its commitments to the gospel mission of Jesus. We were grateful for our BVM Constitutions and our core values of freedom, education, justice and charity which inspire our life and work.

Yes, we are grateful today, and we appreciate all who celebrate this Eucharist with us in the chapel or via video stream. We express gratitude to a God of love who walks with every human being, all created in the Divine image. May we recognize God's image in each person.

And may all of us continue reaching out in love as Mary and Elizabeth did, to those whom we encounter in the days yet to come.