

Homily notes

Mass Celebrating Consecrated Life
Saint Joseph's Oratory, September 17th 2015
Readings: I Timothy 4.12-16; Luke 7.36-50

Introduction

People sometimes ask me to compare the experience of the Catholic Church in Ireland and North America. My first response tends to be enigmatic – the principal difference is this: in Ireland the Church has an abundance of ecclesiastical and monastic ruins – popularly seen as the relics of a golden age of consecrated life. I think of such sites as Glendalough, Clonmacnoise, Cashel – and there are lots of others less well known. Today they have become centres of tourist interest, of occasional pilgrimage or local devotion, of interest to academics and students of culture. These ruins stand as silent ghosts of a culture of consecrated life that flourished and passed away. In recent centuries another culture of consecrated life flourished, born of the combined impacts of the Reformation and the French Revolution. Now this modern culture is also falling into ruins. What can we expect for the future?

We can think of these cultures as earthen vessels, bearers of a divine treasure – of pearls of great price, combining metaphors from Saint Paul and the Synoptics. What is that divine treasure? *It is a covenant of love which never ceases to re-invent itself in new and renewed forms of consecrated and community life.* Consecrated life is one way, among many, of being in love, in love with God, with life, in love with creation, with one another. It is the divine treasure that grounds our hope.

Love is at the heart of today's Gospel story. Three cultures meet. They are embodied in Simon the Pharisee, in the sinner, and the prophet – Jesus. Their story can help us *discern* the culture of love in contemporary forms of consecrated life – discern the seeds of living and dying – what is of spirit, what is of clay.

The Culture of Simon

Simon was a Pharisee; we do not need to invent a story for him, more than the elements Luke supplies. Simon has asked Jesus to eat with him; there are other guests at the table. We are familiar with that kind of society. Simon would have known the expectations of such a social gathering; and yet he omits the common civilities of gracious hospitality – no water to wash, no kiss of welcome, no soothing anointing. Hospitality is the signature trait of civilized living. What has happened to Simon's heart? Has it grown cold? Is he being deliberately offensive? Is he the unwitting victim of a dying culture?

Simon's behaviour symbolizes a culture that bears the seeds of its own demise. Seeds that appear as the markers of respectability – success, class consciousness, sensitivity to social recognition, bearers of convictions that wither as prejudices. Think of the words of that other Pharisee depicted by Jesus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like

this tax-collector.” At the same time, we should not forget that such culture accomplishes much good, and thereby often concealing the seeds of its own demise. Discernment is the art of sorting seeds. James Joyce left us a short story in *Dubliners*, entitled “The Dead”. For me it is a masterpiece mirroring how being half dead may be disguised in the most respectable of urbane societies.

Does Simon’s culture mirror our experience of modern consecrated life? Does it help us discern our own culture of consecrated life?

The Culture of the Sinner

The woman displays another culture. The Gospel does not give her a name, but the city has given her a title, a category, a sinner. Again, we do not need to invent a story for her. Luke gives us sufficient elements. She performs all the gestures of gracious hospitality that Simon has omitted; she is full of warmth and affection; she is not afraid to touch and care for another human being; she shows, in the words of Jesus, “great love”. Despite the judgement of society, the seeds of life are manifold in her.

The woman symbolizes cultures and categories of people who are marginalized and judged (if not condemned) by society, people whom respectable circles have difficulty seeing as bearers of great love. In our world, our global village, there are so many sub-cultures pushed to the periphery of society. In these days, we cannot help but think of the refugees and victims of violence. They are just a part of people we have always with us – the poor. It is remarkable how often the name of the poor appears in the mission statements and rhetoric of religious congregations. Rightfully the service by religious to the poor is celebrated during this Year of Consecrated Life.

This Gospel story raises many questions: do we get close enough to the sinner to taste her tears, to be touched by her, to be loved by her? Are we close enough to recognize love embodied in the lives and culture of the poor, so that we may be evangelized by them?

When the bond between consecrated life and the poor weakens, the culture of consecrated life is dying. Do the poor help us to discern our culture of consecrated life?

The Culture of Jesus

It is Jesus who brings the word love into Luke’s narrative. In the story within the story, he talks of a creditor and two debtors. He asks the question: Now which of them – the creditors – will love him more? Simon does not use the word love in his reply. Despite the overuse of the word love in modern culture, there is sometimes resistance to use it where it counts most – in our day-to-day relationships. Jesus uses it, love, of the creditors, and of the woman’s care for him: “she has shown great love.” And he becomes more concrete, in specifying one beautiful seed of love... forgiveness. Forgiveness granted, forgiveness accepted. He affirms for the woman that her capacity to love is rooted in her capacity to accept forgiveness.

There is so much to be found in the simple words and actions of Jesus. They contain the perennial seeds of life. One of the great blessings of the Second Vatican Council, a stroke of genius, is the restored easier access to the biblical word – to the biblical expression of the story of Jesus. Attention to the biblical word is the guarantor of a future new Christian culture, and of various new and renewed cultures of consecrated life.

Jesus is the primary apostle of a culture of new life, of life in abundance. “I have come that they may have life, life in abundance.” Jesus represents a culture of love. Does his interaction with Simon and the woman mirror how we relate to such people? Three cultures meet.

Conclusion

Recent Popes speak often of a culture of life, and warn against the insidious seeds of cultures of death. The present Holy Father, Francis, speaks frequently of discernment, of sifting the seeds of life and death that are at work in the same soil, in the same common home. We recall the parable of the wheat and the weeds growing alongside one another. May I draw these remarks to a conclusion by reminding us that one of the principal services, expected of Bishops, of leaders in consecrated life, is to lead in the common sifting of cultures, discernment. The present Holy Father returns often to one sure sign of good seeds – joy, enduring joy! One place to find such joy is at the banquet table of the poor.

My prayer for us all, for the Church and all people of good will, is the prayer of Jesus at the last banquet: that his joy may be made complete in us.

Eugene King, O.M.I.