

Sisters of St. Joseph Jubilee Mass Nazareth Holy Family Chapel

13 Sister Jubilarians: 1-75th; 9-60th; 3- 50th

"Mercy: the Heartbeat of God"

(Jer 1:4-9; Phil.3:8-14; Jn 15:9-17)

July 24, 2016 10:00 a.m.

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Sister Jubilarians celebrating 75, 60 and 50 years in Religious Life; Dear Sisters of St. Joseph; Dear Associates, Family members, guests and visitors; Dear Father Mike Howell; sisters and brothers all----Praised be Jesus Christ!

This is such a happy and special day as we honor 13 of our dear Sisters who are celebrating the milestones of Diamond Anniversaries---(one---75th and nine---60th), and three celebrating Golden Anniversaries. Whether yours is diamond or golden, we know that all of you are precious, as you've given witness to your faithful discipleship of Jesus as Sisters of St. Joseph for a combined total of 765 years of religious life----through ministries of education, health care, medical technology, social work, ministry to persons with special needs, peace and justice ministry, music ministry, business administration, hospice care, missionary work and migrant ministry, diocesan staff work, and community leadership. Your work and ministry has taken you to far away mission fields, to nearby schools and classrooms, and everywhere in between. No matter where you have gone throughout these 765 years worth along the spectrum of ministries, you have witnessed to Jesus Christ, you have reached out in loving hospitality to the dear neighbor, and you have been a witness to God's loving Presence in our world.

We congratulate you today! And, we thank you for your faithful witness! We rejoice with you----We are inspired, and our lives have been enriched, by you. You have truly been the *"Mercy, the Heartbeat of God"* as the theme for today's Jubilee Mass so beautifully put it. No matter where you have gone and what you have done, you have put the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy into action throughout your religious lives---your heartbeat revealed God's "heartbeat" of love and mercy. The ministries and religious witness that we celebrate today of our Sister Jubilarians have been more valuable than diamonds or gold----they have brought the priceless gift of the love of Christ to countless numbers of people in need.

And if you would allow me a personal comment, I count this day as special because July 24th is the anniversary of my dear mother's birth. She would have turned 97 years old today if she were still in this world. And so as we celebrate this Mass for all of us gathered here, with a special thanksgiving for our dear Jubilarians, please also whisper a prayer for my dear mother.

The Scripture Readings we have just heard proclaimed, drawn from the Votive Mass for Religious, are powerful in so many ways, but what strikes me about all three of them is the focus on God's initiative ---- on God's call to all of us to be His faithful people----- on God's call to these 13 religious women to enter into religious life in 1941, 1956 or 1966----and God's call to each of them each day of these 75, 60 and 50 years to continue living religious life with joyful spirits and generosity of heart. How beautifully we heard Jeremiah, the great Prophet of Old, reflect on the beginning of his own prophetic ministry. Perhaps it was on a milestone day in his own life when he spoke these inspired words which begin the Book of Jeremiah. As Jeremiah recalled, God spoke to Jeremiah's heart and told him that God had chosen him not only before he was born, but even before he had been conceived in his mother's womb. Jeremiah also remembered that at first he was somewhat hesitant to heed God's call, and came up with the excuse that he was too young and didn't know how to speak, so how could he be God's Prophet? That's when God reassured him: You're not too young. Wherever I send you, you will go; whatever message I give you, you will deliver it. And then, these powerful words: *"Have no fear....I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."*

St. Paul told us something very similar in his Letter to the Philippians this morning. Paul had at some point much earlier in his life----sometime after he had been so dramatically "blinded by the Light" and gone through that absolute conversion to become the greatest of all the Apostles (as he so "humbly" referred to himself)----Paul saw very clearly what was most important in his life----his relationship with Jesus and his vocation to be His apostle! Everything and everyone else was in descending order from there; absolutely nothing was more important to him than his vocation. Or as he pretty dramatically put it in today's Reading: *"I consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord....and I consider them (everything else) so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him."*

But what I think is so inspiring is the last part of today's Reading when Paul gave us the insight into what kept him going. *"Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal--the prize of God's calling."*

It's good for us to look back on the beginning of our calling. I loved reading the brief summaries of each of our Jubilarians, and seeing how God's call drew them forward at various points in their lives----some with a very early awareness of Jesus' call, one recalling that it was on her First Communion Day; and then as they went through formation, and finally, making their profession as Sisters of St. Joseph. But in each and every instance, God had called you first!

And today, from your perspective as retired or more limited in your ministry, it's also good for us to pause and think about the successes (and the failures too) of the "heydays" of our ministry, when we were in the thick of the day-to-day, nitty gritty of teaching, nursing, administering, and any of our other ministries.

But whether you're celebrating 50, 60, or 75 years of religious life---and for the rest of us gathered here for this Mass as well just living the ordinariness of our vocations-----in a sense, with St. Paul, we need to "forget what lies behind" and "keep straining to what lies ahead".

At some point in our lives, as important as our ministries are, we come to realize that it's not so much in what we do that matters in the long run, but it's in who we are as we give witness to the world of our faithful response to God's initiative in our lives---to God's call that we remain joyful and generous in our response to God and God's people, whether we're able to DO much, or very little. The "goal" still awaits us----the "prize" is not yet quite in our grasp. And so we need to keep "straining forward". And that is what is most inspiring to the rest of us---and to the world. It's that faithful, constant, loving, generous, and joyful "straining forward to what lies ahead". It's the commitment to the Hope that drives us forward. It's when we finally realize that it's not that we are choosing to follow Christ, as much as that Jesus has chosen us. Again in the words of St. Paul, when we realize with him that "*I have been taken possession of by Christ Jesus!*". That is when we are able to just be filled with the Good News that keeps us "straining toward the goal", no matter what happened in our past, or what is going on around us in the present.

Jesus told us the same thing, but much more clearly, in today's Gospel: "*It was not you who chose Me, but I who chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain.*"

As you celebrate your Jubilees dear Sisters, the Church is also in the midst of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Pope Francis has urged the entire Church, beginning with himself, and applying to each and every person, to realize that God's greatest gift to us is that of His love and mercy. And the most important part of who we are, no matter what our vocation, or whether we're

celebrating a Jubilee or not---the most important thing for us is to humbly ask for God's mercy, and to generously give love and mercy to those in need, in the name of Jesus.

As we heard Jesus sum it all up in today's Gospel----which is the summary of our vocations as religious women, as those ordained, or to those of our lay faithful----it all comes down to the way Jesus summed it all up: "*As the Father loves me, so I also love you..... This is My commandment: love one another as I love you.*"

Congratulations, dear Jubilarians! Thank you for so faithfully and so generously living your lives according to the Gospel imperatives of evangelical poverty, celibate chastity, faithful obedience, and the profound love of God and the dear neighbor. May God continue to bless you with much happiness in this life, and one day, as you keep "straining forward", may you obtain the prize of eternal life in the world to come.

God bless you, now and always.

Faithfully yours in Christ---- + Bishop Paul J. Bradley