

CSJB 150th 1874-2024

15 June 2024

Deut 11:8-12, 26-27; 2 Cor 5:17-6:2; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

We're here today to give thanks for the lives and ministry of this Community of St John Baptist – the Community here today, the Community at Clewer who encouraged migrants to these United States, and the long roll of sisters who have served in many parts of the world, sharing the love of God wherever they have gone. Well done, good and faithful servants, today and of the ages: sisters and mothers superior, clergy who led Mass and heard confessions, Associates and neighbors of the Community: an ever-flowing abundance of hands and hearts and minds (and pocketbooks) put to God's purpose in ever varied circumstances.

Thanks be to God! ¡*Muchas gracias a Dios, por muchos dones, many graces, many gifts!*

This community is Christ's embassy, not unlike Ambassador Antony Blinken, charged to seek justice and peace in other nations. The Community of St John Baptist is a blessedly bound body of *ambassadors*, from a Celtic wordⁱ that means "wandering agents," moving around. Not just Dag Hammarskjold, U Thant, Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Desmond Tutu, but God's peace force among the wounded and frail, eager young students, the wandering, forgotten, hungry, and ill in our city streets. The focus here is on the oneness and thriving of God's creation – humanity, plains and forests, seas and rivers, and every living thing, living together in harmony. The sisters live that reality in the midst of struggle – as well as gracious harvests.

This Community has had many wandering agents: in Jersey City and the Big Apple; here in the neighborhood at St Mark's, St Bernard's, St Luke's, and others; in Navajoland and Corsicana; and for decades in the green hills of Oregon. This Community has been, is, and will continue to be, a deeply faithful blessing, wherever and whatever sort of healing God calls you into. Even alterations to the Rule and Constitution (and habit) have been gracefully and graciously engaged, in body and in spirit. In the midst of plenteous silence, you and your sisters have grappled, discussed, explored, and eventually come to consensus. That persistence, particularly between Mendham and Clewer, now Begbrokeⁱⁱ, has been gently shepherded into God's unfolding future, modeling creative difference with love for all. Your example spreads abroad and changes minds, even the custodians of Mendham and Morris County fire codes!

Change has accompanied this Community's journey for several lifetimes. Settling sisters in NYC, Jersey City, and across the country was always a response to the call of God. Growing children needed love, education, and direction. Many, including their elders, were hungry and ill-clothed. Some had no place to lay their heads, others came for sandwiches or familiar Latino fare. ¡*Mas tamales, por favor!* Sisters guided Christmas pageants, choirs, and summer camp excursions. The frail, wandering, and ill were pastored and prayed for. The changes were simply responses to varied needs – for love in the variety of human incarnation – as well as dogs, cats, and horses! The loving care of these grounds and their residents, human and not, radiates the joy of first creation: 'and God saw that it was very good.'ⁱⁱⁱ

The sisters of this Community have shepherded loving work in the wider world, living words we know from Compline: *Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness.* Weariness has and will come to each one, yet the spirit moves us out again to wander and look into the needs and possibilities around us. Will you go to the hungry or

unhoused? The downcast and withdrawn? Youth who've met the demons of addiction, or the examples we all need of holy wanderers bringing light, and life, and healing?

The Scriptures at this Community's founding are heard again today in remembrance and celebration, continuing to shape the pastoral work: "now is the acceptable time." It is a time of grace and favor, to be urgently grasped with both hands and heart! Now is God's time, blessing, milk and honey, watered ground, grown verdant. Would that all might experience that lush and urgent greenness, what Hildegard named *viriditas*, green, growing wisdom, flourishing. The Community of St John Baptist continues to prod and open to that fullness of life, that land flowing with milk and honey in a riot of abundance, that cross-pollination of creation, as the lark sings: "always, always, always goes the Christ in the stranger's guise."^{iv}

The vocation of this Community is woven into meeting the stranger, whenever and wherever, in church and across the sea, knocking at the door in the middle of the night asking for shelter. Those of us who don't live in a convent likely expect that all is calm, tidy, and taken care of, though Valerie Bonham's books tell the details. Crisis comes to all – snow and hurricanes that block the roads and times the priest can't get there; fire in old New York buildings; cars that die in difficult weather; broken water pipes; naughty children; injuries and death. The changes and chances of life come to us all, and the sisters seem to manage the crises. There is a wideness in God's mercy they know how to call on – "all will be well, all will be well, all manner of thing will be well." The sisters' lives touch the world around you in ways that seep into anxious hearts and bring a greater peace, that "deep peace of the running wave, and the flowing air, and the quiet earth, and the shining stars – the deep peace of Christ."^v Holy crisis management looks like that – be not afraid!

In recent years, this Community met a living fire in Sr Jane Mankaa, insistent that orphaned children with AIDS are to be cherished, healed, adequately fed and educated, in poor and difficult circumstances. Her work in Cameroon, accompanied by Sr Mary Lynne, the Rev. Elizabeth Geitz, and many more, is yielding health and wholeness for those growing children and their neighbors. University students are thriving, older children teaching younger ones, and together, knowing and sharing the love of God within and abroad. We give thanks for her life and witness, fostered by this Community, which continues to bless and challenge the world.

The Community of St John Baptist is gifted not only in caring for God's people and creatures, but is also a remarkable gift of flexibility. The Sisters have made bold decisions both to take up new work and to lay ongoing work down. They've been able to discern the potential fruitfulness of new possibilities and when to pivot to other kinds and opportunities for ministry. Prayerful and careful discernment has been and continues to be immensely fruitful. That fruitfulness has a great deal to do with hope and the absence of fear – at least mostly!

May the loving faithfulness of the Community of St John Baptist continue to challenge the world around us; may these Sisters continue to be a beautiful and holy witness to God's love in human flesh. The "I" of this prayer seems an appropriate, ancient description of this loving Community:

I saw a stranger yestere'en;
I put food in the eating place;
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place;
And, in the sacred name of the Triune,
He blessed myself and my house,
My cattle and my dear ones,

And the lark said in her song,
Often, often, often,
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise,
Often, often, often,
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.

ⁱ Celtic *ambiactos*, messenger or servant.

ⁱⁱ Originally, Becca's Brook

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 1:31

^{iv} The Rune of Hospitality, traditional Celtic prayer. Kenneth Macleod, translated "Chunnaic mi coigreach an dé", Celtic Review, 7 (1911-1912); Cuala Press, 1910.

^v William Sharp (1855-1905)

The Rt. Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori