International Solidarity Reflection

School Sisters of Notre Dame

Shalom

The Strength of Women and Girls **March 2023**

Introduction

At the end of creation, God *made/built* a woman in God's image and likeness. The inspired Author used the same Hebrew verb that appears later describing *building* the altar to the Lord. Pope Francis points out that, "This is a society with a strong masculine attitude, lacking in a woman's touch. It is just that man does not bring harmony: woman brings harmony that teaches us to caress, to love tenderly, and makes of the world something beautiful. This is the future; this is what was missing. Woman comes to crown and bring harmony to creation." Pope Francis, 9 February 2017

School Sisters of Notre Dame follow Mary who was so united with God, so desirous that his will be done, that the Word could become incarnate through her (*YAS,* C 32). Pope Francis attests that "The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution of women through sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess…for example, the special concern which women show to others, which finds a particular, even if not exclusive, expression in motherhood." Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel,* 2013.

Call to Prayer

Triune God, open our hearts to Your guidance and inspiration. Direct our thoughts and actions toward You as we commit to work together to build possible and real paths of peace, freedom, and dignity. Fill us with Your power so that in Mary's spirit we may do whatever You tell us.

Experience

I have met many women who amaze me with their femininity, especially their motherhood, which is the fullness of womanhood. It is a woman's vocation, our feminine vocation. I am grateful to my mother for showing me what it means to be a woman, mother: faithful, courageous, humble, persistent, hardworking, and believing in God. Mom experienced war as a small child and lost her father. With her life, she showed me how to love and how to give life.

During the war in South Sudan, when the soldiers mobilized and enlisted young boys in the army, women became "soldiers" protecting their sons. "I knew I could die," Madam Rebecca shared with me. "I thought to myself that I had already experienced a lot. My son was just beginning his life." Rebecca was not even forty years old at the time of the war. She had just survived the death of her husband but remained faithful, peaceful and with a charming smile. She had survived this war, but what had she experienced? I did not ask. I did not dare. War is horrible. "Women bear the grief of war; carry the responsibility to provide for their families. Many of them live with the trauma of displacement, sexual violence and the daily fear of mistreatment in their own homes and communities…yet they are incredible women of strength, relying on God for their refreshment…." ~ Mrs. Caroline Welby, 5 February 2023.

Some women have stood strong with their heroic faith, virtue, and pointed to Jesus' heart. Mary's challenge at the wedding in Cana "...they have no wine…do whatever Jesus tells you." (John 2:5.) The Canaanite woman, "Yes Lord, even dogs eat scraps that fall from their master's table…" (Mathew 15:27) Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, Germany, Foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who longing for the oneness of all in God, grounded the congregation in Eucharist, struggled for unity and responded to urgent needs in wartime Europe. Caroline Friess, Germany, School Sisters of Notre Dame,

adapted the congregation to a new continent, North America, risking innovative responses to urgent needs (*YAS*, Prologue).

Other women have stood on the edge of darkness of every age, seeking light, spreading love, living hope, and giving life. Blessed Maria Antonina Kratochwil, Polish, School Sister of Notre Dame, a woman of humility, faith and courage, gave her life for the poor and the women imprisoned with her. Rose of Lima, Peru, Third Order of St. Dominic, Patron of South America, the Indies and Philippines, lived a life of austerity and care for the poor. Kateri Tekakwitha, Canada, patron of the environment and ecology. Jožefa Bojanc, Slovenia, Daughters of Divine Charity, martyred by the Chetniks during World War II. Josephine Bakhita, born in Sudan, a Canossian religious sister, abducted by Arab slave traders, left a legacy that transformation is possible through suffering. Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores, Honduran indigenous leader and environmental activist. Dorothy Stang, Brazil, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, brought faith and justice to the peasants of Brazil, teaching them to form communities, farm for their living, and defend their human rights. These women left a challenging legacy. How can we do less?

The strength of young women of our time inspires and challenges. Malala Yousafzai, Pakistani teenage activist against the prohibition of education for girls, survived an assassination attempt at age 15. In 2014, Malala and Kailash Satyarthi, India, were awarded jointly the Nobel Prize for Peace in recognition of their efforts on behalf of children's rights. Greta Thunberg, Sweden, confronted world leaders for doing little to confront climate crisis. She mobilized students through *Fridays for Future* and addressed the United Nations on climate crisis by calling leaders to reduce carbon footprint. Ridhima Pandey, India, has been involved in activism since the age of nine when she joined a lawsuit against the government of India for not meeting its obligations under the Paris agreement. She joined others in the UN complaint to accuse five governments of violating the Convention on the Rights of the Child. She is featured in The Letter Film.

Reflection

"…we work actively … to eliminate the root causes of injustice in order to realize a world of peace, justice, and love." (*YAS,* C 17) "That women in society must be involved in decision-making is not only right … but also for the specific insights women bring to the process. This "feminine genius" will prove most valuable … in the solution of the serious challenges the world is facing." Intervention by the Holy See at the General Assembly of the UN, 2007

- Listen deeply to what God is inviting you to do NOW to support women and girls.
- Reflect on our Laudato Si' congregational commitment and the Talitha Kum Network.
- How do I/we educate ourselves and respond to the needs of women and girls around us?

Action

- In what ways can I/we educate, advocate and act for the dignity of women and girls?
- What action/s are you/your community/ministry taking in relation to our *Laudato Si'* congregational commitment? How can you support the Talitha Kum Network activities?
- Engage in campaigns that defend women and girls, and work toward the respect of their rights, recognition of their contributions and their inclusion in decision-making.

Closing Prayer:

Triune God, we give ourselves to You anew. Help us in our daily life to give life and sustain it. Open us to You, to life in its beauty. Transform us in our pain. Giver of life, we bring to You all women, young and old. Guide, strengthen and protect them that they may protect the life entrusted to them. May they be safe, courageous and committed to the service of life. May they be humble and aware that every human life is Your gift. Amen.

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