

Reflection for Sutton Pilgrimage 2017

When I entered the community in 1958 in Bristol, Rhode Island, I did not even know the name of our foundress. I presumed we had been founded by Paul of the Cross or at least had a very strong connection to him. But the name Elizabeth Prout or Mother Mary Joseph, in my recollection was never mentioned in the 2 1/2 years of novitiate.

How strange not to know anything about your foundress! Probably a reason for that was that the cloud of the investigation that nearly dissolved the community was still hanging over the congregation. The sisters were told to keep a low profile about what had happened. And that seemed to have included passing on the life and legacy of Elizabeth Prout.

It was only after Vatican II instructed religious communities to go back to their roots that Elizabeth was literally dug up and the pieces of her life began to come together.

We have had to work at getting to know her because there are so few anecdotes, stories, exhortations on the spiritual life.

The fact that we have so little direct information about her - only nine letters - makes one think that her strength and the strength she left the congregation was not to follow her every word, because there are so few of them, but to follow her spirit.

And her spirit will inevitably lead us to the cross because that is where she found her strength and her mission.

She did not lay out a blueprint that was to be followed without deviation. I expect she must turn over in her grave whenever she hears one of her daughters saying "We have always done it this way."

Legacy of EP found in her groundedness in the reality of life.

Her spirituality was rooted in recognizing and accepting the will of God for her at any given moment in any given circumstance.

This was the spiritual force that permeated her life and that we must embrace wholeheartedly if we would do her the honor and love she deserves.

EP led us to the cross to find our way and our directions.

She led us to search within ourselves and our reality to see the will of God.

When EP died she left a small group, (around 12) of young, inexperienced religious to carry on the work she had begun. What must it have been like for Winifred Lynch at age 25 to become the superior general of this still fragile, small religious community. What must it have been like to suddenly become the leader of a religious community whose way of living religious life was not the norm of the day.

Today we are all where Winefred Lynch must have been the day EP died.

We, like she are bearers of a charism that is meant to continue. It is our task to articulate that charism and give it life and authenticity in this present day.

Near the end of her book "A Job in Jeopardy" Sister Barbara Sexton says of EP "the appeal of EP lies in her normality. She was no plaster-cast saint. She was a real person. She laughed, she cried, she was afraid, she was stubborn; she was sarcastic and confessed to a wicked temper. She had many bouts of serious illness. She loved to be free to chase hens and chickens and murmur sweet nothings to the cows. She liked fine things, she hated deceit and being under constant scrutiny. She juggled the responsibilities of housekeeper, teacher, trainer and working mother. That is about as realistic and practical a description of a foundress as you can get.

In the religious atmosphere of her time this would never have been the description of a holy person. There was a sense that to be holy meant going against the "flesh" and living on some rarefied spiritual plane.

Elizabeth grew in holiness in the day to day embracing the unfolding reality of the moment and seeing in it the will of God. She trusted the guidance of her spiritual guide, Fr Gaudentius. But even in her desire to be obedient, she struggled with what she was going through spiritually and the advice he was giving her.

She followed the inner voice of the spirit that at times led her to see her situation and that of the congregation with different eyes. Elizabeth's trust in God had to be rock solid when we reflect on some of the decisions she made for the good of the sisters, for the growth of the congregation. Sometimes she had to stand alone in these decisions.

Her road to holiness took her deeper into the reality of life in the moment. And she surrendered herself to it.

She knew what it was like to be questioned and chastised by her spiritual guide, betrayed by some of her sisters, her form of religious life questioned and criticized by local clergy.

But she was able to forgive and move on.

Without a very strong awareness of God active and present in every moment, in every situation, she would never have had the spiritual and emotional strength to continue.

When EP entered religious life, the community she joined, Sisters of the Infant Jesus, were typical of many religious communities of the time

Their way of life could be described as cloistered or semi-cloistered. They may have had boarding schools attached to the convent but the sisters did not venture far from the convent walls.

The ministry came to them. They did not go out to seek the ministry

The rule of life for these religious communities was modeled on that of cloistered religious communities. Many of these congregations were in the evolving stages from cloistered to active ministry. But in the mid 19th century their place in the church was still not defined.

This was the religious life that Elizabeth had experienced.

Yet when Gaudentius invited her to join him in founding a new religious order the model he proposed was completely different from what she had lived during her brief stay with the Sisters of the Infant Jesus.

His vision was that of a religious order composed of middle and lower class working women who would not be required to have a dowry, who would go out to work every day, wear street clothes, use public transportation and also carry out a full schedule of prayer, meditation and devotions in the convent.

If there was any precedent for this type of religious life it was not in the general vicinity of Sutton or Manchester.

Elizabeth accepted the challenge to be part of this new venture. She did not have a blueprint. She could not contact other religious orders to get some pointers. She took a leap of faith, stepped out of the security of the known, turned her eyes toward her God whom she believed with all her heart was leading her.

Elizabeth saw the tremendous need all around her – factory children without rudimentary education, women in need of basic housekeeping skills, a crying need for religious education at all levels. She saw clearly that this ministry would not come to her. She must go to the ministry.

In retrospect EP was a courageous visionary. Her vision was grounded in the reality in front of her. That is where and how she responded.

Today apostolic religious life is defined and has a status in the Church. Apostolic religious communities continue to provide tremendous service to the people of God throughout the world.

But apostolic congregations have reached a threshold. They are being invited to walk into an uncharted future.

We, EP's daughters, are on that threshold.

From all appearances Elizabeth's situation and that of our congregation today have very little in common

When she died the median age was probably somewhere between 25 and 30. Today the median age is north of 70.

All the sisters lived within in the same part of England, separated by walking distance

In 2017 the sisters are in nine countries on six continents – small groups in places our foundress had probably never heard of.

New candidates came regularly to the new congregation. Candidates today are few and far between

Elizabeth's untimely death was the seed that fell into the ground that would bear much fruit.

Is our diminishment today the seed that will bear much fruit tomorrow?

I believe it is. But if we are looking for a clear cut vision for our future we will be very disappointed. There is no more concrete clarity for us today than there was for Elizabeth. We will discover our direction for this time if we are willing to walk with open minds and receptive hearts.

Elizabeth has not abandoned us. She has not left us.

She encourages us:

1) to seek the will of God in the present moment.

We are encouraged to discern what our reality is telling us. We are part of a world in turmoil – a world that is in tension between the old order and an emerging global shift. What is our role – how are we called to minister in this dizzying, fast paced global community? The passionist charism is not our sole possession. It belongs to the church and the world. #51

Corporate mission of the members of the Congregation is to be prophets of the Paschal Mystery in the midst of the suffering of the world by witnessing to the reconciling, forgiving and compassionate love of God in terms which the world is able to understand. What does that mean today?

2)Recognize and utilize the gifts we have as individuals and a congregation

I have never seen this word connected with Elizabeth Prout but when I ponder her life I do believe she had the gift of creating harmony.

If all we know about Elizabeth were centered in St Paul's words to the Colossians in today's first reading it would be enough.

She lived compassion kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We see it in the relationships she had with the sisters, in her interactions with Gaudentius where her humility and patience must have been sorely tried and yet she continued to love him and honor him as her guide. And she was joyful! To the point where she was scolded by Gaudentius for laughing too loudly!

That is definitely one of our gifts as a congregation. We are a joyful, down to earth group of women.

I was always impressed by the fact that even though we wore the same habit and kept the same horarium every sister was her own person. The individual giftedness of each sister was affirmed.

Those virtues do not change with the passing of years. If we are going to be faithful to the legacy of our foundress these virtues are fundamental.

Young women who are attracted to religious life today will tell you that a primary reason is their desire to live in community which means to live in relationship.

The gift of religious life to the church is not so much in the ministries we do as it is in the way we live with one another. The world longs for harmony and peace. Our future may very well be determined on how we relate to one another and how we communicate that to the world in which we live.

3.Face the future with courage – don't be afraid to step out of comfort zone

In August we will have a gathering of sisters from all parts of the congregation. This will be another step in our commitment from the Chapter of 2014 to Walk Together With Hope into the future.

We do not know what will be the outcome of this gathering but we do know that the only way into the future is together- Botswana, Chile, Argentina, Australian, Viet Nam, England, Ireland, United State, Peru – all of us talking to one another sharing our hopes and dreams.

While this is exciting and life giving it is also unnerving. What will the congregation look like in 5 or 10 years. How will we live our mission in a world so dramatically different from what we have known?

We can only trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in the wisdom and trust of each of us and all of us as we take a courageous step into an unknown future.

The spirit of Elizabeth Prout is with us. Here is this sacred place it is palpable. And she is beckoning us to walk together, to trust the spirit within us – her spirit alive and active in this moment.

Let us rejoice in the privilege of being her daughters.

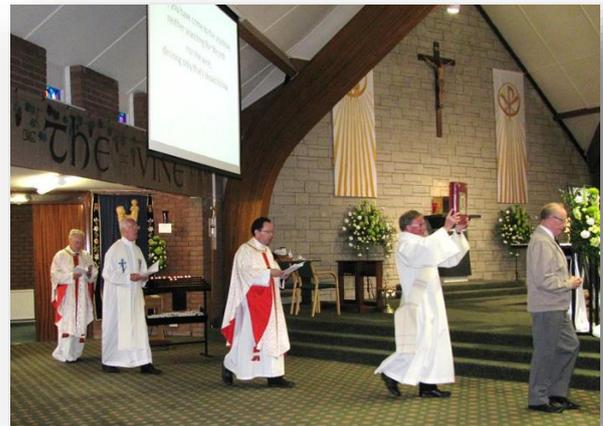
Sister Eileen Fucito CP
Congregational Leader

Some photographs of the day, taken by Sister Dominic Savio.



Pilgrims arriving at the Church of St Anne and Blessed Dominic, Sutton

The Entrance Procession for Mass in the Church of St Anne and Blessed Dominic, with Father Nicholas Postlethwaite CP as Chief Celebrant.



Pilgrims enjoying hospitality in the Parish Club after the Mass.