

Golden Jubilee Celebration
Sister Mary Elizabeth Cassidy, O.S.B.
St. Gertrude Monastery
Saturday September 10, 2005 – 11:00 AM

Mary Elizabeth Cassidy entered the convent the same year Disneyland opened in California. Today we know why she chose reality life in Ridgelyland, Maryland over fantasyland in Anaheim. 1955 was also the year James Dean was killed in an automobile accident and Rosa Parks ignited the Civil Rights movement by refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She probably traveled up the mile lane at the Plains humming the tune of the Mickey Mouse Club or a Patti Page song whose show was a hit that year on TV. She began her formation for religious life in the same year that Kevin Costner, Kelsey Grammer, Debra Winger, John Grisham, Yo Yo Ma, Bill Gates and Whoopi Goldberg were born. But, these celebrities did not deter her from staying focused on two more important people in her life, Benedict and Scholastica. Her heart was drawn more to holiness and a consecrated way of life rather than to actors, authors, musicians and founders of the .com world.

For 50 years her heart has belonged to a Benedictine rule of life where she has experienced an abiding peace and the goodness of God. These life-giving fruits inspired her to select the reading from the Old Testament book of Sirach. As a sage, or wisdom teacher, Sirach lived in Jerusalem and was devoted to living the Mosaic Law, and participating in divine worship. As a wise observer of life, he committed himself to mentoring others in seeking God's wisdom in the holy books and helping them maintain their religious faith. The two verses read from Chapter 50 were lines from a great prayer of blessing spoken by the high priest Simon, Son of Jochanan. The prayer blesses God who is the source of peace and joy of heart. These are the fruits of asking for wonder then letting God do wondrous things on earth. For 50 years Mary Elizabeth, as a Benedictine Sister, has made Simon's prayer her own. Today we rejoice with her that God's goodness has endured for the 50 years she has allowed God to fashion her into a servant of the consecrated life.

Her heart also belongs to Jesus Christ and the gospel of life. Her intimate relationship with the divine master is expressed in the image of the vine and the branches in St. John's gospel. John is teaching his community that Love is the principle of the relation between the Father to the Son. The same love has brought the Church into being and Jesus is encouraging the disciples to keep themselves worthy of the protection of his love. This is done by obedience to the will of Christ. Following his example means finding a joy that makes life complete.

This is a message in conflict with a culture that markets control over obedience. Anyone who stands against the culture is labeled “counter-cultural.” Mary Elizabeth Cassidy is counter-cultural. So is the Benedictine tradition of peace and justice in a culture that feeds on restlessness and greed.

This disparity between the religious and secular worlds reframes the vocational question from, is God calling you to religious life to, how is God calling you to be counter-cultural as a woman religious? How is God calling you to be different from all those who only seek to conform, to fit in, to be accepted? How is God calling you to be unique, to write your own label for life and not just wear one that says, “Made in China, or the Philippines.”

For fifty years Sr. Mary Elizabeth has worn a label that says, “Made by God and fashioned by Jesus Christ.” She has touched far more lives with this label than being fashioned by labels that read, Gucci, Christian Dior, Saks, Bloomingdales, etc.

The essayist John Rosten writes: “The function of life is not to be happy; the function of life is to matter --- to have it make a difference that you lived at all.” The Sufi masters tell a story that helps to clarify this call to make a difference.

Once upon a time --- among an ancient people --- an only child of a family of thread makers was orphaned. Wandering nomad weavers took the boy into their tribe for awhile but, for lack of means, eventually had to sell him as an apprentice to a family of shipbuilders. In their situation, the shipbuilders trained him to make masts. Mastmaking was a good trade, in great demand in this sailing town.

The young man liked the work; but years later, while on a business voyage for the mastmakers, this same young man --- once an orphaned spinner, once an abandoned weaver and now a satisfied mastmaker – was shipwrecked on a primitive island.

And in this place the people lived in wait for the fulfillment of a promise that God would some day send a foreigner who would help them save their religious treasures from ruin by the hostile environment. All other foreigners were to be rejected.

“Are you the one for whom we wait? Are you the one who will save our religious treasure?” they asked.

At that very moment the young man understood both his past and his future. He took the memory of his experience as a spinner of thread and made rope; he took the memory of his experience as a weaver and made cloth; he took the memory of his experience as a mastmaker and made long, strong, poles. And

out of all these memories, he fashioned the vision of a tent which saved the values of that people.

“Winds of Change” – Joan Chittister, O.S. B. – pp. 35-36.

Sr. Mary Elizabeth, thank you for fifty years of faith witness to the Benedictine rule of life and the gospel of Jesus Christ. You awaken us today to a new awareness of how important it is to remember the treasures of our past and imagine anew how to pass them on as values for the future.

As you celebrate today with the Cassidy family and the Benedictine family, make the Cantic of Life by Franciscan Sister Margaret Halaska your Cantic of Life:

Strong and sturdy years
Weak and wrinkled years
Smooth and silken years
Crushed and crinkled years

Gentle, gifted years
Dreary, desert years
Graceful, growing years
Fragile, flowing years

Happy, wholesome years
Torn and tested years
Worn and weary years
Sacred, simple years

A blessing cup of many years
Gift of the God who gives
JOY
To my life!