

Sr. Patricia Gamgort's 50th Anniversary
St. Gertrude Monastery – Ridgely, MD

Saturday October 14, 2006

Texts: Sirach 50:22-24 – 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 – Luke 1:45-55

There is a story about a mythical king named Clorain who was betrayed by an unfaithful wife. This distracted, hurt and upset him very much. As a result he becomes harshly distrustful of all women. So he decides, being king, that every day he will marry a different wife, but in the morning he will have her killed. And this becomes the rhythm of his life until one day he marries a clever woman named Scheherazade. She is quite determined to stay alive and the cycle of death should be broken.

So each evening as they retire she tells the king a fascinating story. But toward the end she grows so tired that she just can't finish the story and falls asleep, leaving the king in high anxiety and quite beside himself until he can hear the rest of the story the next day. So, of course he puts off her death. But each evening she starts another fascinating story. And so it goes for 1001 nights. In the long process Scheherazade changes and so does the king. He works through his issues of betrayal and hurt inflicted by women. And she falls in love with him.

Good stories provoke curiosity and compel repetition. A good story is like a secret; too good to be kept. For better or worse, the story must be told.

Part of celebrating religious jubilees is telling stories. They connect us with God, with the Jubilarian and with one another. They help us remember our past by bringing it into the present for the sake of envisioning our future life with God in eternity. These sacred stories remind us that through faith our life goes on, way beyond 1001 days and nights. The stories of Sr. Patricia Gamgort's religious life as a Benedictine Sister of Ridgely, spans 17,719 days and nights. Scheherazade should feel lucky she didn't have to spin that many stories.

Sr. Patricia's public love affair with Jesus Christ began during the Presidency of Dwight Eisenhower with her entrance into the community in 1955. Her final profession of vows occurred in 1960. The beginning of her new life as a Benedictine Sister was the beginning of the Age of Youth as 70 million children from the post-war baby boom became teenagers and young adults. Her regulated life of prayer and teaching began against the national landscape of cultural upheaval and Vietnam War protests.

She chose the authentic witness of Benedict and Scholastica over the plastic Barbie dolls and G. I. Joe's of your earlier days. She chose a simple black and white habit over go-go boots and Nehru jackets.

She was an educator when the release of author Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize novel *"To Kill a Mockingbird"* captured the turmoil of race relations in the country.

She was no doubt awakened to the environmental movement by the release of Rachel Carson's book, *"Silent Spring."* And as one who pledged a vow of poverty, she became aware of the consumer movement through Ralph Nader's book, *"Unsafe at any Speed."*

The seeds of her preferable option for peace over war were sown in her by the Creator God who gave her life. It was nurtured years later by the creation of the Peace Corps by President Kennedy in 1961. Her value of non-violence was no doubt influenced by Martin Luther King, Jr's "I have a dream speech" in 1963. And I have no idea how her imagination was influenced by Astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin's walk on the moon as part of the Apollo XI mission in 1969.

Sr. Miriam Ruth, who edited the recently published *"Tell It With Joy – A Narrative of the Sisters of St. Benedict"* gives testimony to these spiritual values in her on page 46.

"A never-to-be-forgotten day in the life of our Sisters in Rehoboth made the headlines in the Issue Number Two of 'The Dialog' for April 1962. "Someday" said a prominent lady at the Rehoboth resort, "I may forget this coastal storm and 7 ½ million dollar damage, but I'll never forget the sight of these Sisters from St. Edmond's, out serving coffee in the middle of all that rain and wind." The Atlantic Ocean had gone on a rampage and seemed determined to swallow the Delaware Coast. While the National Guard stood their ground, protecting whatever they could from the ravages of the storm, Srs. Leonard Sonntag, Jerome Toomey, Vincent Schroeder, and Theresa, a.k.a. Patricia Gamgort started their 'coffee rounds' in their station wagon, bringing some small measure of comfort to the struggling men."

While other parts of the diocese were going to a James Bond movie during that storm or dancing to the hottest selling song, "Mack the Knife," watching "Andy Griffith," "Star Trek," Twilight Zone," or "I Dream of Jeannie," on TV, Sr. Theresa Gamgort was in the storm zone serving Maxwell House Coffee to the National Guard because Starbucks wasn't even a dream then.

Her Prioress years saw the beginnings of the *Spring Benefit Weekend* for the Benedictine School in 1980, the creation of St. Martin's Barn in 1983 and the construction and dedication of this monastery chapel on the feast of St. Gertrude November 16, 1986.

All of the above is the stuff of the stories you share in common with Patricia as either a relative or a religious sister of St. Benedict. When these personal stories are brought into conversation with scripture stories then God enters our lives and the story telling takes on a sacred and eternal dimension.

The stories Sr. Patricia chose for this Jubilee liturgy speak about God entering the lives of the Jewish people in Palestine through the wisdom writer Sirach, God entering the lives of the Christian converts in Corinth through the witness of St. Paul and God entering the lives of the community founded by St. Luke through the Annunciation story.

Born and bred in Jerusalem, Sirach was a highly respected scribe and teacher, a man of culture who traveled and possibly served as an emissary to foreign courts. In later years he founded and ran a school imparting to youth his deep knowledge and love of the scriptures as well as the practical wisdom he had acquired in his experience.

One of Israel's great ancestor's was Simon II, a high priest, whose zeal for public worship stirred great devotion for Yahweh in the hearts of the chosen people. Sirach included Simon as one of the great hero's after the exile. The beautiful prayer in verses 22-24 were pronounced by the high priest only, as a blessing prayer over the people on the great Day of Atonement.

St. Paul developed his own style of greeting and blessing as expressed in his first letter to the Corinthians. It became his customized way to signify the gracious goodness of God and the gifts that are the effect of God's generosity. "Grace" is the gift God gives to all who were saved in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. "Peace" is the fruit of salvation God gives in Christ. This genuine "Peace" includes the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God as well as harmony with all humanity. These blessings, grace and peace are the desires of Paul's heart for the community he founded in Corinth. They are the essential blessings of Christianity. Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians to enjoy them because they are the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, and children of his father. In one respect this greeting was politically correct since the dissension and disharmony that had shattered their community will be the focus of his letter. By greeting them this way Paul hopes they will work toward the kind of harmony that exists between the heavenly father and son who are the source of their new dignity.

Finally, the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus in St. Luke's gospel concludes with Mary's song of Thanksgiving following the affirming way her cousin Elizabeth greeted her into her home. This poetic canticle expresses deep emotion and strong convictions. Similar in tone and style to the canticle of Hannah it extols the fruits of faith and of lowly dependence on God. There is a prophetic ring to Mary's words especially about God exercising power in caring for the needy. This poignant prayer is known as the Magnificat. It is Mary's way of making God look good.

In the fifth century the holy twins, Scholastica and Benedict, followed Mary's example and made God look good for people in Europe hungering for a more devout life. Their Magnificat was a rule of life for women and men called to

monastic living. In the 19th century, 1857 to be specific, Mary's Magnificat was expanded by the arrival of six Benedictine Sisters from Germany to Newark, NJ. It was embellished by the foundation of the convent at Sacred Heart Church in Wilmington in 1879 and the final verses were added with the establishment of St. Gertrude's Priory in Ridgely, MD in 1887. Sr. Miriam Ruth, in her narrative, *"Tell It With Joy,"* named the 102 Benedictine Sisters whose voices, from 1857 to 1980, have given testimony to the lyrics of the Magnificat as they were sung and lived here at The Plains.

Sr. Patricia's 50th anniversary during the sesquicentennial celebration of the Ridgely Benedictines is more than just coincidence. When viewed through the lens of faith and tradition it means the voices of the 45 Sisters not listed in Sr. Miriam's narrative must contribute to your communal life as a Magnificat. Compiling Volume II from 1980-2006 is my challenge to you. It should be a fitting memorial for your 150th year as well as a pledge of hope that Sirach's recognition of ancestors, St. Paul's call to grace and peace, and Mary's song of Thanksgiving will be the stuff of stories for those women who follow you as Benedictine Sisters and make your Magnificat their own as they lay the groundwork for the Bicentennial in 2056. Let the dreaming and writing begin so that the stories of God in your jubilees continue to be told and celebrated. Amen.