

Celebration of the Priesthood of Sr. Diane Stier

Homily on the Emmaus Story

The Gospel of Luke, written almost fifty years after the death of Jesus, is the result of years of reflection on community gatherings, stories about experiencing the presence of Jesus in the breaking of the bread, and of seeing Jesus, now the Christ, in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Emmaus story, the author of the gospel compresses this long growth in understanding in the context of a single afternoon. How beautifully Luke puts this ongoing discovery, this deep contemplative experience in the exclamation, “Were not our hearts burning within us?”

Each of us can experience the comforting drama of the Emmaus walk, especially if we have learned to live in the presence of God and have experienced prayer as a conversation. From Diane’s early attraction to Carmel through her growth into the beautiful contemplative woman we know today, contemplatives and their stories have been her companions. Teresa of Avila, in particular, has been an inspiration. Her definition of prayer as “a friendly conversation with the One whom we know loves us” has grown into a conviction that prayer is being present to the Presence within us.

Let me tell you about Diane’s relationship with my community. One day in 1967 the sisters in our monastery received a letter from twelve year old Diane Stier. She was very drawn to our way of life, she said, after reading several times the autobiography of an

American Carmelite Nun in Oklahoma City. We were interested and invited her to visit us. Some months later she and some friends came and attended Vespers in our chapel. At that time, the community was separated from the congregation by a large grate, and, we chanted the psalms in English, on one musical note. When we met with Diane and her friends after, they were clearly intrigued. The word that they used to describe Vespers was “weird.” It took me a while to realize that weird did not mean terrible! I was learning a new teen-age vocabulary!

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Her early attraction to Carmel gradually shaped her life. After getting her doctorate at Notre Dame, which included working for a while in ministry, she began to understand that she was called to be a contemplative presence; not in a cloister, but in the world, in service to others. Having met Linda Susan who had similar aspirations, they founded together the Emmaus Monastery where we gather today. Diane relates the name of their community to the death and resurrection experience she had in the change of the direction that had guided her for some ten years. Emmaus now embodies two great spiritual traditions, the Benedictine for Linda Susan and the Carmelite for Diane. As the years went on our community was to support and advise them in their efforts to be officially recognized in the Catholic Church.

For thirty years they have provided spiritual nourishment to many people and in many forms. They have hosted retreats, taught Bible studies, and supported reading groups, sponsored recollection days, and made themselves available to do spiritual direction. Being accomplished musicians, they have provided liturgical and music

ministry to the area for two decades. Diane has also been deeply involved in the life of parishioners, especially in times of illness and death. Her call to priesthood became very clear during this time. She wrote “I don’t feel God is calling me to something new, but to enter more deeply into that which God has already formed in me.” Diane’s discernment committee wrote to Bishop Wayne Houglund, “Diane has been following a star.”

The Emmaus story, which has clearly been the inspiration for this community and for Diane in particular, has a universal appeal and can speak to us about our own lives. As I have prayed and reflected on it for today’s celebration, three things came into focus for me: friendship with Christ, the newness of God, and the power of hope in our lives.

Jesus approaches the disciples on the road with a friendly inquiry about their experience and their feelings. In the ensuing conversation, he affirms their faith, shows how it flows from the Hebrew Scriptures, and opens new vistas of belief for them. When he responds to their invitation to stay the night and breaks bread with them, they are lifted from their suffering and energized by this friendship. In the ups and downs of each day, when we turn toward God in friendship and prayer, we can find ourselves being gently freed from attachments and prejudices; being more compassionate to family and friends; and more open to those with whom we come in contact. In this conversation with God we may feel like we are talking to ourselves, but we should recall Teresa’s necessary condition for contemplative prayer: determination. And somewhere along the line, in Teresa’s words, “He will let you know that he has heard you.”

The mission of Jesus for these travelers and for us is newer and deeper understanding of Scripture and the traditions of the church. The documents of Vatican II talked about “ongoing revelation” saying “The tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit as there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and words which have been handed down. [Deeper understanding] happens through the contemplation and study made by believers who treasure these things in their hearts.” Furthermore, this process calls for structures of discernment which are part of the Episcopal Church, and have made the ordination of women to the priesthood possible today.

On the road to Emmaus Jesus addressed the mystery of suffering in our lives by relating it to Christ whose suffering made it possible for Him to “enter into his glory.” Companionship with Christ helps us to see that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work within us and grounds the virtue of hope in us. Hope has nothing to do with a predictable future, but everything to do with the confidence that God joins us in our struggles and gives meaning to them. Seen in the light of hope, we trust that what we suffer is worth being part of. John of the Cross says that hope keeps us in the present moment, not obsessing about the past or anxious about the future, but staying in the here and now, the only place the divine/human encounter can happen.

Let me close with the words of a song written by Diane and Linda Susan.

God will take us where we dare not go.

We follow, ever on the road to God,

Trusting in your faithfulness.

For God is all and everything

Trusting in you we follow with our lives

A road we do not know.

On this wonderful day, “Are not our hearts burning within us?”

Sr. Jean Alice McGoff, OCD

Carmelite Sisters

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