

## Founders' Day Homily, Nov. 10, 2020

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“She is a valiant woman; her roots are firmly planted.  
The kingdom is within; her heart, treasure-filled.”  
- Proverbs 31:10

As we celebrate Founders' Day, I am particularly drawn to our valiant woman, our co-founder, Theresa Maxis. In recent weeks, I've heard it mentioned that we are spiritual daughters of Theresa. I find myself wondering what Theresa's words would be to us today, as her daughters, as the ones who carry on the legacy of our founding. In order to get a perspective on what this might be, I spent a morning in Archives and listened to the voices of Sister Maria Alma Ryan from West Chester, Sisters Immaculata and Margaret Gannon from Scranton and Sisters Rosalita Kelly, Rose Matthew Mangini and Connie Supan from Monroe. Their research gave me a glimpse into what Theresa might be saying to us today.

We know that Theresa feared for the future of religious life when she was with the Oblate Sisters of Providence and aware of the uncertainty for the future and the economic insecurity of the institute. Some have said that she “left the ship in a storm.”

My reflection is far from a lesson in history. Rather, I offer the insights I had as I reviewed documents that gave me a window into Theresa's life, a window that we all have looked through so many times. As I held in my hands the journal Theresa wrote when requested to share her thoughts about the founding of our community, I felt a strong connection to our co-founder. Theresa did not make any reference to her birth or lineage. Some of her early writings, however, indicate that Theresa's life was tragic, filled with trials and conflicts, particularly those that were the result of birth and lineage.

But Theresa tells us in her own words that she had decided her focus would be on the congregation's rootedness in the Redemptorist heritage. In one early history, it was noted that Theresa was a “blond child who had developed into a dark-haired, blue-eyed woman of very clear complexion.” We have come to know, however, that Theresa was a woman of mixed blood, who passed for white. And we know that Theresa told another Oblate Sister of Providence, Sister Stanislaus, that she could not join her in Monroe and in the formation of the new community because her color was too dark.

I find myself wondering why it took us more than 150 years to claim Theresa as our co-founder. It is interesting that at the celebration of our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we were confronted with the truth that Theresa was of mixed Black and white blood yet chose not to acknowledge that fact. As Theresa passed for white, have we relied, perhaps subconsciously, on our white privilege as we have lived the IHM mission over the years? The call to us today is to grapple with and address systemic racism in new ways.

Theresa, as noted by the research, was light-skinned, intellectual and had administrative gifts that gave her access to a world denied to people of color. While we

have ministered in the urban areas, reached out to the poor, the captives, the blind and prisoners, have we done so from our place of advantage? A few weeks ago, the PBS documentary, *Driving While Black*, made me acutely aware of some of the advances in society that seemed to benefit all of us, but in reality created a chasm between white people and people of color. One can say that the motivation was such that there was concern for all people. Yet, I find myself being called to the invitation to go deeper into my journey, the journey of our IHM community and to look through new eyes.

Today we once again turn to the Gospel reading that has been foundational for us. It is the reading where Jesus, who is beginning his ministry, refers to the prophet Isaiah who had a hope for the restoration of Israel, a new beginning of sorts. Can we commit on this Founders' Day to restoration of right relationships among all people? Theresa's journey was such that she was able to assimilate, to fit into the French-speaking world that seemed not open to people of color. The call at this time is to make the journey into our world of white privilege, a world that has been advantageous to us over many years.

In Assembly '87, we adopted a feminist perspective, one in which we would commit to educate ourselves and then operate from that understanding. Under Dorothy McDaniel's leadership, the Claiming Our Roots project was put into place and gradually we came to realize that we needed to claim our roots and own Theresa Maxis as our co-founder. At the Chapter of 2000, we acknowledged the historic truth of Theresa's role in our congregation.

Sister Maria Alma Ryan, in her history written in 1941, expresses the "hope that together we may achieve a true interpretation of [Theresa] as a valiant woman." Theresa was a valiant, joyful, patient, loving and sharing woman. She continues to give her gifts and treasures to us today. In the direction of the 2000 Chapter we read, "We draw on Theresa's qualities of vision, her trust in Divine providence and we embrace the challenges of our own time." Today, while there are many challenges, it is clear that one that is before us is working to eradicate systemic racism. The challenge of that journey begins with each of us.

As we move forward with the implementation of our 2018 Chapter Direction, let us realize that all is connected. We are called to enter more deeply into the liberating mission of Jesus Christ as we come to understand it anew through the mystery of the Sacred Universe, responding to the challenges of our beautiful yet fractured world. We committed ourselves to the transformation of relationships, structures and systems that perpetuate discrimination. Over these 175 years, we have worked to "bring glad tidings to the poor; to proclaim liberty to captives; recovery of sight to the blind; and release to prisoners." I feel that the call from Theresa today is to address systemic racism, beginning with the journey ourselves, within our community and working with others to transform structures on many levels. Like the valiant woman described in Proverbs, Theresa gave her gifts and treasures to the community founded on Nov. 10, 1845, and she gifts us with them today. Let us work together so that one day we can proclaim that "the Scripture passage is fulfilled in our hearing."