

Reflection

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Monica Stuhlreyer

As I was preparing for sharing some thoughts about our co-founders today, I realized it has been 177 years since Fr. Louis Florent Gillet, a Belgian Redemptorist missionary, met the three women in St. Mary's Church for mass after which he invited them to the altar rail, rested his stole on each of them for a moment. This signified their cooperation in the work of the Church.

Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin, Charlotte Shaaf and Theresa Renaud were the first three sisters in what would be the Sisters, Servants of the IHM. History tells us that they were able to speak French to a heavily French settlement in Monroe at the time. They were invited by Gillet to start a young women's academy, which began in January 1846.

Reading *No Greater Service* by Sr. Rosalita Kelly, IHM of Monroe, and *I Desire to be Everywhere* by Gilbert Enderle, CSsR, as well as *Paths of Daring, Deeds of Hope* by Margaret Gannon, Scranton IHM give an intriguing story of the next years of the lives of these co-founders.

Fr. Gillet came to Monroe with other Redemptorists in 1844. Later, with the perspective of years of spiritual journey, he described of himself as "a young priest full of zeal, but perhaps indiscreet zeal, **without experience of the ways of God.**"

He was very active, having many missions in the area and its surrounding parishes. He gave retreats, preaching on temperance, often going from place to place on horseback. He built an addition on the Church, renamed St. Mary's, built living quarters for the Redemptorists, made friends with many families, and was trying to make better accommodations for the Sisters. All went well it seemed until 1847 when he was falsely accused of improprieties. As a result, he left Monroe and this led to years of misunderstandings with his own Redemptorist superiors. This period of conflict and doubt lasted from 1847-1855. And it finally led to his request for dispensation and leaving the Redemptorist order. He wandered about, working in some of the major cities, New York, Illinois, Ohio, New Orleans, Philadelphia for years.

In 1855 he returned to Belgium to seek readmission to CSsR but got a negative reply. So, in 1857 he left by ship for South America, but returned after 4 mos. He

then sought entrance into a Cistercian Abbey in France where he remained until his death in November 1892. In 1929 his remains were brought to Monroe.

And then there was Theresa Maxis, who came to Monroe at the invitation of Gillet, hoping to be part of true religious life (leaving behind an institute that didn't seem to have a future after the death of its priest director.

When Fr. Gillet departed in 1847 there was still Redemptorist support, but alas they pulled out of Monroe in 1855 because of illness and lack of finances.

Redemptorist ties were critical to Mother Theresa as she saw the Alphonsian spirituality essential to the charism of the IHM congregation. So, the departure of the Redemptorists had serious consequences for Mother Theresa:

- 1) Bishop Lefevre of Detroit was angry at the CSsr pullout, so he wanted to eliminate any of their contact with IHM, so he appointed a diocesan priest, Fr. Edward Joos, as superior and director of the community
- 2) This meant Mother Theresa was replaced as superior.
- 3) She saw a move to PA under Bishop John Neumann, Redemptorist, to return IHM to Redemptorist influence. She did get permission for one mission, but when pressed for more, Fr. Joos got the Bishop to permanently dismiss her from Monroe.
- 4) Then she tried to bring the whole community to PA and as a result Bishop Lefevre split the community into Monroe and those in PA.
- 5) Mother Theresa tried to reconcile with Bishop Lefevre but he refused.
- 6) Thinking she could do better from a neutral place, she sought the hospitality of the Gray Nuns of Ottawa.
- 7) For 17 years she stayed there, hoping to be able to return to IHM but it was only in 1885 that she was finally permitted to return to IHM congregation in Philadelphia by the new bishop there. Imagine the suffering she experienced in this exile. Reading the letter in ***Paths of Daring, Deeds of Hope*** give us a true insight into the pain in her heart.
- 8) She died 7 years later and is buried at Immaculata, PA

Reviewing all that both our co-founders suffered in their desire to serve God and the Church made me think of Pope Francis words this week, in his book, *The Gospel of Luke*: “**O Lord how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen...**” I imagine both Gillet and Mother T. must have prayed those words often crying out: “**O Lord how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen..**”

Gillet thought his missionary work was building up the faith of many, and yet he was plagued by conflicts and misunderstanding from 1847-1857, years of doubts and restlessness...asking “What do you want of me, O God?”

And Mother Theresa, —her desire to keep the Alphonsian charism alive in the IHM Community and the actions she took to make that happen, got her into trouble with the Bishop of Detroit and PA and caused a split in the congregation.

I think Pope Francis’ words help us get in touch with “the ways of God” that Gillet was talking about when he described what was missing in his zeal.

Pope Francis reminds us: God in response to the plea of our prayers, does not intervene directly, does not resolve the situation in an abrupt way, and God does not make God’s presence known by a show of force.

Rather, God invites patient waiting, without ever losing HOPE, above all, God emphasizes the importance of seeing things with the eyes of FAITH.

**In our time**, even as we deal with the election results, God treats us in the same way. God doesn’t indulge our desire to change our world and other people immediately.

Instead, God intends primarily to heal the heart, my heart, your heart, and the heart of each person.

God changes the world by transforming our hearts. God wants us to open the door of our hearts, so that God can enter our lives.

And this act of opening to God, this TRUST in God is “precisely” the victory that conquers the world, our Faith, for when God finds an open and trusting heart, God can work wonders there!

God has worked wonders for us in this community, despite the flaws of our dear co-founders. As we look at their struggles, may we too grow to “experience the ways of God.”