

Reflection for February, 2022

Theme: Consecrated Life

THE HOUSE AT REST

*On a dark night
Kindled in love with yearnings —
Oh, happy chance! —
I went forth unobserved,
My house being now at rest.
— St. John of the Cross*

How does one hush one's house,
each proud possessive wall, each sighing rafter,
the rooms made restless with remembered laughter
or wounding echoes, the permissive doors,
the stairs that vacillate from up to down,
windows that bring in colour and event
from countryside or town,
oppressive ceilings and complaining floors?

The house must first of all accept the night.
Let it erase the walls and their display,
impoverish the rooms till they are filled
with humble silences; let clocks be stilled
and all the selfish urgencies of day.

Midnight is not the time to greet a guest.
Caution the doors against both foes and friends,
and try to make the windows understand
their unimportance when the daylight ends.
Persuade the stairs to patience, and deny the passages their aimless to and fro.
Virtue it is that puts a house at rest.
How well repaid that tenant is, how blest
who, when the call is heard,
is free to take his kindled heart and go.

- **Jessica Powers**

This poem by American poet and Carmelite nun, Jessica Powers aka Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit, takes on from St John of the Cross's famous lines, and seeks to answer the inevitable question of how does one hush one's house, or in other words centre one's life and find that sacred silence. And yet, doesn't the idea of tearing

down walls, impoverishing the rooms, cautioning the doors seem the complete antithesis of what their purpose is in the first place? After all, walls are meant to be built, rooms meant to be filled and doors meant to allow people in. Perhaps this is exactly what the Consecrated Life is all about. It is like a boat in the sea that dares to sail *against* the current. And sail it does, because the wind that fills its sails are not of Nature but of that *Great Wind* that blows where it wills.

Against the current

Consecrated Life is, in essence, an answer to what the world has considered 'normal', 'expected', even 'essential' for life. According to psychologists, there are three basic needs in Life. Abraham Maslow, the American Psychologist depicted this in the form of a triangle explaining the hierarchy of needs. At the base of the triangle, is the very basic human need- self-preservation- herein lies our need for food, water, clothing and shelter to survive.

A little higher in this triangle lies our need to be in connection with each other- intimate relationships, family, friendships. These are the psychological needs required by every human being. Moving on higher in the triangle and at its very peak is self-actualization. This is the need to live to our highest potential, to be at our creative best.

Interestingly, the three evangelical counsels or vows of poverty, chastity and obedience take on the three basic human needs and invert them. It is not a natural form of life but a supernatural one. It cannot be understood by intellect nor do they neatly fit into the expectations of society, but they show the world in their very living- that the basic need for human life is not even bread or water, but a hunger for God (vow of poverty), the most fulfilling of all relationships is not the one with a spouse or a family but with God (vow of chastity), and the highest potential we can ever reach is not in discovering our own heights but in discovering ourselves in Him (vow of obedience).

And yet, it is this going against the norm, this standing out in appearance, in choices and in lifestyle, that becomes a meeting point for the 'consecrated' and the 'world' and an opportunity to be a witness in the least expected ways. Sr Mary Judith Ezeogu of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ states how "many people are delighted to see religious sisters; they feel a kind of hope and sense of security when they see a sister. Giving them a listening ear encourages them to share the stories of their lives. I will always remember a personal encounter with a little girl of about 8 years who asked me to help her cross a highway. I was touched. I marvelled at her trust and manner of approach. Of course, I helped her across the road and prayed for her safety."

Sometimes people look up to sisters for more challenging and pressing needs. Sr Mary goes on to narrate "On one occasion, I was riding in an ambulance with a

sick person when a paramedic told me he couldn't fathom why God would allow the suffering of innocent children, which he saw many times in the course of his duties. I think the discussion about God and his strange ways may have occurred because he knew I was a sister.”

Has a stranger ever approached you simply because they knew you were a sister? How has your experience of 'looking different' been?

The relevance of Consecrated Life

Some years ago, I met a middle-aged Religious at a National gathering and we started talking about the work we do. A few minutes into our conversation, she confessed that she felt lay people working in the Church was the way forward. She, in fact, wondered about the relevance of the consecrated life in today's world when there was “so much more one can do as a lay missionary.” While I would have liked to debate it, I sensed a sadness in her voice which conveyed something about her personal journey and *that* could not have been debated. However, in the years following, I have felt this feeling of purposelessness or pointlessness of the sacrifice of one's entire life, creep into the minds of many Religious, as they consider the many possibilities, the many “what ifs...”

True, there *seems* to be more freedom and more joy in the lives of lay missionaries, who, *on the surface of things*, are doing everything and more than the Religious are doing. But who can ever measure the good that hours spent in front of the Blessed Sacrament have brought about? Who can ever know the lives blessed because one young girl decided to sacrifice the joy of attending her sister's wedding or the birth of a nephew or being at the side of her parents when they breathed their last? Who is to know how many young people received the gift of modesty because one sister wore the same colour all her life? Who is to know how many children's lives were moulded because one young woman forgoes her dream of becoming a mother? Who is to know how it all adds up?

And yet, if we, in a moment of doubt or sadness or regret, ever wonder if it makes a difference, may this incident bring us hope. One of the visionaries of Medjugorje, Jakov Čolo, who was only 10 when he along with 5 other children first saw our Lady or ‘Gospa’ as they address her, narrates this incident of how Gospa encouraged him to pray as often as he could. When little Jakov said he didn't know how to pray, Gospa encouraged him to say short prayers like *Lord have mercy on me, Lord help me, Lord take me closer to Jesus* and the *Hail Mary!* One day Jakov, who loved playing football, was running in the field when he remembered that he hadn't prayed that day. Mid-field, he stopped and quickly said a *Hail Mary*. He felt bad about his hurried prayer but he tried to say it as earnestly as he could. That evening when Gospa appeared to him and said “Thank you, Jakov for praying today.” Jakov was embarrassed about his hurried prayer but she continued “Come,

let me show you what I could do with your *Hail Mary*.” At that moment, Jakov could see a Chinese man who was on his death bed. Gospa told him that this man was supposed to go to hell because of his many sins, but with his *Hail Mary*, she interceded with the Lord, and he had been saved from the fires of hell. Jakov went on to say how his entire life changed through this incident. He realised the power of what one *Hail Mary* could do!

Perhaps we may never have the privilege of knowing, on this side of eternity, what our sacrifices, our calling, our prayers, our life has brought to the kingdom, and perhaps it is better so, lest we give in to pride or our motives change. Yet, we must believe that it all somehow adds up, makes sense and makes good in Heaven!

Hushing our Houses

While the rest of the world is busy decorating and furnishing their lives, it is for the consecrated heart to make our lives as minimal as we can - thus making room for the Guest.

Jessica Powers in her poem uses the imagery of the house with the *proud*, *possessive* walls, the *sighing* rafters, the rooms that are *restless* with either or both - the memory of bygone happy days or the wounds that still linger on. Interestingly both our pleasant and unpleasant memories, when they linger longer than they ought, leave the soul restless and thus unprepared for the Beloved. Even the echoes of the past are *wounding* and need to be silenced. The permissive doors are perhaps those moments when we have lost discretion and allowed too much of the world to enter in, or may be even lost the graces we had. The stairs, like our mood or the condition of our soul, keeps oscillating up and down, the windows are the many distractions we allow ourselves through the day. The *oppressive* ceilings, the *complaining* floors are all imageries that can help us look into our heart and better gauge the changes we need to make to welcome a more intimate life with the Beloved.

Questions for Reflection-

- Has your perception of Consecrated Life changed from before you entered the Religious Life and now?
- When we think of the imagery used in the poem- which among the describing words- proud possessive, sighing, restless, wounding, oppressive, complaining etc. do you connect with? Which of these would you like to be rid of in order to hush your house?