



Thoughts on the Journey...

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You could see her from several blocks away. Her white veil glistened in the sun and floated on the breeze that her quick gait created as she walked the streets in Claxton, Georgia. She walked with purpose as though her mission depended on every step and her shoes sported the miles of her journey. As I approached her in my red Datsun B-210, I asked her again, as I did every time I saw her walking, "Hi, Sr. Marilyn! Would you like a ride?" She interrupted her mission long enough to lean in my car window to respond as she always responded, "No thank you, dear." Today she added, "Will you stop by the convent later? I have some things I've saved for you to use at the Bible School in Pembroke." We both worked for the Catholic Glenmary Mission parishes in three rural towns west of Savannah. As she spoke, I noticed her 76 year old hands folded along the top of my car door and couldn't help but think how many people they have touched. We said our farewells and as she resumed her walk toward town, I sat and watched her in my rear-view mirror for a moment reflecting on the strength of her gentleness. In that moment of reflection, I remember marveling at what a tremendous influence she had in the community that had such suspicion and disdain for Catholics. She was fearless! What was it about this beautiful servant of God that cut through the Bible Belt barriers that separated fundamentalist Christian traditions from Catholics? What did they see in her that opened their hearts and let her in? Quite simply, the barriers were invisible to Sr. Marilyn. She didn't let anyone or anything stand in the way of her mission. She didn't allow other people's biases stop the flow of her love. She was as beautiful on the inside as her white veil was on the outside. She flat out refused to buy into the territorial notion that "my God is better than your God". Sr. Marilyn wasted nothing and used everything: pieces of string, old rosaries, holy cards, mail promotion items, lids of all sizes, old pantyhose... you name it and she collected it. She didn't collect it to possess it, she collected things to use in her mission of service to others. She walked everywhere because she believed that she would miss opportunities to speak to people along the way if she was in a car. Every morning, she set out on foot with her little bag of holy pictures, small statues of saints, unopened mints, and made an effort to talk to everyone along her way. In conversation, she would learn about people's lives and offer to pray for their concerns. At the end of their encounter, she would reach into her bag and give them a token of their visit. If I saw a statue of St. Michael the Archangel on the bank cashier's register, or a holy picture of St. Ann taped to a bedside table at the nursing home, or a tiny framed picture of the Sacred Heart on the desk at the insurance company, it was a clear sign that Sr. Marilyn was there. Everyone loved her, whether they were Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, or Catholic, because she literally met people where

they were and as they were. She conducted 'church' on the street, in stores, the bank, wherever she was; her church had no walls and no rules that put division between those she served and God. Her creed was bound by the moment and whatever God was calling her to do in her encounters. She was more concerned with the will of God than what any one faith tradition thought of her.

In the gospel of Mark this Sunday, Jesus addresses his disciples who he had commissioned to proclaim the Kingdom of heaven. In preparation for their mission he instructed them three times, "Do not fear". Jesus knew what challenges lied ahead for his disciples and fear, in the face of those challenges, would cause failure of discipleship. Jesus assured them that their persecutors could destroy the body but never the soul. He said to them,

"So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father."

The Church's catechetical document on Evangelizing in the Modern World states, "... the true meaning of evangelization is the proclamation of the love of God that comes to us through Christ Jesus...For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new". The transformation of evangelization begins within each of us first so that what comes from us to others brings unity among Christians.

Sr. Marilyn never compromised her commitment to the teachings of the Catholic Church, but in her dealings with people, she didn't draw attention to the differences. She always looked for common ground and began her encounters there. She trusted in God's providence. She took the time to be present to people. She was more eager to listen than she was to talk. In her quiet, unassuming way, Sr. Marilyn did wonders for people's perception of the Catholic Church in that community because of the Gospel of love that was rooted in her heart. She did not fear those who would attack her or those who had disparaging views of the Church; she did not let them distract her from her mission to bring people to Jesus. Instead she kept Christ at the center of everything she did. Her heart was pure and she had a steadfast spirit.

We are ALL called to fearlessly spread the love of God. In order to evangelize and not defile or pollute the love of God, we must first look within and make sure that what is coming from our inside is drawing people to God, rather than away from him. Let's go spread the Good News!