“Gather Us In” 2009  
Saturday, November 7, 2009

“The Triumph of Forgiveness-Sharing Stories of Compassion”

Nearly 800 women from around the Worcester Diocese and beyond gathered at the DCU Center in Worcester, MA on Saturday, November 7, 2009 for the Gather Us In Conference. Women enthusiastically prayed, sang, laughed, cried and fellowshipped together during keynote addresses, workshops and liturgy at the end of the day.

Paula D’Arcy is one of the keynote speakers at the Nov. 7 women’s conference, “Gather Us In, 2009.” Her story is how faith and forgiveness transformed a cruel event into a catalyst for a productive and fulfilling life. The title of her talk is, “Great Lessons from the Journey.”

Paula is a native of Massachusetts. She is a writer, public speaker and retreat leader. Paula shared her experiences and the importance her faith had in shaping her approach and outlook towards life. In 1975, Ms. D’Arcy was a young mother, building a family with her husband. They had a 21-month-old daughter, Sarah, and they were expecting another child. Their world was a warm bubble of happiness until one terrible day. A driver, impaired by drinking, crashed into their car killing the young husband and daughter. The mother was left, bereft and alone save for the unborn baby.

Paula brings her training as a psychotherapist to her writing and speaking. As an author she has inspired many through the gift of her written words. In what is perhaps her most self-revelatory book -- –Gift of the Red Bird – Paula writes of the impact a car crash and the resulting deaths of her young husband and daughter, Sarah, had on her life. Of that book, Joyce Rupp says, “It is a powerful testimony of how the Divine woos the soul into a sacred embrace.”

Since 1999, Paul has worked with women teachers in Lithuania to help foster growth and learning for children. The Red Bird Foundation, founded by Paula, has been instrumental in creating programs for children in that country. The foundation has expanded its missions and has become a means of touching the hearts and lives of those who have limited resources and/or little hope. In 2007, Paul D’Arcy, as president of the Red Bird Foundation sponsored a three-day conference entitled Womenspeak held at the San Antonio, Texas Convention Center. Speakers were both multicultural and multigenerational. Proceeds from this conference benefited Paula’s foundation and the many persons assisted by the foundation.

Among other books, Paula is the author of A Song for Sarah, When People Grieve, Red Fire, Sacred Threshold and Waking Up to This Day. In more than twenty-seven years of public speaking, Paula has addressed
audiences from every major religious background and has led retreats and conferences on both national and international levels. Included among these are sessions with Native Americans from both the Cherokee and Oglala Sioux nations as well as seminars with Palestinian women. At a seminar sponsored by Johnson Wax held in Barcelona, Spain, Paula met with international women participants for discussions on grief, loss, and the transformation of pain. As a consultant to the Peale Center as well as at the Methodist Publishing House in Nashville, Tennessee, Paula led grief seminars for employees and participated in the creation of books on parenting. Paula has also lectured for Hospice in several Austrian towns. In addition, she maintains a ministry to prisons where she helps inmates cope with grief and pain.

Today Paula D’Arcy is an internationally known speaker and writer traveling to many parts of the world to bring her counsel to people in need. She travels widely in the United States, Canada and abroad. Her work now includes leading workshops and retreats related to spirituality, aspiring writers and women’s gatherings.

Ms. Ilibagiza was one of the keynote speakers at Gather Us In, 2009, the fifth biennial women’s conference of the Diocese of Worcester. Immaculée spoke of the saving power of her faith and how that faith led her to both inward and outward forgiveness.

Immaculée’s life was transformed dramatically during the 1994 Rwandan genocide when she and seven other women spent 91 days huddled silently together in the cramped bathroom of a local pastor’s house. Immaculée entered that bathroom a vibrant 115 pound university student with a loving family. She emerged weighing just 65 pound to find her entire family had been brutally murdered (with the exception of one brother who had been studying out of the country). She credits her survival mostly to prayer and to a set of rosary beads given to her by her devout Catholic father prior to going into hiding. Rather than succumbing to the rage and resentment that she felt in such horrific circumstances, she instead turned to prayer. She began to pray the rosary as a way of drowning out the negativity that was building inside her. Through prayer she eventually found it possible to forgive her tormentors and her family’s murderers. In addition to prayer, Immaculée utilized some of her time in that tiny bathroom to teach herself English with only the Bible and a dictionary.

Once freed, because of the English she learned, she was able to secure a job with the United Nations. After immigrating to the United States in 1998, she continued her work with the United Nations. Her co-workers and friends insisted she write about her experiences. The resulting manuscript was “Left to Tell”. Dr. Wayne Dyer, within minutes of meeting Immaculée, offered to publish her book. Dyer is quoted as saying, “There is something much more than charisma at work here. Immaculée not only writes and speaks about unconditional love and forgiveness but she radiates it wherever she goes.” Her first book, Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust was released in March of 2006. It became a New York Times Best Seller, leading to a documentary of her story entitled The Diary of Immaculée. Numerous media appearances followed publication of her story including interviews on 60 Minutes, CNN, EWTN, The Aljazeera Network and USA Today to name a few. Immaculée has received honorary doctoral degrees from the University of Notre Dame and Saint John’s University. She has been recognized and honored with humanitarian awards including: The Mahatma Gandhi International Award for Reconciliation and Peace and the American Legacy’s Women of Strength and Courage Award. Immaculée is regarded as one of the world’s leading speakers on peace, faith, and forgiveness. Her Left to Tell Charitable Fund directly benefits the children orphaned by the genocide.

She is also a woman who realizes that, as horrifying as her ordeal was, she is not the only person who has lived through painful circumstances. Her fame is as a survivor, but she doesn’t want to be the star survivor, she said. She wants to be just one of many people who suffered and struggled and found a way. “When I speak in Rwanda about being in the bathroom so long, I know there are women who were raped over and over again and contracted AIDS,” she said. “I want to be just a survivor, not highlighted.” But she is a star. Ms. Ilibagiza has taken her experience and the transforming effect it had on her life and has articulated in books and words her extraordinary response. She has brought encouragement and hope to people who were mired in seemingly insurmountable problems. She has found a way to make something good come out of pain.