Secretaries Day 2013 – Thursday, April 25

Each year the Commission for Women celebrates the work and contributions by our parish secretaries with a luncheon, communal prayer and an inspirational speaker. This article, which ran in the May 10 edition of the Catholic Free Press, was compiled by Joan Talbot, Susan Bailey and Carolyn Black of the Commission with photos by Shirley Pukaite.

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SHREWSBURY – St. Anne’s Parish in Shrewsbury was host to the 17th annual Secretaries’ Day held on Thursday, April 25 and sponsored by the Commission for Women of the Diocese of Worcester. Held in the Father Smith Center, some 30-40 parish secretaries gathered on a beautiful Spring day to celebrate mass, partake of a delicious lunch, pray together and enjoy an inspirational talk by presenter Patty Patenaude of Time Out Retreats ministry.

The secretaries were greeted with lovely tables adorned with flowers and yellow and blue décor, and an exhibition of eight floral paintings created by Commission member Brunhilde Luken. An author as well as an artist, Mrs. Luken brings the inspiration of her own spirituality to both her paintings and her poetry.

Shirley Pukaite, treasurer of the Commission facilitated the day, welcoming those attending and introducing Mrs. Luken who delivered her poem, “You Are Mine” as an opening prayer.

Speaker Peggy Patenaude, was introduced by Mrs. Pukaite. Now a resident of Cape Cod, Mrs. Patenaude was formerly the Religious Education Director at St. Richard of Chichester parish in Sterling. She also taught at
St. Peter Marian high school for many years. Currently Mrs. Patenaude conducts retreats and day-long events as well as half-day programs in Attleboro and Wareham.

Mrs. Patenaude’s topic was “A Blessing to the World,” a theme she used to affirm the vital work that parish secretaries perform. During the presentation she offered hints to the women about fostering their own ability to function well in their ministry. She shared delightful stories, punctuated with a gentle humor.

Exhorting the secretaries to consider their work a blessing to the parish, Mrs. Patenaude said, “Think of what would not get done if you were not there. Tell yourself ‘I am a blessing.” She encouraged the women to associate with God everything that happens in the secretary’s office.

Mrs. Patenaude offered anecdotes to illustrate her point. In one story, a mother is about to serve her two boys, five and three, pancakes. As the two boys argued about who would get the first pancake, their mother took the opportunity to teach about Jesus and how He shared with others with the result being that one boy said to the other, “You can be Jesus.”

A story of a missionary whose boat capsized illustrated how simple acts of kindness make us the face of Christ in the world. Washed up on the shore of a village, the missionary made no faith claim but identified with every human condition, ministering selflessly to the needs of the villagers. Twenty years later when a group of missionaries came to the island and preached about Jesus, the natives said they had already met Jesus and led them to the one who had been among them for years.

Mrs. Patenaude encouraged the secretaries to claim the power and the privilege of enlivening people’s lives with the spirit of God: “The person in front of me is the most important person at the time. We minister one person at a time.” She quoted Jose Hobday (now deceased), “My interruptions were my ministry.”

Touching on the prevalence of high tech in today’s world and the frustration we feel at times at not being able to speak to a real person on the phone, Mrs. Patenaude suggested the use of “high-touch ministry” as a means of offering comfort, compassion and community. She used the example of a hospital chaplain going out to meet patients in the parking lot before surgery.

Mrs. Patenaude stressed the importance of taking care of ourselves, paying attention to all our needs: physical, spiritual, mental and emotional... She
quoted St. Bernard of Clairvaux who said that we need to be able to give out of our abundance: we need to be replenished. She concluded that the Church needs ministers who serve with joy out of a sense of balance.

Following a short break, attendees had an opportunity to comment. Pam Ashmankas and Eleanor Binnall from North American Martyrs parish shared how the daily intrusions in life can feel like an interruption but that “each person is important…..even though my work doesn’t get done, they are my work to get done.”

Mrs. Jane Ford, administrative assistant of the Office for Divine Worship said, “Balance in life is so important. We need to take time for ourselves so we can give of ourselves to others.”

Mrs. Patenaude ended her presentation with a ritual which included prayers of recommitment and gratitude. Each participant was then given a VIP pin and acknowledged verbally for their important ministry.

Following the presentation, the secretaries worshipped together at mass celebrated by Bishop Robert McManus. They enjoyed a delicious lunch catered by Napoli’s in Shrewsbury.

Joan Talbot, long-time Commission member summed up the day in this way: “Peggy Patenaude’s personality and manner of presentation engaged the attendees and reinforced the blessing their ministry is to others. We look forward to her presence at our November 2nd Gather Us In 2013 conference.”

Here are some pictures from the wonderful day shared by our secretaries.