

(The follow talk was given by Carmilla Burns SNDdeN on Founder's Day at Emmanuel College)

Dedication of the Mission and Spirituality Center

Founder's Day - Emmanuel College

February 22, 2007

A RIVER OF LIFE RUNS THROUGH IT

It is a pleasure to be with you for this important moment of the dedication of the Mission and Spirituality Center. Today you are taking an institutional moment to ponder the deep purposes of Emmanuel College. Mission and Spirituality are like an underground river flowing beneath the daily events at Emmanuel. It keeps flowing and we are invited to tap into its life-giving waters to moisten the dry places of life. Large volumes of spiritual water surge beneath this magnificent institution and the establishment of this Center is a public reminder of this great underground river and provides a point of access to its life-giving water. This pulsing river is a river of memory, of vision, of inspiration, of responsibility and of Wisdom.

River of Memory

It is a river of memory because it is a tributary of the great Notre Dame river which began over 200 years ago in Amiens, France when two women dedicated their lives to provide education in the ravaged infrastructure of Church and state in

post-revolutionary France. Today that great river has spread to five continents and twenty countries. It exists wherever there are Sisters of Notre Dame. It gives refreshment in the desert regions of Africa and restores life to the great Amazon forest. It provides refreshment for the poor of Peru and the orphans of Zimbabwe. It flows from “sea to shining sea” in this country where it nourishes great institutions of education, pastoral care and outreach to the poor. It flows abundantly and deeply through Great Britain, Belgium and Italy. It has established magnificent schools in Japan. During these past two hundred years, over fifteen thousand sisters of Notre Dame have carried the waters of its life around the world and these same waters flow in the underground river of Emmanuel. It has been flowing abundantly here for 43% of the history of the entire Congregation. It has deepened and widened through the presence of many dedicated Sisters of Notre Dame serving at Emmanuel College for eighty-eight years.

River of Vision

It is a river of vision because it not only holds the institutional memory but contains the vision that inspired all Sisters of Notre Dame. The mission of the Sisters of Notre Dame is the mission of Jesus which is to bring about the reign of God. However, while that mission is the purpose of all religious Congregations, the spirit or charism of each is unique to the foundress of a Congregation. Thus in carrying out the mission, the members of each congregation manifest the particular

charism of the foundress/founder. Our foundress, St. Julie Billiart, had a profound appreciation of the Goodness of God. It was a gift (charism) of insight that permanently changed her vision in life. The realization of God's Goodness everywhere apparent overwhelmed her to such depth that she directed the whole of her life so that others might also become aware of God's Goodness. We describe it in the first article of the Constitutions of the Sisters of Notre Dame, "The Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur was founded by Marie Rose Julie Billiart, a woman filled with love for God and God's people. She responded to the call to commit her life completely to God and to spread everywhere the Gospel message that God is indeed good." That impulse is carried by all Sisters of Notre Dame who are motivated by the same energy. We say in our Constitutions, "Our common aim is to express in our time, as Julie did in hers, that God is good." All those in mission in the spirit of Notre Dame are called to proclaim the good news of God's goodness through word and action.

The Notre Dame charism calls the person to proclaim the good news of God's goodness through word and action which means that one is both the messenger and the message. The message is proclaimed and lived in such a way that the messenger is recognized by certain characteristics which not only identify the messenger but proclaim the message. Many of these characteristics mark the message of Emmanuel. They are from the river of inspiration.

River of Inspiration

The characteristics of the messenger are from a particular spirituality. It is a river of inspiration because it offers a spirituality to express in our time that God is indeed good. Spirituality is an elusive word which is at times vague and imprecise. There are almost as many definitions of it as there are people. Experiential definitions seem to work better than conceptual definitions. It is what a people mean when they talk about what gives them energy; how they want to feel connected or how they seek to belong to something greater than themselves. We recognize they seek what is authentic and genuine, something personal and intimate. They long for water that satisfies their thirst. It is a deep need, a cry from the heart. The water that they choose to drink to satisfy their deepest longing is spirituality.

The Sisters of Notre Dame have a spirituality which is rooted in the conviction that God is good. St. Julie's most frequent saying was, "Ah! Qu'il est bon le bon Dieu!" "How good is the Good God!" Notre Dame spirituality, a vision of the world as a manifestation of God's goodness emerged through this lens. I will briefly describe a few characteristics of this spirituality in order to explain some of the currents in our river.

One outstanding characteristic is trust. A firm belief that God is good engenders an equally strong trust in God and in God's creation. It is an optimistic

stance on life. Julie's trust was steadfast and true, tested by trials and suffering but she never doubted that it all had significant meaning. "God knows how to make everything turn to the good of those who love with all their hearts and who put their trust in God."

This unwavering trust is exemplified in the description of Emmanuel on your website. You are a Catholic liberal arts and sciences college but you are more. It says, "We are a community with a passion for teaching and learning that believes education will create a just and better world. We believe education empowers people and transforms their lives."

Trust in God's goodness is accompanied by a liberty of spirit which allows one to be daring and courageous, open and flexible yet serene in the face of criticism and opposition. All of these qualities speak of a life focused on God's goodness. Emmanuel has the same liberty of spirit when it says, we "challenge ourselves to act, to lead and to give generously to others. We believe education is inclusive, that the world of ideas demands diversity." The service to the poor that you exemplified today is a strong commitment in Notre Dame. Julie had a predilection for the poor especially in the most abandoned places.

Simplicity is a primary characteristic of the Sisters of Notre Dame. It is a single-heartedness that is a response of the whole person to God experienced as good. Like the sun that draws the sunflower in its direction, so God draws Sisters

of Notre Dame in a response that is total, direct and uncomplicated. It is our great legacy and perhaps our greatest challenge because simplicity is one and undivided. We cannot have it in one aspect of our lives and lack it in another. As the whole sunflower is turned to the sun, so the Notre Dame charism calls us to focus wholeheartedly on God. A person possessing simplicity can respond to new calls from God and moves with God as God continues to be revealed in the contemporary reality.

The ability to live a life of complete trust in God and total focus on God's action in all of life calls for a life of prayer and reflection. Our spirituality is centered in and flows from a tradition of contemplative action. "As the quality of our life response flows from our personal and communal prayer and asceticism, so the authenticity of our prayer flows from our life response" (#46). The mutuality of life lived and prayer is the radical meaning of simplicity. There are no separate compartments to life, it is one. St. Julie had a marvelous expression for this unity which she called 'rapture of action.' The Center for Mission and Spirituality is a testimony to your own commitment to the necessity of prayer and reflection. True education requires reflective pondering into the deepest longing and desires of our being.

The spirit of trust and simplicity in Julie produced a manifest joy. Joy is so much a characteristic of Notre Dame spirituality that at one point St. Julie declared

that a particular convent was no longer a Notre Dame community because there was no joy there. The joy of Notre Dame spirituality is the Christian joy rooted in the Paschal mystery. We are called to embrace the cross, trusting in the mystery of life and death which lies at the center of Christian faith. Embrace of the inevitable suffering of the human condition is integral to the embrace of God's action in all of life. Emmanuel "accepts the transformative power of real-world experience..." That statement alone is a beacon for the rest of your life. Julie had a direct and simple way of explaining this when she says, "God knows how to make everything turn to the good for those who love with all their hearts and who put their trust in God." Emmanuel also knows joy when it recognizes that the sophisticated resources of Boston are "for learning, for fun, for growth and for serving."

River of Responsibility

The river that nourishes is also a river of responsibility. A contemporary expression of spirituality is sometimes called spiritual health. Health is no longer understood as the absence of disease or illness but now includes a sense of wholeness and well being. The world needs spiritually healthy people who stand in right relationship with themselves, with other people, with the earth and with God.

You stand in right relationship when you realize that you are in communion with all creation. Science has confirmed the interconnectedness of all creation with the great story of the beginning of the Universe. To be is to be related. In the very first instant when the primitive particles rushed forth, every one of them was connected to every other one in the entire universe. The spiritually healthy person does not forge relationships as much as discover that they have always existed.

Our towns and cities of the world need spiritually healthy individuals who are able to live publicly and be hospitable to what is different and unfamiliar. We need you to celebrate personal hope, to invest in social capital and to transform spiritual wilderness into centers of personal, social and economic creativity. Our planet needs you because a spiritually healthy person knows a responsibility to the well-being of the earth. You study, teach and serve in an institution that nurtures a river that can help you discover that you are already a person in relationship with others, the world and God. This river of vision and inspiration is also your river of responsibility. Allow yourselves the time to refresh yourselves and your deepest yearnings to become a spiritually healthy person. We make our own way but all journey together. We keep company with one another as we journey from the private, the personal, into a community who freely, joyfully and fearlessly inhabits the civic, public arena and the earth.

River of Wisdom

In closing, I would like to offer another vision of a river from the Bible. In the Wisdom Tradition of the Old Testament, Wisdom is symbolized as water. “For her thoughts are more abundant than the sea, and her counsel deeper than the great abyss” (Sirach 24:29). The author of the passage is seeking Wisdom and describes the desire to gather water from the river of Wisdom by preparing a water channel as if his life was a garden. In that way, the water of Wisdom can come to the person. The text reads, “I watered my garden and drenched my flower-beds. And lo, my canal became a river, and my river a sea.”

You also have access to a river of Wisdom that came with the Sisters of Notre Dame when they founded Emmanuel College in 1919 and nourished it with their vision and dedication. It continues to flow today with vibrancy and clarity as part of the great river system of Notre Dame throughout the world. The Emmanuel river has embodied the Wisdom of our tradition as well as making its own unique contribution to the history of the Congregation. Today Emmanuel College is publicly proclaiming that everyone has access to the river through the Mission and Spirituality Center. You are indeed privileged to be invited to the river. You need to make the effort to open a channel for the water to enter into your life. The endeavor is small compared to the rich reward of your channel widening to a river.

Drink deeply from its springs and they will nourish you all of your life and become
a source of refreshment for others.

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