**Welcome Home Preaching**

21 June 2021

It was “a time to be far from embraces” when I left for the novitiate last August. We were about six months into social distancing to stop the spread of COVID-19. It was a time for me to mourn the novitiate year that might have been. Unlike other groups at the CDN, my cohort would not get to gather with other novices in person or visit different motherhouses. And last summer was a time to weep for the unacknowledged legacy of slavery in this country. During the protests for racial justice, several cities seemed thrown into a time of war.

At such an uncertain and tumultuous time, I was sent by this community to the novitiate. Sr Pat Twohill wrote me a parting note. She said, “It is no accident that you are entering the novitiate at this most unusual time. Remember, everything we go through is mysteriously a preparation for what is to come.” I pondered these words throughout the year. What is to come? For what am I being prepared? I’d like to share three things I will remember about this most unusual of canonical years, three things that I believe will prove helpful, whatever the future holds.

First, it was a time to embrace reality, to come to terms with what is rather than cling to what used to be or might have been. Embracing the reality on the ground frees us to discover what can be, what new opportunities have emerged. Taking classes at Catholic Theological Union, we couldn’t meet in person as in the past. But by embracing the possibilities of online learning, Professor Maria Cimperman, RSCJ, was able to open up her course on the Vowed Life to religious located around the world, from Rome to Fiji. I had the opportunity to talk with Sister Christine Mwale, a Zambian Dominican Sister whom several of you know. We had a rich conversation about the need in today’s world for our Dominican charism of Truth and what that looks like in Zambia compared to the U.S. What a gift for me to experience through this course the global reality of religious life and the Dominican family. I hope, in time to come, that we in the U.S. can embrace that reality more fully.

Second, this canonical year was a time to seek. Of course, novices are ordinarily invited to seek greater self-knowledge and deeper awareness of God’s presence, and I appreciated having the time and space to do that inner work. But this year was unusual in that it was a time to seek different ways of being in relationship with our most vulnerable sisters and brothers. I’m sure that you also confronted the challenge of trying to be in solidarity during a pandemic. I was blessed to volunteer at Kolbe House Jail Ministry of the Archdiocese of Chicago. When the Kolbe House staff couldn’t go into the jail to minister in person, they sought creative ways to reach out to those on the inside, who were kept in lockdown without visitors, internet access, programming or religious services. I was privileged to correspond with incarcerated women and men who had recently suffered the death of a family member. What a gift to read about their experiences of loss and resilience. In time to come, by what creative means will we seek out relationships with folks who are isolated and marginalized?

Finally, there were many times this year to be silent. Again, the canonical year is ordinarily a time for silent reflection and solitude. This particular year, I spent a lot of reflection time wrestling with my own reaction to this country’s political turmoil, from the 2020 election through the Capital Riot, and its manifestly racist justice system. Even after the egregious murder of George Floyd, police continued killing Black and Brown Americans in Columbus and Chicago. It is infuriating. And the chance for reform can seem hopeless. I felt such despair over the violent abuse of power we witnessed in January that in prayer I could only be silent and sit in the place of impasse. Faced with such destructive actions, how could I commit to practicing dialogue, as Dominicans are called to do? My prayer became, God, let my own heart not be hardened. I had to trust that, if I sat in the impasse long enough, somehow compassion would break through, God’s own compassion. Only during the time of silence did I eventually receive a compassionate word to speak. How will we remain faithful women of dialogue in a deeply divided world? These are the questions and hopes I carry forward.

What is to come for me and others new to religious life remains a mystery. But I trust that I’m being well prepared – prepared to embrace reality as it is, to seek out relationships with those on the margins, and to be reverently silent, letting my own heart soften until it is time to speak a word of peace. So, I give thanks for this most unusual of novitiate years. During a time of mourning, our community was able to weep together and also to laugh, rejoicing in our common vocation to religious life. What is to come is both mystery and gift. There is joy in finding out what is ours to do, and doing God’s work together.