

Sr. Victoria Michelle's Clothing—Feast of the Dedication. June 8, 2012

Matt. 7:13-14, 24-25

In 1989, when I was still living in San Francisco, we had a major earthquake called the Loma Prieta. It measured 6.9 on the Richter Scale. One of the many challenges of living in San Francisco at that time was that the media made the disaster look even worse than it actually was. Our friends and relatives in other parts of the country were watching their TV sets, thinking the whole city of San Francisco was on fire. People were desperate to reach us by phone and we were desperate to reach them, but the phone lines were either down or so jammed that we couldn't get through. But when the dust had settled, we found there wasn't a great deal of damage other than the collapse of the San Francisco Bay Bridge. Most buildings suffered minor damage or no damage at all. The one exception was the area of the city called the Marina. Because San Francisco is built on a narrow peninsula, there is really no way to expand the city. But the people who planned the 1915 World's Fair insisted on creating more space for buildings and they did it with landfill. The result was disaster in 1989. After that, people said they would never again live in a house built on landfill. For years after that, the Marina was partially unoccupied. Some of the inhabitants, like my parents, moved to rock in other parts of the city. But if you see the Marina today, it looks like nothing ever happened.

Michelle is a woman who has chosen to live on rock rather than sand. This building is not only built on rock but is rock. Today is the feast of the Dedication of this building. On June 8, 1916, what was then a new convent was blessed by Bishop Burch. But much more important than any building, Michelle has chosen to live her life on the rock known as Jesus Christ. She is here to test out whether this is the right place to live out her vocation to love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

A call to the religious life is a radical call. We tend to think of radical as meaning "far out," but taken in a literal sense, radical means "root-like." Something which is root-like is the basis and support for something else. In that sense, a call to the religious life is a call to live the tap-root of Christianity. And what is the tap root of Christianity? Love God with all your strength, heart, mind, and soul. Michelle is answering a call. Most people become aware of their call only gradually and some become aware of the call long before they are able to respond. Many of us experience the call as coming from somewhere and someone else and yet it comes from within. It is a peculiar and mysterious feeling, but if it is genuine, it won't go away.

There is a reason why there is a road less traveled and a narrow way that only a few find. Everything about our culture says what we are doing here isn't the right thing. What are we doing? What are we producing? One of our Oblates told me recently that the average American is exposed to 3,000 ads a day. All are geared to work up our appetites to buy, buy, buy, mostly things we don't need. Family and friends often try to discourage us from taking up this life. In this world, we are constantly faced with the short way, which promises immediate results, and the long way, for which the results are in the distance. The lasting way is the long way, but how tempting is the short way. Everything in this world has two aspects—how it looks at the moment, and how it will look in time to come. The easy way may look inviting at the moment and the hard way may look very daunting. The only way to get our values right is to see things in the light of eternity. No one drifts through the narrow gate by accident or by chance. They seek it and find it when they hear the command of Christ and respond.

Who is this Jesus whom Michelle loves so dearly? People have been speculating about who he was, what he did, and what he said for 2,000 years. We know he was a spirit person, a great mystic who knew God face to face. We know he was a teacher of wisdom. We know he was a great advocate for social justice. He was the bread of life, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, the true vine. We know he was Son of God. We know he was God incarnate. We know he is with us today, still influencing millions of lives. We set special places like this one aside to pay him honor and at the same time know he lives in our hearts.

My favorite book on the religious life is Joan Chittister's *The Fire in These Ashes*. I bring it out almost every time we have a Search Program. Chittister has a great gift for expressing foundational facts in clear and articulate language. She tells about the yearly visit her prioress made to the novitiate. "Mother Sylvester, my first prioress, made two trips to our novitiate yearly. In both of them, she came to ask us only one question. Patience was her hallmark; she tutored us with measured steps. In fact, she viewed with great benignity the fact that most novices failed the test rather routinely at the time of her first visit. At the same time, she was anything but complacent if we failed it at the time of her second one. 'Why have you come to the religious life' she asked each of us in turn, arms folded under her scapular, head tilted down to scrutinize us over her glasses as she scanned us around the table. At first blush, we made up wonderful answers: 'To give our lives to the church,' the pious said. 'To save our souls,' the cautious said. 'To convert the world,' the zealots said. But no, no, no, she signaled with a shake of the head. Not that. Not that. Not that. 'You come to the religious life, dear sisters, 'only to seek God.'

In reality, we all come to community with mixed motives. Some enter community hoping it will be an ideal place of love and holiness. Some of us come hoping the religious community will supply the affirmation we have not felt elsewhere. It isn't and it won't. Because religious live, work, pray, and play in the same community, the life is very intense. I have heard it described as something like getting married to ten or twelve other people, none of whom you chose. So the life-long task for us is to embrace the community, not as we would hope it to be ideally, but as it is. And we come to that community as it is "only to seek God." Only to seek God is stunning in its demands and stunning in its simplicity. It is the narrow gate. Michelle, you have started on that path through the narrow gate and our prayers are with you.

I would like to close with a work of English poet John Oxenham. It is called "The Way."

To every man there openeth
A way and ways and a way.
And the high soul climbs the high way,
And the low soul gropes the low
And in between on the misty flats
The rest drift to and fro
But to every man there openeth
A high way and a low; and every man decideth
The way his soul shall go.