

**Homily for the Sisters of Saint Francis of the Martyr Saint George
Mass for 50-Year Jubilarians: Sisters M. Martin Reynolds and M. Stephanie Belgeri**

Saint Francis Convent Chapel, Alton, Illinois | October 15th, 2022 AD

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers, Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good to be here with your community once again to celebrate the 50th jubilee of Sister Mary Martin Reynolds and Sister Mary Stephanie Belgeri. I find myself today with many of the same dispositions and joys that filled my heart two months ago for the Mass of Reception into the Novitiate, and the First and Final Profession of Vows on the Feast of the Portiuncula on August 2nd. Reflecting on this, I recognized that many of the same themes are given for our nourishment and contemplation today: our first reading from Hosea, as well as the Gospel that we just heard, are in fact the same ones we heard then. So also, Sister Martin and Sister Stephanie, directly after this homily you will recommit to the same vows and constitutions that some of your sisters received for the first time back in August. I think also of the candles that you carried into this Mass: how both at your sisters' entrance into the novitiate, first vows, and final vows, and now

today, your carrying those lights remind us of the prudent virgins of Our Lord's beautiful parable prepared for the coming of the Bridegroom.

Apparently, dear Sisters, you also apparently recall many of the same dispositions and joys of that liturgy this past August, as you specifically asked if I would reprise the song that I concluded my homily with that day, "Be Still, my Soul." I am happy to do so today! Certainly, we find Our Lord in all these ways reminding us of some of the same truths He shared with us then. But, as I considered all these similarities, a deeper realization kept coming up in my prayer. Notice that although in August we celebrated the beginning of your sisters' entrance into religious life, whereas today we celebrate 50 years of your living that life, the same joyfulness, and liveliness, and loveliness are ours again today.

Looking at our culture, I think that many would be puzzled by this. There is such an emphasis these days on novelty and youthfulness and not letting the years leave their mark on us, yet after fifty years of religious vows, there is nothing lacking, or spent, or worn-out in the love you have for Christ, and the Love He has for you. Our society wants us to think that the vibrancy, energy, and productivity of youth are better in every way, and somehow we must hold onto it, and repudiate any evidence of the passage of years. How often it is said

when someone turns 40, or is it 50, “Well, it’s all downhill from here”? This is not Christianity, and this is not of Christ! Recall St. Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “Love never ends”; put differently: Age does not diminish love! I think we find this truth repeated in various ways as we meditate on our readings this morning.

Recall our first reading from Hosea about the way that God draws us after Him. The prophet uses the image of a bride, carried by her bridegroom into the austerity and simplicity and silence of the desert. It is not endurance or boldness or any of our own wherewithal that makes this possible, but simply a response of love: “With loyalty and compassion; I will betroth you to me with fidelity, and you shall know the LORD” (Hosea 2:22). Yes, we are called to faithfulness, but it is Christ’s faithfulness first of all that makes ours possible, and His fortitude and courage that will continue to bear you up upon His highway through the wilderness. If I may, I return now to the first verse of “Be still, my Soul” where this truth is beautifully expressed:

*Be still, my soul; the Lord is on your side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
in ev'ry change he faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul; your best, your heav'nly friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

The psalm given to us today returns after each stanza to the simple words from God to each of you sisters: "Listen to Me, daughter; see and bend your ear." The Lord here reminds you of the foundation of your identity in Him. Before you were a Sister in this community, before He called you to be His bride, before you were asked to love and cherish so many different people down through the years as a spiritual mother, He called you "My daughter." It is worth reflecting again on this foundational truth! All of us have been given the dignity, and freedom, and serenity of being sons or daughters of God! With this truth in our hearts, nothing can shake us. Nothing can worry us. Nothing can steal from us that relationship. We all must reflect on this again and again. Once again, the words of St. Paul come to mind: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." Not weariness, not uncertainty, not temptation, not suffering. Hearing God speak this truth in our hearts, and holding fast to this truth when His voice is hard to hear, *this* is where the Christian knows his or her value and worth are made sure.

*Be still, my soul; your God will undertake
to guide the future as he has the past;
your hope, your confidence, let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul; the waves and winds still know
his voice who ruled them while he lived below.*

Today we are also given St. Paul's strident exhortation to the Philippians, calling them to unity in Christ. "If," he says, "there is any encouragement in Christ, and comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit ... complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord" (Philippians 2:1-2). Perhaps this truth is the one most tested over the course of many years. We have all suffered discord, we have felt loss, we have seen the consequences of the sin and selfishness that St. Paul tells those in Philippi to drive from their hearts. Fifty years offer plenty of memories of joy, and sublime moments of closeness with the Lord, as well as occasions when love seemed so lovely, but we can also recall times when we and others have failed to hold fast to the Lord's love.

What is the Lord's response to this? I find comfort in the words we so often pray in the breviary as repeated in each of the 26 verses of Psalm 136, "His mercy endures forever." Only Christ holds the past, present, and future in His hands. We cannot change what has already happened, nor can we predict what is to come, yet the mercy of Christ embraces all time. Those places of darkness that we have crossed through, or perhaps those that we will find further down the road, need not haunt nor frighten us. Again, the Lord

reminds each of us that we are always held in His Love, and our part – no matter where we are on the path – is *only* to open our hearts to Him and let Him embrace and carry us on.

*Be still, my soul; when dearest friends depart
and all is darkened in the vale of tears,
then you will better know his love, his heart,
who comes to soothe your sorrows and your fears.
Be still, my soul; your Jesus can repay
from his own fullness all he takes away.*

Lastly, of course, I turn to our Gospel today, and, as on August 2nd, we are given some of Jesus' words before His Passion from St. John's Gospel. "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." We have to listen closely to Our Lord, lest we fall into the trap of letting our own ideas and expectations define what we think of as "bearing fruit." If we ponder these words of Our Lord, we find a radically different version of fruitfulness than the productive one so rampant around us. "My Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does He prunes." This is a fruitfulness that comes from the care of our Father. We need not judge ourselves by our own efforts, or results, or sense of satisfaction, but must only let our Heavenly Father prune where He

knows it is needed, and continuously join us more deeply to the vine which is Christ.

Our Lord continues, "Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing." Once again, the emphasis is not on us, but Him: fruit-bearing is not found in effort, but abiding, not in results, but remaining. What a beautiful reminder we have of this as we begin this year of Eucharistic revival here in the United States! Christ's presence in the Eucharist is a relentless reminder that fruitfulness is found only in being united with Him. He does very little when He stays with us in the tabernacle, and perhaps we do very little when we sit with Him there, yet nothing else compares to the union we have with Him in the Most Blessed Sacrament.

I recall Jesus' words to Mary: "One thing is necessary." Once again, we discover that years do not limit this abiding, but actually are just the continued gift of Christ's being with us that He promises will be ours in eternity. And so we come to Jesus' final rejoinder: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you." No better request can be made of Him than simply that we would all be given the grace of each and every day, and always, remaining in Him.

*Be still, my soul; the hour is hast'ning on
when we shall be forever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still my soul; when change and tears are past,
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.¹*

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ German Title: *Stille, mein Wille; dein Jesus hilft siegen*; Author: Kathrina von Schlegel; Translator: Jane Borthwick (1855); Melody: *Finlandia*; Copyright: Public Domain.

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Be Still, My Soul

1. Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side;
 2. Be still, my soul: your God will un - der - take
 3. Be still, my soul: when dear - est friends de - part,
 4. Be still, my soul: the hour is has - t'ning on

bear pa - tient - ly the cross of grief or pain;
 to guide the fu - ture as he has the past.
 and all is dark - ened in the vale of tears,
 when we shall be for - ev - er with the Lord,

leave to your God to or - der and pro - vide;
 Your hope, your con - fi - dence let noth - ing shake;
 then shall you bet - ter know his love, his heart,
 when dis - ap - point - ment, grief, and fear are gone,

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in ev - 'ry change he faith - ful will re - main.
 all now mys - te - rious shall be bright at last.
 who comes to soothe your sor - row and your fears.
 sor - row for - got, love's pur - est joys re - stored.

Be still my soul: your best, your heav'n - ly Friend
 Be still my soul: the waves and winds still know
 Be still, my soul: your Je - sus can re - pay
 Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past,

through thorn - y ways leads to a joy - ful end.
 his voice who ruled them while he dwelt be - low.
 from his own full - ness all he takes a - way.
 all safe and bless - ed we shall meet at last.

Katharina von Schlegel, 1752
 Tr. Jane Borthwick, 1855; alt. 1990; mod.

FINLANDIA 10.10.10.10.10.
 Jean Sibelius, 1899; arr.
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