

Blessed Catherine of Dernbach
Reflection for Mass: February 4, 2018
Given by Sr. Cathy Schwemer, PHJC

Today we have come once again, to remember and to celebrate the power of story in our journeys of faith. It is such a human thing to tell story – it helps us to understand what is beyond our understanding; beyond what our sense tells us is real. There are so many ways to tell and retell story. As Christians, we have the divine story of salvation history and God’s glory and love of us as written in scripture. We have the stories of history, of our foremothers and fathers who have gone before us, marked with the sign of faith – as living memory of our faith traditions and the wonder of God who lives within each of us. And when our vocal language fails us, we have signs and symbols, art and music which speak to our souls of the mystery and wonder of God, in ways speech never could. Each of these methods has one thing in common – each points beyond itself to the wonder, mystery, power of God’s love for us.

In today’s we heard this short song of praise:

“Blessed is she who believed that what the promises made to her by her God would be fulfilled.” (Luke 1:45)

Of all the wonders that are written in Luke 1, I believe that this joyous blessing by Elizabeth is one of the most powerful! She understood as women of faith throughout the ages have understood; God is ever faithful. In acknowledgment of Elizabeth’s greeting, Mary’s heart broke into the great song of praise, “The Magnificent.” Yet Elizabeth and Mary -like Hannah and Sarah of the (Old Testament) before them had no real idea where this journey; this divine promise

of God would take them. Elizabeth and Mary, one older, one young both overjoyed about the new life being brought forth through them. It is in their embrace that greatest figures of the old and new testaments would meet. And both would bear the grief of seeing their children suffer and die by beheading and crucifixion, all for the sake of the promise. Through it all they believed deeply in the divine promise, it would not be an easy journey for them, yet, ***in total freedom and in loving faith, they responded, Yes: so be it.***

Throughout the centuries of human history that lead up to this present day, many others, (men and women both) - have answered God's call with their own yes, believing as Elizabeth and Mary did that God's promise would fulfill to the world through their faithful action. Among these powerhouses of faith was a young girl from a small farm town in Dernbach, in the Diocese of Limburg, Germany named Catherine.

Catherine Kasper was born in 1820 during a time of great political unrest and poverty, especially in the rural areas. This young girl, who did not consider herself very intelligent, who was often sickly, listened with a heart to the voice of God's promise. God would give her what she needed to service her suffering neighbors – whoever or wherever they may be. Trusting this promise, Catherine had the strength to answer yes. Yet, she like Mary “The Handmaid of the Lord,” she had to convince those around it that indeed God would fulfill his promise. It took many trips by foot to talk the Bishop of Limburg and the officials of the village of Dernbach, to allow her to move forward, but forward she did move. And with a little money (\$1.50) she and the other Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

would built their first small house. She was not totally sure where her God's promise would take her yet, ***in total freedom and in loving faith, she responded, Yes: so be it.***

It was because of the faithfulness to this yes, that Catherine became the spiritual mother to thousands of women who have joined her faithful response since 1851. And now, her charism, her strength, her faithfulness has inspired both men and women who partner with us in the work of the spirit as, PHJC Associates, Fiat Spiritus members, friends, coworkers and benefactors.

The great Vatican II theologian, Karl Rahner saw charisms as the point at which the lordship of Jesus Christ is most clearly exercised. All Christian charisms points to Jesus and Jesus the Christ always points to God, His Abba. So is with the living charism of Catherine Kasper. A charism which still calls people from all walks of life to follow her in the way she worked and lived out the Gospel of Jesus Christ. ***They too, in total freedom and in loving faith, responded, Yes; so be it.***

Here in the United States, we are blessed to have an original icon of Blessed Catherine Kasper, written by the hand of Rev. Peter Pearson. Commissioned by Sr. Pat Kolas in memory of her parents and her sister, this icon now hangs in the Visitation Chapel. However, as many times as you have seen this icon how many of you understand mystery of the sign and symbols that are written into it? Catherine's icon, as all icons do, points to the divine. They tell the story of faith in brush and paint.

Everything in an icon points to the sacred. Icons are not portraits but stylized depictions which point to a sanctified humanity through the charismatic lives of its subject, in this case of Blessed Catherine Kasper. *(I remember when Catherine's Icon first arrived, as we removed it from its packing case, I first thing I heard was "it's pretty but it doesn't look like her.")*

Catherine's face and hands are stylized. Her hand is held in a gesture of blessing; in this case she is pointing to and offering the blessing of the Holy Spirit which burns in her heart. She gives silent testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit in her life and mission. She proclaims the power of the Holy Spirit in the world and offers back her whole being as well as her community to God's mission.

Icons are also silent in the face of the Divine Mystery; the mouths of the subjects depicted on an icon are smaller than other facial features and are never open; since there are no symbols that can indicate sound. There is perfect silence in the icon and this stillness and silence creates an atmosphere of prayer and contemplation. The silence of an icon is a silence that speaks; it is this ***silence that Catherine invites us to become like her in listening attentively and act courageously*** to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Frequently a saint's icon features some important reference to their life or works: In many icons the saint or blessed one holds a scroll that quotes their own words or a scriptural quote which highlights some outstanding feature of their life and struggle. In this icon of Catherine, she is holding a book. Because this book is decorated, it is a sign that it is important or inspired. For Catherine, two of the

most important books which inspired her spiritual life and mission were of course, the Bible and The Imitation of Christ. This one book represents both these books. Every color used in the tradition of iconography has great significance for understanding the mysteries of Faith. So it is in this icon as well. You will note that there is a red hue in Catherine's icon. Red symbolizes activity. In Hebrew thought, red represents fire and life. The red in this icon speaks about the fire of the Holy Spirit which set Catherine's heart ablaze with the call to a new life as Foundress of the PHJC community. Catherine's heart is set ablaze with the "Holy Fire of the Spirit". The fire on her chest and the rod of light coming from heaven depicts God's action in Catherine's life.

Thomas Merton explains the icon as an act of witness: *"What one sees in prayer before an icon is not an external representation of a historical person but an interior presence in light, which is the glory of the transfigured Christ, the experience of which is transmitted in faith from generation to generation..."* Every symbol on this icon challenges us to reflect and asks us the question: **Will you in total freedom and in loving faith, respond, Yes: Let it be.**

During this 150th anniversary year of the Poor Handmaid presence in the United States, we will celebrate in many and various ways, by re-grounding ourselves through scripture, remember our history and being moved more deeply into the mystery of God through signs and symbols. **My hope for you is that** as you look upon and pray with this icon that your heart may too, burns with the fire of the Holy Spirit as you/we continue to walk in the footsteps of God's Poor Handmaid, Blessed Catherine of Dernbach.