Feast of St. Benedict
March 20, 2020

Reflection by Sister Judith Murphy, OSB


How will we tell the story of these days of crisis we are living through, after we’ve lived through them? At this point, we don’t know.

For example, being in a crisis brings to mind a time 8-10 years ago, when we were visited as part of the Apostolic Visitation, the investigation of American nuns. I was on the council at the time and the visitors asked each of us to tell our vocation story. As we went around the table, we found that some of us did not know each other’s “vocation story” and we really got into asking each other questions to hear more. That was not what the visitators had in mind, so we were called back to the task at hand.

These days may give us time and opportunity to share stories of other life experiences with each other. Like, what drew each of us here?

Yesterday Sisters Mary and Mary Ann and I were on a call with a consultant and he mentioned the Stockdale paradox as we talked a bit about these days. I knew I had heard the name Stockdale before, and I needed to look it up to be refreshed. James Stockdale was a naval officer and in a prison camp with John McCain; after being imprisoned and tortured for seven years, he explained, that he found the way to stay alive was to embrace both the harshness of his situation and with a balance of healthy optimism. Hoping for the best but acknowledging and preparing for the worst keeps us grounded.

Maybe you have heard Sister Mary quote Fr. Dom Grassi’s note this week saying he was trying to stay positive “until we can get back to all the things, we so easily take for granted.” I had also been thinking that this time may help me understand a little bit of what the tens of millions of refugees in our world live through with no end in sight.

So, our feast day may be a good time to ask ourselves how we each got here, a good time to even share our vocation stories. What were we seeking?
Sister Barbara Fiand says that we aren’t seekers, as much as we are the sought. That God is seeking us. We might say we were drawn to this school of the Lord’s service because we are sought by God. That we were drawn here to learn to “Listen with the ear of our hearts…to be marinated in the Rule and in stability in this beloved community… Learning to know ourselves, our true selves through prayer and work and study and leisure together.

At the LCWR meeting last summer Sr. Pat Murray, the president of the UISG told of working in Sudan with various groups of religious sisters. Some of the women native to that war-torn place saw from their habits that these sisters were “different” from each other. A group of local women asked the sisters to teach them how to get along peacefully with people they saw as different, as enemies. Similarly, AIM’s prayer asks for the blessing that our lives together as monastics give witness to the reality that strangers can live together in peace.

Benedict saw the whole world in a single ray of light. Maybe listening with the ear of our hearts can help us understand a bit better the other people suffering in the same world-wide crisis these days, that we are all one. And so many others enduring situations we hear and see in the 24/7 news cycle.

Loving God, you seek us and bring us to our true selves. Lord, you show us the path to life.