



Servite Sisters Australia Golden Jubilee

Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

**Saturday 5 December, 2020
Our Lady Queen of the Apostle Church, Riverton Parish**

“The Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name.”

These words of Mary, the Mother of the Lord, which are part of the beautiful hymn of praise which Mary sang when she met her cousin Elizabeth, are words that the sisters of the Congregation of the Mother of Sorrows, whom we know more commonly as the Servite Sisters, can make their own today.

From their first arrival in Western Australia fifty years ago, at the initiative of Fr Chris Ross and the invitation of Archbishop Goody, the Lord has certainly done great things for them. They have flourished here and are an integral part of the life and mission of the Church here in our Archdiocese and in Western Australia more widely. I am sure that their hearts are as full of gratitude to God for all his blessings as Mary’s heart was.

We are all here today because we, too, want to thank God for the wonderful gift which the sisters have been, and continue to be, for our Church. The Lord has done, and still does, great things for us by giving us this special gift.

It is a gift, of course, which goes far beyond the work the sisters do here in Western Australia, important and life-giving though that work is. The real gift which the sisters bring is the witness, not so much of what they do, but of who they are. They are a group of women who have made the most radical of choices: to embrace the religious life and to publically and permanently commit themselves to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as a group of consecrated women.

Although the Congregation of the Mother of Sorrows was founded on December 8 in India in 1854, religious life itself stretches right back to the earliest centuries of the Church. While its origins are shrouded in mystery it is commonly believed that, once the Church was freed from the fear of persecution, there arose in the hearts of many a deep desire to find a new way to give everything to God, just as the early martyrs gave the ultimate gift of their life. Religious life emerged, then, as a new kind of martyrdom – although perhaps only those who live the religious life really know how much of a martyrdom such a way of life actually is!



Over the centuries different forms of religious life appeared. Today, in the Church, there are many hundreds and perhaps thousands of religious Orders and Congregations, some very large and some very small, some with a long history and some just recently founded. But in one way or another they all have one goal: to offer to the Church and to the world a living and powerful sign of what fidelity to Christ and his Gospel actually looks like. And what it looks like, not just for religious but for all of us, is this: to live in a communion of love and faith with our brothers and sisters; to live a life of simplicity and of attachment to God and his plan for humanity rather than to material possessions; to live in openness to God's will so as to be able to say, as Mary did, "*I am the servant of the Lord, let God's will be done in my life*"; and to live a life that is marked by profound reverence for the dignity of each person, never using others for personal gain or satisfaction but always seeing each person as a brother or sister to be served with humility and joy. These profound Gospel values, which of course marked the life of Jesus himself, are expressed by religious in the vows of poverty, of obedience and of chastity. But precisely because they are the values by which Jesus lived they are not optional extras for any Christian: every one of us – married or single, male or female, young or old, healthy or sick – is called to live this way. And it is the presence of the Servite Sisters in our local Church which stands as a powerful reminder of this common vocation which every Christian shares: to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, reproducing in the pattern of our own individual lives, and in the reality of our own circumstances, the pattern of his life.

Of course, every religious family will have its own way of doing this and its own special emphasis on a particular aspect of the Gospel: the Carmelite sisters will be a powerful reminder to us of the importance of prayer; the Franciscan family will not let us forget the call to poverty and simplicity of life; the Dominican family will recall for us the duty we all share to preach the gospel by word and example. The Congregation of the Mother of Sorrows, the Servite Sisters, have been given the special gift by the Holy Spirit to make compassion the heart of their lives and of their ministry. It is their special vocation to remind us all, not just by words but by actions, that allowing God to form in us hearts that are moved by the suffering of others is an essential part of every Christian's vocation. In the words of Mary's hymn to which we have listened in this morning's gospel, we are all called to lift up the lowly rather than to bow down before the mighty seated on their thrones of power, and we are all called to fill the hungry with good things, rather than to spend our time rejoicing in the pleasures of the wealthy. We are, in the words of Pope Francis, to be more and more a poor Church for the poor.

For 50 years the Sisters of the Congregation of the Mother of Sorrows have been, here in the Church in Western Australia, exactly this presence, this powerful and life-giving sign of the vocation we all share. We thank the sisters for their witness, their fidelity and their gentle Christ-like presence among us and we thank God that in the mystery of his providence he has brought the sisters here, all the way from India, to enrich our lives and Christian witness.