Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

August 1 – 2, 2020

Sister Mary Ann Barnhorn

Today’s Liturgy invites us to claim the missionary heart of Jesus as our own. “All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat”. Those words of the Prophet Isaiah introduce today’s Gospel where we read that the crowds followed Jesus on foot and that when He saw them His heart was moved with compassion.

He felt with them. The disciples suggested that the people be sent away to buy food for themselves. But Jesus said NO. Missionary hearts never stop. Not nights, not weekends. Never! They know no boundaries. But the disciples thought the work day should end at dusk. Jesus said NO. We will feed them. We will take care of them.

They were not crowds to be gotten rid of but persons to care about and to nourish.

“St. Julie Billiart, the foundress of the congregation to which I belong, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, told her Sisters, “Give them what they need for life.” And that is what Sisters of Notre Dame throughout the world do every day.

I am here to talk with you about the hundreds of our sisters who work in Congo, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, Brazil and Haiti. Like Jesus, they look at the crowds and say, “Do not send them away. We will feed them”. We will give them what they need for life.

And how do they nourish the bodies and spirits of women, men and children in these faraway places?

Our Sisters, like Jesus in today’s Gospel, go to remote places. They establish and run elementary and secondary schools, as well as maternity clinics, and they create small Christian Communities where the people nourish one another’s faith and care for each other. Missionary hearts in action 24/7! Missionary hearts that, like Jesus’ heart, FEEL compassion and refuse to send anyone away.

In Nicaragua our sisters have established a city wide program for handicapped children, children who previously spent the day locked in their little houses while their parents went to work. And in Haiti Sisters of Notre Dame most recently started an educational center and a bustling bakery to provide jobs for very poor people, men and women who simply want to work to support their families. And then there are the maternity clinics in Africa and Latin America.

This never ending work is financially supported by our own sisters in the United States, Europe and Japan. All of us together contribute to support the life changing work done by our sisters in Africa and Latin America. We receive no financial support from any of the dioceses in which we work.

I am here today to invite you to stretch your missionary heart to contribute to a very special program Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur have initiated to bring clean water to villages in Africa. Places where we teach and administer maternity clinics. Can you imagine teaching school or running a maternity clinic that does not have clean water available? Yes, that was the reality our Sisters worked with 20, 50, 70, 80 years. When the leadership of our congregation saw the dilemma of our Sisters, they launched a well thought out program, and retained an engineer to build photo voltaic units, solar panels and batteries to generate and store electricity that would pump clean water from bore holes, streams and springs in the remote areas our sisters staffed. To date, we have developed units in nine villages in Congo and Nigeria.

The completion of one of these units brought tears to the eyes of Sr. Marie Jeanne who administers a 75 bed maternity clinic, as she said, “Now we can do C sections and deliver babies in the middle of the night with good strong electric light rather than a lantern”.

 We have a slightly different project in a village located about 400 miles from Kinshasa, called Pelende, where six sisters administer a nursery school, a primary and secondary school as well as a Health Center that sees hundreds of patients each month. Once again, the missing ingredient is clean water. And here’s the thing. These women running schools and clinics continents away, are our Sisters. We cannot let them down. I am asking you today to help us meet our commitment to these Sisters. Specifically, I am asking you to help with a program we have launched in Pelende. The situation there is unique. Pelende had a water system developed more than 100 years ago. It has deteriorated beyond repair. However, the village has a robust supply of clean spring water that will supply the water we need but the elevation of the city adds a significant challenge. A complex system of pipes, lines, overhead tanks and electric pumps is necessary to bring the clean water the people so desperately need. Our engineer has developed a workable plan that will change life for the Sisters, their schools, hospital and the villagers. But this project is exceedingly complex because of the elevation. $100,000.00 has been pledged to develop this system and I am working to match that. So, I am here to ask if your missionary heart will stretch to help us. We worry every day about our Sisters’ safety and wellbeing so far away. We cannot forget the experience of losing our own Sr. Dorothy Stang, to a violent death in the Amazon, at the hands of hired gunmen. Can I count on you to pray for our Sisters and their safety? If you are able, would you consider making a contribution to help with this match so we can move forward in Pelende? I would be very grateful. And I want to promise you that you can always count on the prayers of our Sisters for you and your family.

Father will direct you as to how to make your gift today, should you wish to do so.