

Sr. Mary Elizabeth, S.V., Vicar General of the Sisters of Life, was the keynote speaker at the 4th Annual Banquet of the Women's Support Center of Milwaukee February 14, 2014. Below is the text of her talk.

Tonight, I would like to reflect on 2 things. First, the call to be witnesses, to be a light amidst the darkness of the growing culture of death. Secondly, the power of maternal love to transform a culture, one heart at a time.

The Need for Witnesses

Pope Francis is continually calling all Christians to not only believe the gospel but to live the gospel. To make our lives a living gospel. And he is leading the way through his example.

What moves people today are living witnesses, the real life example of someone who reveals the beauty of life, and gives an example of authentic love. What will change hearts is if we show that being pro-life is not just about words or politics; it is a way of living that first **changes me** and then affects all of my relationships. To be effective in building a new culture of life, I must be a living witness of the Gospel of Life.

There is a moving story that illustrates the power of personal witness in the book *Rediscovering Catholicism* by Matthew Kelly. It begins this way:

“Jim Castle was tired when he boarded his flight one night in Cincinnati. The forty-five-year-old management consultant had put on a weeklong series of business meetings and seminars, and now he sank gratefully into his seat, ready for the flight home to Kansas City.

As more passengers boarded, the plane hummed with conversation, mixed with the sounds of bags being stowed. Then, suddenly, people fell silent. The quiet moved slowly up the aisle like an invisible wake behind a boat. Jim craned his neck to see what was happening and his mouth dropped open.

Walking up the aisle were two nuns clad in simple white habits with blue borders. He immediately recognized the familiar face, wrinkled skin, and warm eyes of one of the nuns. This was the familiar face he'd seen so often on television and on the cover of *Time*. The two nuns halted, and Jim realized that his seat companion was going to be Mother Teresa.

As the last few passengers settled in, Mother Teresa and her companion pulled out rosaries. The airplane taxied to the runway, and the two women began to pray, their voices in a low murmur. Though Jim considered himself a not very engaged Catholic who went to church mostly out of habit, inexplicably he found himself joining in. By the time they whispered the final prayer, the plane had reached its cruising altitude.

Mother Teresa turned toward him. For the first time in his life, Jim understood what people meant when they spoke of a person possessing an aura. As she gazed at him, a sense of peace filled him; he could see it no more than he could see the wind, but he felt it, just as surely as he felt a warm summer breeze. “Young man,” she inquired, “do you pray the rosary often?”

“No, not really,” he admitted.

She took his hand, and her eyes probed his. Then she smiled. “Well, you will now,” and she dropped her rosary into his palm.

An hour later, Jim entered the Kansas City Airport, where he was met by his wife, Ruth. “What in the world?” Ruth asked when she noticed the rosary in his hand.

They kissed and Jim described the encounter. Driving home, he said, “I feel as if I met God’s daughter.”

Too often we forget who we are. We are bombarded with so much information, with so many messages – it is easy to forget who we are and to lose sight of what we are made for. It is like we have spiritual amnesia. We need to experience the reality that each of us is a son or daughter of God.

Each of us has been **Chosen** by God. Pope Benedict put it this way: *“We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”* No one is unwanted, no one is an accident. Every human being has been loved into existence and is continually upheld in existence through the tender and all-seeing providence of our Father in heaven. God knows every fiber of my being. We are God’s sons and daughters. When we live out of this knowledge, we see and experience life differently.

The second point that I would like to reflect on is the transforming power of maternal love, because the work of the WSC involves awakening or stirring up maternal love where it has been bound and buried in fear. St. Edith Stein wrote: “God combats evil through the power of a woman’s maternal love...”

It belongs to the dignity and vocation of women, in a special way, to reveal to the world the primacy of love. **God entrust this great task to us.** JP II called upon women to be a **“prophetic” presence that manifests in the world the primacy of the order of love.** If women don’t do this, if they get swept up in the frenzied “doing” of our culture, in the preoccupation with status, power, productivity, efficiency and achievement, there will be a huge void, an emptiness unfilled, a deep loneliness and a growing self-doubt in the hearts of our children – in society, in the workplace, in our friendships and in our families. Just as we need food and drink to nourish and strengthen our bodies so we need spiritual and emotional nourishment for our hearts and souls to grow, mature and flourish. We are in desperate need of a reawakening of appreciation for the indispensable and irreplaceable value of maternal love.

Let’s take a moment to explore concretely the reality of this spiritual, life-giving love. What does it look like?

I am going to share with you our secret. This is something that we have discovered in our work with pregnant women. I am sharing it with you tonight because **this can change your life.** It can be applied to both men and women, in how you approach every relationship you have: in your marriage, especially with your children, with siblings and friends. It is a very simple concept but we have experienced it to be revolutionary.

We call it delighting in the other. True, authentic human love begins by being moved from within by another’s goodness. It is not something that I do, but something that happens to me.

When a woman comes to us there is an eagerness in my heart that says, “I want to know something more about her.” Interiorly I open my heart to be moved; to be touched by her beauty, by her goodness, her strength, or by her fragility or vulnerability. Who knows what I am moved by - but it is something uniquely in her, that special something in her.

As I manifest my delight, this reveals to the other her own goodness. My response of love becomes **a revelation of her goodness**. I become for her a mirror of who she really is in herself. And her experience is one of being confirmed in her own worth. This is the emotional food that we all long for, that nourishes our hearts and allows us to grow as a human person.

Let’s take a minute – Think of a time when you have experienced this. When someone really believed in you. It may have been a coach, a teacher and parent – think about what that felt like – at those moments you can almost feel yourself growing, becoming more than you thought you could be. It awakens hope.

Delighting in her is loving her, not because I am going to save her baby, but simply because I am given this gift of her. I don’t have a program or an agenda; I don’t have a script for this encounter; I am going to see who this person is that God has given me, and allow the nurturing affection to flow out of me. To be expressed naturally; letting it show in my eyes, my tone of voice, my posture, my facial expression. It seems so simple but try it and you will be surprised at what happens. Because she feels known and understood by you, she relaxes and is able to connect with the deeper beliefs and desires of her heart and not just with what everyone else is telling her or pressuring her to do.

The warmth needs to be matched later by actions but not in the beginning. If I begin to do good things for her without first being inwardly moved by her goodness and expressing that to her in some way, she will experience that I love her only because I am good, and not because of any goodness that I see in her. She needs to perceive that you are doing these things because the exact opposite is true - you see strength in her, and you believe she is going to make it. She needs to believe that she has the interior strength, goodness, and resources to move forward, and we can’t give her this or convince her of it; it has to well up within her. But we can mirror back to her what we see and experience in her.

A young woman we had served, I’ll call her Susan, returned to visit the Sisters several years after living with us. When I first met her she was still young but had already experienced abuse and an abortion. She used to wear only black – black jeans, black t-shirt, heavy black eyeliner...you know the look. But that wasn’t Susan at all. She was petite and quiet with long brown hair, a beautiful smile and the biggest, saddest blue eyes I have ever seen. As the months past, Susan began to find healing and hope as she experienced the Lord’s love for her. The sadness lifted and her eyes began to sparkle. When she moved out she began taking classes at a local college.

She came to back to visit several years later; she was wearing a pink and white dress and was so proud to introduce us to her husband and two children. She had met him at a catholic young adult retreat and he was a good man who loved her and worked hard so she could be home raising their children. Susan was beaming and at peace – the transformation was honestly breathtaking, and then she completed the picture by saying -- “You know it’s funny: over the years I began to experience myself as the person you always believed me to be! And now I want to share that love with my children.”

We, who love with the love of Jesus, grow by acting on behalf of another. For the one who loves in this way can say authentically – “It is I who receive the greater part in having loved and served you.”

About a year ago, Archbishop Samuel Aquila of Denver reflected on the great despondency which pervades our culture too often deprived of this maternal love. He wrote:

Motherhood is the art of finding potential, and fostering it. Motherhood is the craft of focusing on the good and trusting that the rest will fade away. It is the penetrating beauty of unwavering hope, and unflinching love... The feminine genius is the practice of literally growing goodness in spite of incredible obstacles.

We need to find pockets of good—echoes of truth—and foster them. We need to refute what is evil—undoubtedly. But we also need to cultivate every possible inroad of beauty, if we ever hope for a re-flowering of Christian culture...

... “Beauty,” reflected Dostoevsky, “will save the world.” There is nothing more beautiful than a mother loving her child into goodness—and nothing we need more urgently.¹

A word to the men present. Before entering the Sisters of Life, Mother Agnes, our Superior General was a Professor of Clinical Psychology at Columbia University. She did her doctoral research examining the dynamics within families of children with special needs. They studied, in particular, those families that stayed together and flourished despite the many challenges. What made the difference? The findings are fascinating. The thing that made the biggest difference was the amount of perceived support and affirmation that the wife received from her husband. They went on to describe the type of support that made the difference – it wasn’t that he did the dishes or that they split the housework 50/50 – it was that the wife felt affirmed and valued in her maternity by her husband. He was able to communicate in some meaningful way that he admired, valued and appreciated her work as a mother. Then she was able to handle just about anything.

What happens when maternal love is set free? Let me answer that question by sharing with you a story of a woman who lived with us during her pregnancy because I think she is very much like many of the women you serve at the Women’s Support Center.

Racquel’s Story:

When Racquel moved into our convent, she had decided to parent her baby, but she would never tell another woman what to do. As she grew in accepting her maternity things began to change in her life. I don’t think she was aware just how much she had changed until one day, she was about 8 months pregnant, and was on her way to see her doctor.

Here is the story in her words:

I was in the hospital elevator on my way to a doctor’s appointment. Another woman got on with me; I said hello and she burst out crying and told me that she was pregnant. I said, “Congratulations! I’m pregnant, too.” She explained that she just couldn’t do it right now; it wasn’t the right time. Then I felt Lyam move and I placed her hand on my belly, “Do you feel

¹ Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila, Archbishop of Denver “*Cultural Despondency and Cultural Motherhood*” *First Things* December 12, 2012.

that?!” Right at that moment my baby kicked her. She said, “Wow!” I said, “Yeah, my baby’s going to be a linebacker. He’s gonna be strong and he’s gonna be blessed.” And she said, “Why is he gonna be blessed?” I said, “Because he’s here – whether you cry or you laugh, if you’re here, you’re blessed. You’re put here for a reason.

And she said, “I’m gonna get an abortion.” And I said, “No you’re not. You’re not going to have an abortion; you’re going to have a girl. I know that already because I wanted to have a girl, but I’m having a boy, but that’s OK – you have your girl and dress her up in pink and call her Racquel, and by the way, my middle name is Jasmine. And if she asks you how she got her name tell her you met a fabulous lady on the elevator one day and she told you that you were going to have a beautiful little girl.” She laughed and then we got off the elevator together and I walked her down to make an appointment with my obstetrician. You see, I can be pushy.

She goes on to say:

I didn’t see her again until two years later at the same hospital. She was pushing a stroller and ran up to me and hugged me. She had twins – two girls – and their names are Racquel and Jasmine and she had them all dressed up in pink, just like I told her. She made it. She said, “I love you. You don’t understand Raquel, I love you. I love you. I love you. I’ll never forget your name, your face, your smile. I would do anything for you. I love you.” And I said, “I love you too. I understand. I have experienced it.

CLOSING

Maternal love set free will change the world – one heart at a time.

Thank you for all you do to support these heroic women. You are making a difference. The good that you are doing is incalculable. Think of the value of one human soul. Your support of the WSC not only saves lives, it also saves souls. It saves each mother from a lifetime of grief and regret and frees their hearts to love and to embrace goodness. To begin a new life with her child.

Thank you for being witnesses of the hope found in Jesus Christ. For standing up and saying, women deserve better than abortion. They deserve love, support and practical compassion.

Know that the Sisters of Life stand in solidarity with you and lift you up in our prayer. We carry each of you in our hearts and in our prayers each day.

Let us continue to respond to God’s call to know who we are: sons and daughters of the living God; and to respond to God’s call to open our hearts to be transformed by His love so that we may become living witnesses that saying ‘yes’ to life brings hope, authentic freedom and joy.

May God Bless each of you and your families.

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Family Life Council Note: An electronic copy of this talk is available at www.4life4family.org/2-14-14 The current issue of the Sisters of Life publication, “**Imprint**”, has additional wonderful insights on maternal love and more information on the work of Sisters of Life. To inquire about the possibility of obtaining a hard copy, call the Sisters of Life Motherhouse: 845-357-3547. Just ask for the Spring, 2014 issue entitled, “The Beauty of a Woman’s Heart”. An electronic version may also be available soon at their website: <http://www.sistersoflife.org/newsletters>

Family Life Council, Inc., 2416 N. 74 St., Wauwatosa, WI 53213 (414) 771-2965
www.4life4family.org