

The readings for Philippine's Feast contain several odd juxtapositions:

*Ruins that sing for joy; a seed that dies in order to bring new life.*

These readings are fitting for a celebration of Philippine's life, which was also full of ambiguity and contradiction. We all know the basic story: How Philippine had an intense and long-postponed desire to bring the "Good News" of God's Love to the native people of the new world; how she finally got to come to the new world when she was already in her late 40's and after decades of struggling to get schools started and solving a multitude of administrative and personal challenges, she finally was given permission to go the Potawatomi Indians for one year when she was 70 years old.. When today's psalm says "Blessed on the mountain tops are the feet of those who bring good news" it could easily seem to be referring to Philippine's arrival in Sugar Creek when the Potawatomi welcomed her with a parade of over 200 warriors mounted on horseback. The Potawatomi had long ago converted to Catholicism and intermarried with the French fur traders. They were genuinely delighted that Philippine and her three companions had responded to their request to come and provide a quality education for their daughters. It didn't matter that Philippine herself was too old to do much except pray and communicate her love through small gestures. The sisters she brought with her and those who came later stayed for almost 40 years, learned the customs and, in some cases, the language of the people. These women, who were from very different social classes and nationalities lived and worked together as one body, freed by circumstance from the rules observed in other houses of the Society that were designed to separate the coadjutrix and choir religious. Seven Religious of the Sacred Heart are actually buried in single grave in St. Mary's Kansas, where the Potawatomi eventually moved when they were pressured to leave Sugar Creek.

This is the simple, straightforward story of Philippine's life that we have been telling for generations. She is the humble seed, falling into the ground which gave rise not only to an enduring affection on the part of many Potawatomi but also to the establishment of the Society of the Sacred Heart throughout North and South America.

But when someone has been made a Saint, the hagiographers often leave out the parts of their stories that would actually be the most helpful to the rest of us as we struggle to make moral choices in a world that is full of grey areas.

Over the past few days we have all been reflecting together on a whole universe of injustices, some of which we have actually helped to create and sustain by our own complicity. We have talked about racism, gender bias, the destruction of the environment, sexual abuse, violence and war. We recognize that the complex challenges of our time require subtlety and discernment, not black and white answers. And this is where the ambiguities and contradictions of Philippine's life might, ironically, be more helpful to us than her saintly passion.

During this bicentennial year celebrating Philippine's arrival in the "new world", the United States-Canada Province took a new look at Philippine's life, with a particular focus on how she dealt with one of the most egregious justice issues of her time, namely the practice of human slavery.

Cathy Mooney's talk at the Spirituality Forum in St. Louis at the start of this bicentennial year provided a sobering assessment of Philippine's accommodation to the system of slavery and racism that she encountered when she arrived in New Orleans. We learned that the Society of the Sacred Heart held a much larger number of enslaved persons and in many more locations than we had previously thought and that, contrary to the often repeated story, there was no evidence that we actually taught them to read and write.

In addition, the Province asked a group called The Committee on Slavery, Accountability and Reconciliation to research the stories of the enslaved persons who were present at Grand Coteau during Philippine's time. Members of the committee reached out to as many descendants of these enslaved persons as they could locate and asked them if they would like to have a gathering at Grand Coteau, (the school in Louisiana which was built by the forced labor of their ancestors.) This gathering took place on September 23rd, 2018. You can find a moving video of this gathering on the webpage of the USC Province.

The descendants asked for three things:

1. That we let them plan the entire service and that we provide some financial help to cover travel expenses to help some of them get to Grand Coteau.
2. That a stone be placed in the graveyard where their ancestors were buried with the names of all the enslaved persons engraved on it.
3. That a scholarship fund be established which would allow more young women of color to attend Grand Coteau.

The work of this Committee also revealed that Philippine and other Religious of the Sacred Heart did try to reunite families by purchasing members of the family that had been sold to other plantations. One young African American child was given to Philippine Duchesne when the child was only 7 or 8 years old. When this child, Liza Nebbit, grew up she had great devotion to Philippine and called herself the first “colored child of the Sacred Heart.” We also know that Philippine asked for permission to accept African Americans into the schools and into the novice ship but was forbidden to do so by St. Madeleine Sophie and the local bishop. Philippine did, however, clandestinely help Henriette DeLille, a free woman of color in New Orleans, when Henriette wanted to start her own congregation of sisters. (The Sisters of the Holy Family.) Henriette lived with the Religious of the Sacred Heart at St. Michael’s for over a year and there is a plaque on the wall that commemorates this collaboration.

So how does this new information about Philippine help us today? Three things occur to me.

First, I think we can feel less ashamed of our own complicity in the social sins of our time. Like Philippine, we are confronted with impossible dilemmas. Many of us flew thousands of miles to get to this meeting on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, creating a huge carbon footprint in the process. But, like Philippine, we have to work with the reality that we find ourselves in and try and balance the harm we do with acts that address the harm in other ways.

Second, Philippine also provides a useful model for us during those times when we are sure we are right and are tempted to destroy relationships in an effort to prove it. She didn’t leave the Society or the Church when they both told her to accept what she knew in her heart was not right. She humbly stayed and found a way to do good for the enslaved African Americans in her care.

And finally, Philippine sets an example for us of collaboration. We don’t have to act like it is up to us to address every social ill by ourselves. When circumstances prevented her from accepting women of color into the Society she found a way to support another group who would, in the end, be even more effective in creating a welcoming religious community for them.

So let us thank Philippine today for being willing to grapple with the evils of her time and for finding ways to do good even when those ways were incomplete and imperfect. May we find the courage and humility to do the same.