



SHARING IN THE CHARISM OF THE

Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary
of Wichita

May 31, 2016

The Teaching Apostolate

A few years ago I made the acquaintance of a bishop from California. He recognized the habit and Heart, and he asked if I were a Sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He then told me that he had very fond memories of being taught by the IHM Sisters. He said that in his younger years he attended a school not run by the IHM's, and he hated going to school. When he made a mistake in behavior or academics he was punished. This made him very nervous, which caused him to make more mistakes, which made him more nervous. I'm sure we can understand why he dreaded school. His family moved in the middle of his grade school years, and he started attending a school with the IHM Sisters as teachers. His face lit up with a big smile at this point. He described how he started enjoying school, and looked forward to going. The Sisters made him feel loved and accepted. Learning was fun, the faith was exciting! The nurturing of the Sisters set him on his current path. He is now just a couple of years from retirement, and he tells the story as if it just happened yesterday.

Lots of people teach. What makes an atheist's teaching different from a Christian's? What makes a faithful Catholic's teaching different from a Sister's? What make other Sister's teaching different from an IHM? For each of the people mentioned, the content could be the same, but the heart behind the teaching, that which enlivens the teaching, is different. Bishop Jackels stated that while a lay

teacher could be more talented or experienced than a given IHM Sister (He also said this is unlikely because our Sisters are very well trained, but it is possible), a Sister's teaching is still irreplaceably valuable because it flows from her consecration to Christ, her prayer life, and the bond of love she shares with her Sisters in community life. This is the unseen gift our students receive when we teach them.

My Californian bishop friend most likely didn't receive different content when he transferred schools, but the heart behind the teaching was different. He did not mention subject matter when speaking with me. He mentioned receiving a Marian love from the Sisters, a love which gives birth to Christ in souls. In our history of teaching, our Community, from Spain to California, to Kansas, never practiced the common discipline techniques common in Catholic as well as public schools. We are not amused about stories of rulers or other forms of corporal punishment as that has never been our way. We win our students over with love, as Our Lady does.

In our Constitutions, the section on our teaching apostolate begins by beautifully stating that our teaching flows from our very life as consecrated religious. "As the whole of Christ's life was a continual teaching, so must the whole life of each Sister bear witness to Him" (#64). Christ taught by what He did, how He did it, and what He said. I am called to do the same. More and more, I am called to conform my life to His so that my whole life may bear witness to Him. The longer I teach, the more I grow in the conviction that my decisions at any given moment of the day affect what my students receive through my teaching. Fr. Jackson, a good friend of our Community, wrote of one of our Foundresses, Sr. Giovanni, "I learned more about the Immaculate Heart of Mary from her life than I could learn from any book."

We Sisters live in a radical way the life that all Christians are called to live by virtue of Baptism. Everyone in this room is a teacher, and is called to bear witness to Christ, to teach others about Christ through the witness of your life. I have heard some say to me, "I could never do what you do, Sister. I don't have the patience or the gifts to teach." Well, apparently Our Lord thinks otherwise. He asks that you share Him with others according to your state in life: with your children, family members, coworkers... through the witness fo your whole life.

"But Sister," you tell me, "I'm not good enough. It's not working. People I love don't respond to my witness." We are all in the same boat, Sisters included. It is important to remember three things when passing on the Faith. First, Christ never asked for success. He asks for fidelity. We must be detached from results, or we end up either depressed or proud, sometimes all in the same day. Fruit takes a long time to grow. Just keep sowing. Second, take some time for self-examination. Do I love? How well do I love? Do I let Him love me? Am I full of His love? We can't assume that an exchange of love is happening. If I give an automatic, "Yes!" answer to these questions, thinking I'm doing great in these areas, that's a warning that I need to work on it! No matter how far we've advanced, we should always have the sense that we need to be more open to His Love, and that we can grow in how we love others.

Third, remember that Jesus Himself lost one out of His Twelve, and there were numerous Pharisees, Jews and Gentiles that refused to accept His Love at all. Surely this wasn't due to any defect on Jesus' part. Judas had free will, and he chose to use it for evil. Those who have left cause us immense pain. We can identify with the Parable of the Lost Sheep. The ninety nine are not enough of a consolation to alleviate the pain caused by the one stray. Don't let the stray cause you to give up. Keep praying and searching! Love all of the sheep Our Lord gives you, and your love will increase and flow to

the straying. Your love will give them every opportunity to return. Teaching the straying or hard hearted student is disheartening. Keep offering! The invitation, given lovingly and tirelessly, is all we are concerned with.

If I ask Our Lord and Our Lady, They will enlighten me to see particular ways I can grow out of selfishness and into Love. I must KNOW Our Lord through prayer and study of the Scriptures, through pondering the Word with Our Blessed Mother. All of this will enliven my teaching. My students will be able to tell that because I love them, I want to introduce them to the Love of my life. Christ will come to them as a personal Friend, not as a subject to study from afar.

The original aim of our Institute was, and remains, to convert sinners and transform society. Fr. Masmitjá envisioned us doing this in a preventative way by forming the young, and he counselled that prayer and teaching would be most effective to attack sin at its root. We are “to instruct others in the faith so they may become instruments for instructing and strengthening others, and in this fashion rebuild the foundations of morality in a society weakened by its divorce from religion” (#65).

In order to convert sinners and transform society, we must actively seek prayer and opportunities to teach. There is a beautiful union between prayer and teaching. Prayer enlivens my teaching, teaching flows from prayer and causes me to seek a deeper prayer life. True prayer should move me to pass on what I have received. Immediately after her heavenly encounter at the Annunciation, Our Lady was moved to take Christ to her cousin Elizabeth. Like her, I should be so in love with Our Lord that I cannot contain my faith, that I am bursting to share this Goodness with others. If I am not sharing my faith, I should take this to prayer and ask Our Lord to show me why I am less eager to talk about my faith than I am to encourage others to try out a certain restaurant, movie or iPhone app.

Do I get more excited about a song, meal or pair of shoes than prayer, the Sacraments or other aspect of our Faith?

We are not instructing you and others just for your own well-being and holiness. If it all stopped there, it would be a very worthy endeavor, for your souls are precious and of infinite value! But Our Lord is too good to let it end there! You are to be instruments! We instruct others (you), so you in turn may be instruments for instructing and strengthening others. It's not just about your holiness. You are called to share what you have received. Pray about it! Seek it! In case you are experiencing interior panic at the prospect of evangelizing and teaching the faith, calm down. Just do what you are able. Our Lord will provide. St. Augustine recognized the problem. He said you should simply start with the souls that Our Lord gives to you, the people you know and meet.

We Sisters spread the Faith in all kinds of ways, and this is very Marian. Let's look at her and how she joined her Son's mission of Redemption. We are introduced to her at the Annunciation. That's our first lesson: Say yes to God and receive Him into your life. Then she makes haste to visit and assist Elizabeth. Lesson two: Take Him Whom we have received to those whom we know and love. During Jesus' childhood, we see Our Lady caring for Him, nurturing Him, and learning from Him. Lesson three: Take care of the Christ dwelling within you through rooting out sin, fostering prayer, time with Scripture, praying the Rosary, doing your daily duties well, and works of mercy. When Christ as an adult left His Mother's side for three years of Public Ministry culminating with His Passion and Death, Mary was oftentimes not at His side. Cardinal Newman wrote, "She showed herself a Mother by following Him with her prayers, since she could help Him in no other way." Lesson four: intercessory prayer: pray and sacrifice for others. After Jesus' Resurrection, Scripture tells us that the Apostles gathered with Mary to await the Holy Spirit. There is also evidence that she shared with them her memories of her Son. This is

most likely the source the Gospel writers used to record the events of the Joyful Mysteries at the beginning of the Gospels. Lesson five: Care for the Church and our priests. Share with others what you have received, how you have encountered Christ in your own life. Pray and sacrifice for the Church, our priests, Bishop Kemme, Pope Francis, for conversions, for your IHM Sisters (!), for the fostering and strengthening of all vocations.

Included in our Constitution articles on our apostolate of teaching, we learn that Sisters “serve the people of God at every level and in any program which provides an opportunity to spread the Gospel message. Likewise, Sisters engaged in the domestic works of the Institute contribute essentially to this apostolate of service” (#67). Moreover, when old age or illness prevents a Sister from active teaching, her prayers and suffering, in union with Christ and Mary, contribute powerfully to the work of the Institute (#73). All of us can find ourselves somewhere in this, and perhaps we jump from one to the other on any given week, day, month or year: actively teaching, domestic work, prayer and suffering. Can you see all of the opportunities?! Every moment can be spent winning souls for Christ. Our Lady did this in her own life.

I was trained in the work of evangelization before I entered the Convent. When I entered, most of my friends remained in this active ministry. I would receive letters from them describing their work of evangelizing in Canada, in US inner cities, the beaches of Florida during Spring Break, and in Russia. Here I was, cleaning the floor, gardening, making jelly and praying in our little Chapel. I had to learn that more souls are saved through obedience than through any other efforts. Then I began teaching, and it was more fruitful because it was an act of obedience. I was aware that I was teaching not because I had an awesome message or gift to share (see the focus on self), but because Our Lord wills it, He has asked me to take Him others and others to Him (now the focus is on Him as the beginning, middle and end of

my teaching). During the first three years or so of formation, we receive no formal training in teaching. We spend all our effort on conforming our life to Christ with Our Lady as our model. Only after receiving this inner formation can we build our teaching on a solid, Christ-centered foundation.

Anyone who collaborates with us shares in the works of our Institute and the fruits of that work. We can do more with help than we could do otherwise. We would have to say no to several requests, or we would not serve as well, without assistance. We are very grateful for all the help that is offered and given in so many ways. How else do you help us? By attending our events! Thank you! Your being here encourages us to keep providing and serving! Ask us to teach, to speak, to provide spiritual opportunities. We cannot say yes to everything, but your asking spurs us on to keep seeking ways to bring Christ to souls.

Our Constitutions mention that all of our works are to be in cooperation with the bishop's pastoral plan (#69). We also publically and privately respect and support those in authority (Directory #13). We don't tell priests or principals, and especially the bishop, what to do. It has happened at every school that fellow teachers or parents will tell me, "You ask Father or the principal. He has to do what you say: you're a Sister!" I have to inform them that it doesn't really work that way at all! The pastor knows very well that he is in charge of the parish, and the principal the school. Still, it's not as if we have no influence at all. Our influence is Marian and beautiful. She never ordered the Apostles around, though she definitely influenced them through her motherly guidance, prayers and presence. It's amazing how gently effective this can be, without being forceful. I imagine a number of pastors would be grateful for a more Marian approach from helpful parishioners!

We have spent most of our time reflecting on prayer, personal holiness and lovingly reaching out to others. In order to teach the faith, isn't training and study necessary? Of course it is! The meat, or

content of our teaching must flow from a heart united to His, or else it is mere information, a body without a soul. Moreover, when we are formed in a life of prayer and holiness, our teaching has direction. St. Catherine of Siena wrote that understanding frees the heart to love. This is the goal of our teaching! To lead our students to: Love. Bl. Jacinta said, "If only I could put into all hearts the fire that burns within me, that makes me love the Hearts of Jesus and Mary so much!"

Our Constitutions mention study coupled with prayer. "The Sisters devote their lives to the study of the Church's teaching, always pondering the mysteries of the Faith in the light of prayer" (#69). "By prayer and study each Sister seeks to deepen and to enrich her power to bear witness to the truths of the Catholic Faith" (#72). This union of study and prayer is essential in the life of anyone learning our Faith. Prayer helps us to love what we study. We receive it from Our Mother, the Church. The light of prayer allows the beautiful truths of our Faith to penetrate deeply, to form us, to bear fruit. This study becomes my foundation, my formation, which leads me to fruitfully pass on what I receive. How do I use my time? Do I spend time in prayer and study? When I have some time and can decide what to do with it, is prayer and study on my list of options?

Our Directory mentions that we live "in a world divided by individual and collective selfishness, disrespect for the person and his rights" (#49). We see the growing darkness in our world. It is disheartening. The picture the devil wants to paint is one of despair, to make us think that the darkness of sin and selfishness is growing and unstoppable, that it's too late, that people have proven that they cannot, will not, and do not want to change. What a big, fat, depressing lie! There is hope! Love is stronger! Love dissipates the darkness. Love has already and continues to conquer sin and death! This is the Love that we have received from Christ and bring into the classroom. This love makes the Gospel believable and is a ray of hope piercing the darkness of our world, piercing the darkness of sin

surrounding some of our students (Dir. #49). We love them out of sin. We love them into virtue. We love them into the Faith.

My high schoolers have been amused when I share with them that my Constitutions say I have to be kind to them, that trouble makers are especially mentioned as needing my special care, and that because of my vow of obedience, I don't really have a choice in the matter. As several of them have expressed, "That's a pretty sweet deal, Sister!" I wouldn't want it any other way. Our students need to know they are loved, that they are lovable just the way they are. My love for them is not conditional, is not based on their behavior. Because I love them, I want the best for them, academically, with their behavior, and otherwise.

I receive notes, pictures and drawings almost every day from my third graders. I have to admit that the notes that put the biggest smile on my face are notes of apology. "Dear Sister, I am sorry for being bad. I will be nicer to you next time. I will not ever toss markers again." "Dear Sister, I am sorry for not doing my work and walking around the room talking with other people. Because I was being bad I deserve this consequence. Will you please forgive me? If you send an email home my mom and dad will get very upset because I was not supposed to get in trouble to go to the principal's office. Either way I am truly sorry." "Dear Sister, I am very sorry that I cheated. I know it was wrong. When I go to Confession I will tell God that I am very, very sorry. I prayed to St. Bernadette [it was her feast day] for help next time not to be tempted to cheat. I am very sorry. PS I will not do it again. I'll try hard. PPS very hard" "Dear Sister, I'm sorry for not being good today. I hope you're not mad at me. I learned that I need to man up. I hope you're not mad at me like I said, but there's one thing: I love you and you're the best teacher." This last note says on the front: "We love you so much Sister. Thank you." On the inside there are two rainbow hearts. In the center of the first heart is written, "Love is important." In

the second, "Sisters are important." In these notes, I can tell that they know I love them, and they love me. This should make it easier for them to really believe in Our Lord's unconditional love for them. I pray that this is so.

Love makes our life of Faith so sweet that we can see sin for the ugliness it really is. Sin is an ugly, evil lie. Love is good, true and beautiful. Love removes the blinders the evil one tries to apply to our eyes. As more people live a life of faith, others receive true vision from them: virtue is life; sin is death.

As our life and teaching as IHM Sisters is rooted in prayer, so must the students' reception of the Faith be rooted in prayer. "To a society that has forgotten how to pray" the Sisters seek "to direct their students to strive for holiness" through the Eucharist, other prayers and penances, and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, which brings a "joyful fidelity to the Lord" (Dir. #52-53). The Eucharist, prayers, penances, devotion to Our Heavenly Mother... What a rock solid formation! Our students love it! They need it! We all need it! Look at your life. Ask Our Lord to show you: Where do you feel called to become more Eucharistic, Marian, prayerful and penitential? Share this with others.

Sharing a prayer life with students is a great gift. One time I received a phone call in the evening. On the other end of the line was a senior football player, a big linebacker, and he was crying. He didn't say what was wrong; he just asked if he could come over. I asked the Sisters to pray, not knowing what he needed. He arrived, sat down, and told me that his mom had just walked out on the family. He asked his dad about it, and his dad said that he was willing to work on the marriage, but mom was not. Her decision was final, and she was not coming home. The son did not see this coming, and he was devastated. He asked what could be done. I told him we would pray like crazy. He shared with me that he had not been the most faithful to praying and attending Mass on the weekend. I told him this must

change because he needed grace to bear the difficulties of life. Then we prayed together, both memorized prayers such as the Memorare and spontaneous prayer. I gave him a green scapular, which is dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and is known for winning the grace of conversion. He promised to get the scapular to his mom that evening. We made an appointment during my free period the next day when he had study hall to go to the Chapel at school and pray again. He arrived at my room during sixth hour, radiant. He said, "Sister! I got a text from my mom this morning. She said she's coming home, and she and dad will work everything out!" We kept our prayer date, and went to the Chapel. We prayed in thanksgiving for the Lord's goodness. We prayed for the student's parents to receive healing and for the strengthening of their marriage. Then I admit that I used the opportunity to lay it on thick: I prayed something like this aloud, "Dear Lord, in thanksgiving for Your love and goodness, we resolve to fulfill all of our obligations, never to miss Sunday Mass, to pray regularly, and to avoid sin because we need Your help and grace, and we are so grateful for the way You have blessed us." The student responded with a strong, "Amen." At the end of that year, he gave me a senior picture. Written on the back was: "Sister, you taught me how to pray. I'll never forget it. Thank you."

To be faithful to everything we reflected on in this talk may seem idealistic and HARD. It is! Our Constitutions recognize our weakness and explicitly state that "Only in deep communion with Christ the Teacher will [the Sister] find the light and strength" to carry this out (#64). This is a profoundly Marian way to live – in deep union with Christ Who gives light and strength. Let us pray for each other, that we may all seek deeper union with Our Lord, which will move us to bring Him to others and others to Him, to receive His Love and love others with that Love. We all do this according to our state in life, according to our responsibilities. I pray that our witness in teaching will inspire you as it has one particular mother: "Sisters, Thank you so much for sharing your Sisters with our children. And more so for opening

your home and hearts to them. My daughter and I really enjoyed our visit to the Convent. All of you are so kind, gentle and always happy!! I wish to emulate your actions in my parenting.” We’re all in this together. Christ is with us! Mary shows us the way!