

## **The Liberation of Jouarre and the Power of Mercy**

Pope Francis recently announced that beginning on December 8<sup>th</sup> of this year, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, the Catholic Church will enter into what he has called an extraordinary jubilee Year of Mercy: a year to bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives and the oppressed, and restore sight to the blind. December 8<sup>th</sup> will also mark the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United States' entrance into World War II, the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Somewhat less well known, December 8<sup>th</sup> is the anniversary of my entrance into the monastery. It was the culmination of a process that began 20 years ago, when I came to the last abbey fair and received an exquisite crown of flowers made by the nuns. That floral crown, which I have kept to this day, reminded me of my encounter with a place of beauty, a place where my soul felt met, a place that proclaimed the goodness of God. August 27<sup>th</sup> marks moment of conception for that place, this abbey, and in preparation for the coming Year of Mercy, I would like to reflect on what happened on the day of the liberation of Jouarre, how the struggle for liberation continues today, and how mercy comprises the front line of this fight.

So let us return back to August 27<sup>th</sup> of 1944. A young American nun in France, Mère Benoit Duss, is hiding from the Nazis. When the liberating troops drive off the Germans, she recognizes from the monastery tower the star on the Allies' tanks and realizes that it is the Americans who have freed her from captivity. Taking in their exhausted yet vigilant bodies, and then a large American flag, she recounts, "I had to do something. They had been willing to give their lives, and I could feel for the others, the ones who had given their lives so that these men could be here this day." A vision is born within her to bring the gift of contemplative life to the United States in response to their incredible sacrifice. The vision surprises her, shakes her foundations. She had deliberately left America behind and completely identified with her French abbey. And yet her birth country had entered a broken Europe and freed her—a gift she had not sought or earned from them. A profound experience of mercy. As she contemplates how she could match

such a gift, a member of her community, Mère Étienne, comes to her with a roll of Lifesavers that had been given to her by some of the soldiers. She wants Mère Benoit to have the first one, and asks for a message she could take back to the Americans. Mère Benoit, the future Lady Abbess, looks around and sights a beautiful pale yellow rose. She offers it to Mère Étienne to take to them saying, “This is my message.”

Returning to our present time, if there is a person to whom I would give a rose today, in gratitude for the ongoing sacrifice required for liberation, it would be a man named Bryan Stevenson. On a different front, he fights for the poor and incarcerated. The community has recently read his autobiography *Just Mercy*, which recounts Stevenson's decades as a lawyer who founds the Equal Justice Initiative, an organization to defend people given sentences of death or life imprisonment that stem not from justice, but from poverty, racism, and negligence. He writes of his advocacy for Herbert Richardson, a Vietnam veteran who suffered extreme physical and mental trauma after enlisting at eighteen, especially when his entire platoon was killed in an ambush. Returning to the U.S., disabled and tortured by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, he ended up on Alabama's death row when a bomb he made inadvertently killed a young girl, Rena Mae Collins. The jury never knew of his struggles with PTSD; how his mind had never fully left the horrors of the Vietnam jungle. Despite Stevenson's efforts, Richardson was executed.

In his plea for mercy for his clients, Stevenson urges us to consider that each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done. He asks us not to attempt to hide or eliminate all the broken people, realizing that we have each been broken in some way, either through our own choices or events beyond our control. He writes, “In fact there is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and a desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy...you begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us.” Herbert Richardson's main preoccupation in the week leading to his execution was that his widow would receive an American flag from the government upon his death. In

this, I believe he wanted to be remembered not for the worst thing he had ever done, but for what he saw as the best thing he had ever done: he put his life on the line to serve his country.

Yet I would say that in the eyes of mercy we are not only more than the worst thing we have ever done, we are more than the best thing we have ever done. I have a vision of what it would be like for us to come to the end our lives and face the judgment seat of God. Standing at the gate of heaven we would make a case to show what we had done with our lives. If we were honest, each of us would reveal some things of which we were ashamed, and some things of which we were most proud, the best and the worst of what we had done with our lives. After we would finish our case, I picture a beautiful woman, a gracious advocate, approaching us to say, "That is an interesting perspective on what you have done with your life. Now, would you like to me show unto you what *God* has done with your life? And what would then unfold before our eyes might be our greatest encounter with mercy. Like a rose unfurling, we would see our lives opened up, stretching from forever to forever, every good deed rippling out infinitely, and shockingly every moment of brokenness a place of entrance for God, connecting us with one another in our humanity. Then the lady would turn her eyes of mercy towards us and say, "*This* is the kingdom of God. You are, and have always been, free to enter."

I would invite you now to look around. To enter this world of trees and field, birds and blue sky, the people beside you. Recall moments of encounter on this land: with a flower, an animal, a strain of chant, the smell of fresh-baked bread, the taste of thick, creamy milk, a piercing word, a look of compassion, a vision of beauty. This is the rose of Lady Abbess unfurling. On August 27<sup>th</sup> 1944 there was no way she could have known what would blossom forth from her experience of mercy and liberation. There is no way the American soldier who received her rose, kissed it, and burst into tears could fully know that his sacrifice and those of his brothers in arms would lead to this place of life, of sweetness, of hope. They could not know all that God would do with their lives. We are

privileged on this day in particular to have a glimpse of the kingdom of God, to see the mercy of God. To be here is to be liberated by knowing we are more than the worst thing we have ever done, we are more than even the best thing we have ever done. Because we belong to God, and in mercy God takes our lives, our beauty and our brokenness, and weaves it into a love that flows from forever to forever.

Given by Sister Gregory Healy at the Liberation of  
Jouarre Ceremony at the Abbey of Regina Laudis,  
© August 27, 2015