

Diocese of Des Moines Centennial Celebration

By Kathy Regan

I was born & raised a country girl...it was life on an Iowa farm where I experienced the changing of the seasons...I experienced most profoundly both life & death...where the world was constantly transforming before my very eyes...providing me with glimpses and moments of conversion.

Conversion...the dynamic & lifelong process by which a person changes their way of living in order to become more devoted to the "good news."

Even though I could not express it as a child...I always knew that I was a part of something much bigger than myself...that life had to be filled with "good news."

I remember my first year of school...a kindergartener...and as a country kid I always rode the school bus. The beginning of the school year always brought with it seasonal workers from Mexico to help with the harvest. It was the 50's and the children of migrant workers weren't allowed to attend school.

Each morning the bus would drop me off...and I would wait for it to slowly pull away. Every morning...on the other side of the street...a Latino boy would be waiting to exchange a smile & a wave. Other people just called him names...even though I did not understand what they meant...I knew that the words they spoke were not nice. Why would they say that about my friend? Why did he not just cross the street and walk with me into school? It wasn't long until I came to realize that there was more than a street that separated us. Even though I constantly questioned...I had no voice. I learned at a very early age...life was not fair!

I experienced this daily in my life...growing up in a house where love was conditional...and the conditions of that love rested in the hands of the people in my life who had more power. Indeed...life was not fair!

As I reflect back upon my life...it was at the age of eleven that proved to be filled with defining moments in my life...

It was the year my 21 year old brother, Bob, was killed in a tractor accident and the loss triggered within me questions about God and the search for the answers that took me on a journey that would change my life!

My family never attended church on a regular basis. There was no Sunday school, no family prayer...no talk about the presence of God...anywhere! But following the death of my brother, my family immersed themselves into the life of the church. When the feeling of loss began to lessen...so did our attendance at church. But I made other choices...choices that led me to the sacraments...choices that led me to life!

I found the courage that year to confront the injustice in my life and the courage to cross the street and stand with the marginalized. My life was a testament to the scripture... **“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”** That was the year...at age eleven...that I found my voice.

You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you have!

The path of discipleship is a choice...a choice that has led me on a holy adventure taking me to some of the most impoverished countries in the world...taking me to the neighbor outside my back door...leading me into hearts of teenagers...providing me with a voice to speak out against situations that are unfair... capturing on film and expressing in word the struggles for justice....but the greatest journey has been the journey into the heart God...and back out into world. I have discovered that the path of discipleship is a true journey of love.

In the Gospel of John...Chapter 15...it speaks about this kind of love...

⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

And it continues...

⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide then in my love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

In my family of origin...I had never known a love like this! An all-consuming, never-ending love. A love that calls forth the best in me...that connects me to the vine of life...a sacramental love that comes to me through the Eucharist.

We come to the Eucharist...a sacrament so familiar to us, an action we do so instinctively as Catholics that it is in the very depth of our being...the movements and gestures, the often-repeated words, the sights the sounds and tastes and smells that frame this miracle of graced relationships. We come to listen to our family stories...and to love...and having been loved...we are sent...to be Christ's hands and feet. We do it over and over and over. In many ways ...it is like the air we breathe. As I gather at this table...the table that invites me to become ONE...it is at this table that I am fed and nourished.

Alone we are not Jesus...but together we are the Body of Christ. Eucharist is never done in isolation...we experience this love within community...within our parishes...within our families.

The voice of God's love speaks to me through the many relationships in my life...

As a woman of faith, I come to God in prayer. I seek to listen to God's voice in the silence...as I center my life in Christ. Some days are easier than others...I get distracted amid the busy-ness of life...but God not only patiently waits for me to return to the quiet...He walks with me through the chaos.

As a wife...I have been married to the love of my life for 40 years. And even though I am officially the "Church Lady," my husband models for me daily what it means to be a disciple. Though a man of few words...his actions speak volumes about unconditional love.

As a mother, I have been blessed with four children...the fruits of my labor. I have heard God's voice with the greatest clarity through that special love...the special bond between a mother and a child. They have taught me about the goodness of family. As a mother, I have watched them develop their own gifts and find their own voice. And just when I thought my heart could not possibly hold anymore love...I had grandchildren...a new generation whose very presence proclaims the love of God!

I have spent 30 years of my life in ministry...no matter how old I get...I will forever and always be a youth minister. What I have come to discover about God I have learned from the hearts of teenagers. I have walked with them through the darkest of valleys and have stood with them on the highest of mountains...always humbled to share the journey as they seek out and name the God experiences in their lives.

What would life be without friends? They have stood with me on the brink of discovery...at times when I couldn't breathe...assuring me that I could do the next "big thing" God was calling me to.

How can one woman be so blessed!

But sometimes the voice of God uses no words. On August 24, 2010...I stood in a village with 44 families in the Upper Alto Plano of La Paz, Bolivia. That day this small community received running water for the first time in their lives.

Water...life-giving water...flowing down the mountain and into the lives of these Andean people. There were tears and laughter, there was dancing and rejoicing and there were prayers thanking God and Catholic Relief Services for this gift of life.

I will never know all of their names but I will never, never forget their faces.

I have, also, come to discover that God speaks through creation – I experienced this as a child growing up on a farm and came to experience this while in La Oroya, Peru. I witnessed firsthand the devastating effects of abuse caused by mining extractives at the hands of big business. Gaping holes, slag heaps and acid rain suck the very life out of the land and its people.

I believe my life came full circle when I heard Pedro Barretto, Bishop of the Hauncayo Valley in Peru speak about the horrors happening to his people. I knew this kind of abuse...the raping of the land at the hands of the powerful. Where then Lord, is the "Good News?"

And then I heard it...when Bishop Pedro said..."It is not enough to denounce the horror that is happening to our world...but we have to be willing to announce the good news...to be the good news."

That is what evangelization means to me...to proclaim with your very life...through word and action...the goodness of God amidst the struggles for justice...to speak the truth...to be the good news...to be the voice of God in this world.

I have spent my life...advocating/speaking out for justice...as a theology teacher & campus minister, as a spiritual director, as a youth minister, as a consultant, as a missionary, as a photographer & writer and now as a fair trade ambassador for Catholic Relief Services...as I work toward economic justice for our global brothers and sisters by creating awareness and making a difference one purchase at a time.

I have come to realize that it is not enough to simply do charity...Faith-based charity provides crumbs from the table...but faith-based justice offers a place at the table!

Through my travels I have experienced how small the world really is...that we are all brothers & sisters...that our lives are inter-woven, inter-connected and inter-twined...that there is room at the table for everyone.

So for me, conversion is a day to day process of trusting...as I bring my doubts and insecurities, my hopes & my dreams...to God in prayer. Trusting God with my life, knowing that God will provide me with what I need to put my faith into action...that as I embrace the sacraments, I will be nourished so that I will have the strength to continue this journey of discipleship...even on the days when I can't see the road ahead.

To have the courage to live the words from Micah...

He has told you what is good;
and what the LORD requires of you
to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God.

Life is still not fair for many people in this world. But know that there is power in one voice...the small still voice of God who speaks through you...a voice willing to proclaim the "Good News." I have been called many times in my life...and I have found the courage to somehow say "yes"...not because I have all the right skills or all the right answers or all the right knowledge...but because I have a heart willing to serve...and a voice willing to speak out on behalf of those who are voiceless!

"And Jesus said to disciples (in the Gospel of Mark), "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news."

I am still growing and becoming...each day as I live in and follow Christ.

This is just a snapshot of my life.

A simple life of a country girl...ordinary in every way...made extra-ordinary through the power & grace of God.

And all I had to do was to simply say "yes!"