

Courtesy and Politeness.

August 2016.

Yesterday I found myself visiting Sr Francis Marie Bourke. I went with Brigid Stokes and Nora McCarthy both of whom were part of Francis' community before she moved to the nursing home where she now resides- a nursing home run by the Holy Faith sisters. Many of you know Francis. She spent some years in California before returning to Castlecore and working in the Novitiate. Later she worked as a teacher in Newbridge and in the retreat centre in Kilkenny. Francis now suffers from dementia. She was cared for over many years in the Iona Road community and then in 2014 it was obvious that she needed more fulltime care. Some days are better than others for her. Yesterday was a day when she did not want to swallow a tablet. It took a lot of coaxing and the others of us simulating taking tablets ourselves in an effort to encourage her. However, what was clear yesterday was that she knew that we three were 'hers'- different from the other residents and staff who surrounded her. And in her limited way she was able to communicate how lovely it was to be 'all together'. This is a recurring theme of Francis'.

Then today I came across a document written by Francis called 'The Charism of the Ladies of Mary' and submitted in 1978 as part of her Spirituality course in Denver, Colorado. It is thorough, well-researched and well-written as would be the style of Francis. As was the case with the others who researched the writings of the Founder, Francis was struck by his emphasis on courtesy and politeness.

I quote from her text:

"Recurrently in his communications with his congregations, the Canon encouraged politeness among his religious. This politeness, however, was no mere worldly politeness but rather a Christian love that permeates one's life and is demonstrated in love for Christ and one's neighbour."

'There is in this intimate connection between politeness and virtue a common element in that the bane of both is selfishness. Both demand a certain abnegation which in virtuous persons is based on humility. In persons whose only aim is to please there is but a veneer of real politeness. What, in fact, does real politeness require of us? In general, it means that we forget ourselves for the sake of others. What is that but humility? Again, that we take an interest in others and that we anticipate their wishes. What is that but charity? That we put ourselves to considerable inconvenience to save others from it. What is that but mortification?' (Writings of the Founder.)

More succinctly it states in another part of his writing: *'True politeness is based on charity.'*

And so today I sit with this particular emphasis of the Founder and I reflect on the sisters, associates, co-workers, who have modelled this spirit of courtesy and politeness. The words themselves have become 'old world' and maybe 'old hat' - almost obsolete. Yet we are all touched when we receive a courtesy. We are affirmed in our being, built up and strengthened for the road ahead. Courtesies can come in such small ways but the memory of them can last forever. Similarly the sting of a rebuff, a discourtesy or indifference is hard to erase. We all know what it is to experience both. Life

sees to that. I am also sure that there have been times when each of us has been less than gracious to another.

The last school in which I worked came into being as an amalgamation of two schools with different traditions and attempted to forge a new and distinct identity. One of the first things that we did together was to draw up a **Code of Courtesy**. It was totally separate from the school rules and invited staff and students to be gracious and courteous in word, tone of voice and deed. It didn't turn us into angels but it made a difference. It was a standard against which we could measure ourselves and each other. It was a standard against which we could challenge each other. Attending to our Founder's exhortation to us also makes a difference in how we relate to each other and those we meet.

In visiting the regions/Africa Province over the past two years I have been struck by a number of things. I am struck by the care given to the sick and aged sisters (and in our older regions most of us are 'aged') I am struck by the sensitivity and respect shown to those who have Alzheimer's or some form of dementia. I am aware of the sisters – no longer young themselves- who selflessly take on roles of responsibility as a service to the whole region. I see a lot of goodness, compassion, kindness and courtesy. I see a spirit of service. I see the sisters who are involved in ministries relate with great courtesy and respect to former prisoners, students, refugees and asylum seekers, homeless, the sick, parishioners and all those to whom they minister. I am also conscious that those of us who at this time are called to a service of leadership (whatever the context) are called to exercise it with humility, politeness and courtesy.

However, where there is light, there is shadow. And indeed there is a distinct risk that as a certain break-down of the traditional model of religious life takes place and as we become burdened by the rigours of life, we could very easily let our standards slip and simply pass each other by like ships in the night with no real engagement let alone courtesy – with each of us 'paddling her own canoe'. And so we frail and fallible human beings are called in this, our 200th year to attend to the invitation of our Founder once more. His call is not to any smarmy, superficial politeness but a depth of respect, attention to the other and a putting the other before ourselves. Francis Marie adds: 'This politeness, this nobility of soul, was the very essence of the Canon's life.'

Thank you, Francis.

Helen Lane.