

Cokie Roberts Keynote to Leadership Conference of Women Religious New Orleans -- August 12, 2009

Welcome to New Orleans, my home town and thank you for the wonderful work you did and continue to do after Hurricane Katrina, raising almost eight million dollars for the afflicted of the city, in addition to your physical presence and your prayers . It is appropriate that you are gathering this year, of all years, in the place where Catholic religious women first landed on the shores of what would become this great experiment we call America. We come together--and I am so privileged to be one of those invited to have a small part in this incredible gathering of inspiring women--at a time of challenge. How prescient your theme for this conference--Women of Spirit--Creating in Chaos. I would argue that's always been pretty much the spirit of creation in this country--but more on that in a minute.

Obviously, this meeting is taking place as we learn more about the Apostolic Visitation. I have read the *Instrumentum Laboris*: "The specific task of the Visitation is to look into the quality of the life of women religious in the United States who are members of apostolic religious institutes." Seems like an awfully subjective assignment to me and one that I'm certainly not qualified to talk about--though I have visited with my RSCJ friends in small community houses, in the provincial house and most recently in the retirement home in California and witnessed a "quality of life" that is both holy and holistic, prayerful and playful (especially in the retirement home!). But I can speak with some authority about the quality of the lives changed by religious women in this country--the dignity with which you treat the poor; the services you provide for the frightened pregnant girl so that she has the courage to choose life; the care with which you comfort the elderly and sick; the education you insist on for children who are left behind by their school systems. I have seen the hospitals you run with efficiency and best economic practices as well as great concern for the patients--both medical and spiritual. I spend a good deal of time in the schools of the Sacred Heart order where I delight in the girls growing into young women who are dedicated to the service of the people of God, which they understand to be their shared humanity. I know that the quality of the lives of thousands of people in this country are improved everyday by the women in this room, and I am eternally grateful to you for what you do all day every day for all of us. And over the centuries since the Ursulines first arrived in this great city in 1727, millions of lives have been affected by Catholic religious women working in every imaginable field.

I understand that one of the documents that will be guiding the Apostolic Visitation is *Perfectione Caritatis*. And I read in it that "the appropriate renewal of religious life involves two simultaneous processes: 1. a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community and 2. an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times..." As we were saying--creating out of chaos. And that was true from the beginning in this country.

The Ursuline nuns were recruited by the French colonists here in New Orleans to run a military hospital. Talk about chaos! But as soon as they got here they started educating women, establishing the first school for women and the first Catholic school in what would become the United States. Along with teaching the daughters of wealthy French and Creole families, the nuns also operated a free school for black and Indian girls--a totally radical concept, one where they adjusted to the changed conditions. And the conditions kept changing--the French imported *filles a la cassette* --marriageable women for the male colonists. The nuns quickly

started providing housing and chaperonage for those vulnerable girls, and soon opened an orphanage as well, but they had to take on both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities to change their mission. They were the people on the ground, dealing with reality, not theory. They were acting in anticipation of another prescription outlined centuries later in *Perfectae Caritatis*: "The manner of living, praying, and working should be suitably adapted to the physical and psychological conditions of today's religious and also, to the extent required by the nature of each community, to the needs of the apostolate, the requirements of a given culture, and the social and economic circumstances anywhere, but especially in missionary territories." This was definitely a missionary territory where social conditions kept changing. Political conditions kept changing as well--French government gave way to Spanish control and the Ursulines imported some members of the order from Spain. But then in 1803 when rumors of return to French rule started swirling--this time under the anti-cleric Napoleon, a number of the women left for Cuba to continue to live under "His Catholic Majesty" of Spain despite the pleadings of the new French governor Pierre Clement Laussat: "My ladies the need that the colony has of you, the good that you do here, the esteem of the public which you enjoy and which is justly due you have come to the knowledge of the French government which has decreed that you will be preserved with all property."

Of course the French rule was only a sham--Napoleon had sold Louisiana to the Americans--a much dicier proposition for the Ursulines than the French, who were after all familiar. The French tried to terrify the nuns, printing stories that their property would be seized. Instead when Gov. Claiborne arrived he rushed to the convent to assure the religious "that they would be protected in their persons, the property, and the religion of their choice." He was impressed by the size of the school and the sliding pay scale--but the nuns wanted to hear from the top--so they wrote to Pres. Jefferson who re-assured them that their institution would "meet all the protection which my office can give it." But now these women were under this strange new American government which could change at any moment. After all, Jefferson had only a few years before defeated the sitting president John Adams, who accepted the consequences of his loss and left office. Unheard of in human history. Who knew what could happen next? So when Vice President Aaron Burr came through on the lam from murder charges after killing Alexander Hamilton the nuns covered their bases--and sent this man who might someday be useful to them a letter inviting him to the convent. "We conversed at first through the grates, but presently I was admitted within" Burr wrote to his daughter, where "All was gaiety, wit and sprightliness." The notorious ladies' man Burr inside the cloister! After a "repast of wine, fruit and cakes" the nuns sent Burr on his way--a politician in their corner should they need to once again adjust to the changed conditions of the times.

I suspect many of you know the role played by the Ursulines during the Battle of New Orleans at the end of 1814 where they worked to provide clothes for the militia men who arrived to defend the city, then allowed the frightened women and children to gather in the chapel to pray through the night of the battle to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, our special New Orleans Madonna, and then nursed the wounded from both sides. The care "was so highly appreciated by their patients, that British veterans were seen to weep like children when obliged to leave with their officers," say letters in Ursuline archives, and the militia men from Kentucky and Tennessee for years sent baskets of "bacon, fruit, etc. as tokens of gratitude to their Ursuline mothers." Creating out of chaos indeed.

Though I have particular fealty to the Religious of the Society of the Sacred Heart and the great Ursuline women who helped found this city and then helped save it again at great

personal peril during and after Hurricane Katrina, I have also developed a fealty to Elizabeth Seton. Again--talk about adjusting to conditions! Don't you love the way the history books say: "And then she started the parochial school system in the United States." Hold on--did that take some doing? Isn't there a story there?

Indeed there is. Elizabeth Bayley Seton was a wealthy young Protestant woman with a strong sense of social obligation at the end of the Eighteenth Century and beginning of the Nineteenth Century in New York. She worked with the great educator and reformer Isabella Graham to establish the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children. After she and her husband had five children, he lost both his money and his health. So the couple, with their oldest child, traveled to Italy to try to restore him. When they arrived, the Italians refused to allow them to land because there had been a yellow fever epidemic in New York, so they were dispatched to a *lazzaretto*—a sort of quarantine hospital that was more like a prison. When they were finally released to their Italian friends, Seton was so sick that he died a few days later. Elizabeth, on a visit to a Catholic church, apparently experienced some sort of epiphany, and decided to investigate becoming a Catholic. When she returned to New York, she described what she called an almost comical fight for her soul. The Episcopalians, Catholics, Presbyterians, Quakers, Anabaptists and Methodists were all after her. Much to the dismay of her family and friends, she became a Catholic in the spring of 1805. In order to support her five children, she opened a school but her friends wouldn't send their children because Elizabeth was a Catholic. Fortunately, her Italian friends were helping with the education of her boys, but still she was in desperate straits.

In 1808, Mrs. Seton accepted an invitation to set up a school for girls in Baltimore, a far more Catholic-friendly city, and there she founded the first indigenous order of religious women in America. She and her little band of women, (including, much to the horror of the Seton family, two of her husband's sisters) made up the rules as they went along--creating out of chaos. Mother Seton negotiated with Archbishop Carroll how to handle her new duties while caring for her children and insisting that she "would prefer before all things the advantage of my children, if it happened that I had to choose between what I owe to them and the other duties to which I was pledged." The kids came first. The habit was the widow's garb she was already wearing with a change of chapeau. The "gift" of land for a mother house in Emmitsburg sent her and the other new religious off in covered wagon into the Maryland mountains where they suffered under terrible conditions but still they opened St. Joseph's school by mid-winter of 1810 for the needy girls of the parish. That was the first parochial school in the country. The nuns then established the Academy of St. Joseph to pay for the free school. On Mother Seton went, opening hospitals, orphanages and more and more schools. It was a tremendous challenge for a woman at a time when women had no legal or political rights. It took determination and smarts, which her many followers understood as they worked for her canonization, which was achieved in 1975.

When I was growing up, I heard repeatedly the story of another now saint--Philippine Duchesne, though she was a "Blessed" when I was a little girl. The Society of the Sacred Heart was founded by Madeleine Sophie Barat 1800--talk about creation out of chaos—in the wake of the French Revolution when the government was shutting down convents and monasteries. Philippine, the daughter of a wealthy family from Grenoble, had belonged to one of the orders that had been repressed before she joined Mother Barat. Somehow, she developed a passion to work with American Indians—what she called savages. I can't imagine what her idea of Native Americans might have been, but she was determined to minister to them. Then Bishop

DuBourg, whose enormous diocese stretched from New Orleans up the Mississippi, went to France begging for priests and nuns to come evangelize his territory. Mother Barat allowed Philippine, who was already 49 years old, to travel to America in 1818 with a few other nuns. After a hair-raising voyage they finally reached New Orleans where the Ursulines took them in and asked them to stay. But the Sacred Heart nuns had been promised by DuBourg that they would be greeted in St. Louis and go on from there to the Indians. So in the heat of July they sailed up the river to meet the bishop in St. Louis. Once they arrived, he told them he had changed his mind, that they should instead set up a school for girls in the one horse town of St. Charles, Missouri. When Philippine arrived there, she wrote Madeleine Sophie with some skepticism about the bishop's view that the tiny town "will become a great commercial link between the United States and China." The conditions were so primitive, this French noblewoman wrote to her sister that the "only oil is bear grease and it is disgusting" but even so within a few weeks, she managed to open the first free school west of the Mississippi. Unbelievable. And then she set up a boarding school for wealthy girls to support the free school. DuBourg refused to allow her to teach "colored" children, for fear that they would run off the white families, so she set aside a day a week to teach them. Mother Dusesne wrote to her superior, Mother Barat, about how horrified she was at prejudice against blacks and "mulattoes." And she was distressed that she had no savages to teach. Finally at the age of 71, as Sacred Heart schools were spreading around America, Philippine Dusesne moved to Sugar Creek, Kansas to educate the Potawatomi. She couldn't learn their language (she had had a hard time with English) so she spent her time praying—and came to be known by the Indians as "Kwah-kah-kum-ad"—the woman who always prays. Poor health brought her back to St. Charles where she was incredibly discouraged about her life. She considered herself an abject failure. But the Church did not. Rose Philippine Dusesne was canonized in 1988.

I have known and admired the story of Philippine Dusesne since I was a very little girl. As I matured I learned to admire her more and more. But I think it's important to understand why I know her story and that of Madeleine Sophie Barat who said that she would have founded the order for the sake of a single girl. I know them because the Sacred Heart order, and every other order I know about has not only fulfilled the second part of the renewal of religious life that I quoted from *Perfectae Caritatis*--the adjustment to changed conditions--but they also fulfill the first part--a return to "the original inspiration behind a given community." Every little girl in Sacred Heart schools knows thoroughly and lovingly what that inspiration was. And they can all recite the goals and criteria of Sacred Heart education. Better yet--they strive to live by them. They know those goals are rooted in the past where they take their inspiration from that great educator at the turn of the last century, Mother Janet Erskine Stuart who understood that changing times would require adaptation. "Epochs of transition must keep us on the alert," she wrote, "They ask us to keep our eyes open upon the distant horizons, our minds listening to seize every indication that can enlighten us; reading, reflection, searching, must never stop; the mind must be flexible in order to lose nothing, to acquire any knowledge that can aid our mission...Immobility, arrested development bring decadence; a beauty, fully unfolded is ready to perish. So let us not rest on our beautiful past." The Sacred Heart girls I see are devoted to that beautiful past, but know they cannot rest on it. I am so constantly impressed by those girls--by their formation as good Christians, and also their formation as good Americans.

And that is the last point I would like to make. This country remains a puzzlement to our ancestors in Europe and their modern day descendants. After all we are very young—it's not even 300 years since the Ursulines arrived here and that was almost 50 years before indepen-

dence. I understand why the Europeans continue to see this as some sort of upstart nation. They often see only the chaos without witnessing the creation. And they don't appreciate the fact that we have traditions that are different from those of the old world, traditions that have to do with service both inside and outside of religious life. So--at the same time that the Ursulines were here creating schools and hospitals and orphanages, and Elizabeth Seton was doing that on the East Coast--women of every religion and color were creating similar institutions--whether it was Isabella Graham the Scotswoman who worked with Elizabeth Seton to create the Widows Society and many other social service agencies, or Rebecca Gratz--a Jewish woman in Philadelphia who worked with other women in the community to create orphanages and other societies for the poor and then established a parallel set up for Jewish children who were being taught Christian doctrine in those other institutions. Or Catherine Ferguson, a former slave, who started the Sunday School movement in America. Or first lady Dolley Madison who worked with the local women of Washington to set up an orphanage after the British invasion of 1814. These women of course couldn't vote and married women could not own property. *They* were the property of their husbands. But with great difficulty and determination they lobbied the legislatures, solicited funds from the public, petitioned the Congress, organized rallies, performed highly political acts in order to create the safety net for the poor in a time of exciting unbridled capitalism. And that tradition of service continues. Look at my wonderful mother. Look at the incredible work of Eunice Shriver. Look at the generous people who have come out of the goodness of their hearts to rebuild this city after Katrina. When the institutions of government--something Europe understands--when those institutions failed this city, it was the people from churches and volunteer service organizations and businesses who came by the thousands and continue to come to make this dear old city great again.

Out of that service tradition have grown the great social movements that strive to perfect this union. So the women in the early nineteenth century who were dealing with poverty came to see the plight of free blacks and the worse plight of slaves. They became great abolitionists. Lucretia Mott came as a Quaker preacher to Philadelphia in 1821--the Quakers allowed women to preach publicly. She was a staunch abolitionist, but when she went to meetings she was either not allowed to participate or not allowed to vote because she was a woman. So out of the abolition movement came the suffrage movement--the two great social reforms in our history. But the work of social reform is far from over. As needs arise, or as our eyes are opened by these great reformers, more of God's people see their rights recognized and their needs met. Again--taking Eunice Shriver as an example--look what she did for the mentally ill and disabled and the handicapped. She changed the world for millions and millions of people. And she did it out of a sense of faith. A faith deepened by the religious of the Sacred Heart who taught her. But she chose to do it outside of a religious life. She was not an officially consecrated woman--except perhaps by God. And that is something that I think is very important to keep in mind as this Apostolic Visitation goes forward. The official numbers of women religious in this country might have fallen--but it's safe to say that the number of religious women who are acting on their faith to serve society is higher than ever before in human history. Those of us who feel that calling feel it because of you, you awe-inspiring and holy women--you women of spirit have taught us well and your teaching will go on, constantly creating a better world for the People of God--corralling the chaos to create a quality of life for others that you can be proud of. And one last word--our Lady of Prompt Succor is still here, ready to answer our prayers.