

# **Reflection for the Feast of Mother Xavier Termehr**

**December 3, 2011**

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The feast of Mother Xavier comes around every year and each time there is something the same about it and something different. December 3<sup>rd</sup> is always near the beginning of Advent, calling us to a fresh expectancy and hope. It always has a missionary tone because we celebrate it on the feast of the great Jesuit missionary, St. Francis Xavier and on the heels of the Dec. 2nd commemoration of the four Maryknoll church women martyred in El Salvador in 1980. That's not a bad way to celebrate the feast of our founding every year.

And yet, every year, we celebrate something a little different because the context of our lives and our world is different. So, what's the context of our lives in 2011 and what does Mother Xavier say to us this year?

At our congregational Gathering in July we focused on the challenge that faces us at this moment in our history. We are experiencing what is a pretty predictable stage in the life cycle of a group, a time of diminishment and decline. Our spirits might not feel like that, but our numbers and our organizational data reflect it. Studies tell us that at this stage of organizational life, 75% of congregations will become extinct unless there is a dynamic rebirth that can carry the heart of the charism into vibrant new expressions for new times.

We face this moment together with questions we've been praying with and reflecting on, issues begging for genuine conversation. What would it take to make us more invested in creating a future together? What does each of us need to put on the table? How do we help create a future we won't be part of? What do we hope it will all look like when there are only 30 sisters left on mission? What would deepen our personal and communal conversion? How do we go deeper with each other? What is needed for real transformation of our minds and hearts and our living of religious life for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond? Those are conversion questions. They are an invitation into a communal dark night of the soul in which we are called to surrender everything and to invite God's searing light to reveal itself to us in the darkness. We don't know what will come of it. Death? New life? Together we search for God's way forward, a direction beyond our own schemes and plans. We're invited to examine both the gift and the shadow side of our lives as Dubuque Franciscans and to listen deeply to both the urgent cries of our time and to the collective inner voice which only God can give us ears to hear.

And so in the context of that immense challenge we celebrate the feast of our foundress. What guidance does Mother Xavier give us this year? What can we learn from her life and her legacy?

I think that one thing she shows us is a deep letting go in order to live with radical availability to the future God wants to create through us.

When she made vows in the Sisters of the Holy Cross in France, I'm sure she didn't intend to leave, much less found another congregation. But she did. Don't you wonder how she decided that? How did she know whether the choice to leave her congregation and found ours was more of a betrayal of an original call or faithfulness to a new one? I suspect that it wasn't all that clear. But she chose. She prayed, let go, took a risk. And here we are as a result! With a few companions, she set out to respond to an urgent need of her time, caring for orphans. But then a war broke out and she sent her sisters to care for the wounded. Ten of them died of illness and disease resulting from that work. Imagine! That must have been at least a third or more of her new congregation. Did she wonder whether she did the right thing? Had the risk been too great? Should she have saved these young women for the flourishing of her new congregation? Maybe it would never take off. But a new need had presented itself. She responded. She let go. She took a leap. Then the Kulturkampf was decreed. None of those early sisters had imagined leaving family and everything familiar behind and going to the US. She couldn't ask her young followers to do that. That's not what they signed up for. She sent them all home. Imagine what that time was like for her, when she was alone and they were all with family deciding whether or not to come back. She had really let go of any assurance of a congregation at all. She didn't know if anyone would return and get on the Caland with her. We know how that story ended and isn't it a source of inspiration for us? We could go on and on recounting our early history: Radical letting go; openness to an unknown future, at every turn; deep trust in God; willingness to follow a path that has not yet been revealed; risking everything. That's our legacy and our challenge on December 3, 2011.

Today's readings also provide a lens for interpreting the context of our lives. The Isaiah reading was addressed to the people of Israel in a critical time of decline and deterioration, of external assault and internal corruption. It was a time of general chaos and breakdown. Isaiah was sent to announce the fall of Israel and Judah and to call the people to faithfulness, to conversion. Isaiah also invited a deep letting go of what was and a radical reliance on the God of the future. For those who respond, the words of Isaiah break forth into a lyrical promise of God's future for them, for us. "I, who instruct you, will hide no more; your eyes will see me, your Teacher. When you turn to the right or the left, you will hear a voice behind you saying, "This is the way, walk in it!" There will be seed to sow, abundance, wounds bound up, a glorious future. But even that promise is a call. We are to bring that kind of world about. We are to be now the compassion of Jesus in the Gospel. Who are those in today's world that are like sheep without a shepherd? Jesus points us down the path of being moved to compassion as he was. He sends us to gather the harvest of what God has been cultivating in places of pain in our own times.

Today we don't just celebrate the memory of a foundress. We take up the call to be foundresses, to loosen our grip on what has been stable and successful in order to be deeply available to the re-founding of our charism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We rely on our Teacher who points a direction in the darkness. We don't know whether we're headed for extinction or for new life, but following the example of Mother Xavier we risk availability to whatever future is drawing us, knowing that God is with us still.