

# Final Profession Celebration of Sister Sarah Kohles, OSF

Reflection by Sr. Nancy Schreck, OSF July 9, 2011

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## Introductory Comments:

- Who of us hasn't wished to find a treasure -- buried or not. Probably why gambling is such a big activity these days.
  - Did you have this experience? As a child often as I was walking I would look at the sidewalk for pennies, nickels, quarters really were the best... I was never sure, was this a child's wish or was it the fact that I often walked with my grandfather who was a banker. You know a penny saved is a penny earned.
- Who of us hasn't wished for a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow?

## Roy Whitstine: a true treasure in a field experience.

- There was a rock collector: two sons gave him \$5.00 to buy a rock at a rock show.
- He found a potato sized rock in the Tupperware bin with lots of agates around it.
- Sign: Any stone \$15
- He held the stone and said to the seller: "You want \$15 for this?"
- The seller said: "I'll sell it for \$10 since it's not as pretty as the agates."
- Roy bought the stone, got a receipt, and could hardly contain himself.
- He just purchased the largest known star sapphire (1509 Carats.) Value \$2.5 Million uncut, \$10 M cut

## Analogy is obvious: (I hope)

- A lot of us spend our time looking for pretty agates and miss the sapphires of life in God's kingdom.
- All of life is seeking after what we value. Sometimes we find it fortuitously and sometimes it comes only with great effort.
- And when we find a treasure it is worth a risk to claim it.
- Roger and Evelyn, and Grandma Betty, we are glad that you taught Sarah to search for real treasures in her life.
- A couple of weeks ago Sarah and I were having a conversation and I asked her to tell me again why she wanted to do this. With the determination of the person in the gospel who sold everything to have the field she said..."it's the only thing that makes sense for me."
  - So today Sarah scoops up all the pieces of her life, holds it as a treasure and says to God and to us; "here is my life, take me, I will hold nothing back. I want to live this Franciscan treasure I have found all the days of my life."
  - This might look like sheer craziness to some, but we are here today to support Sarah and the congregation's discernment that together we have found a field worth buying. A life committed to the reign of God, to God's ways is a treasure.

Whenever we have a liturgical celebration like this it is important to pay attention to the readings the person chooses to have proclaimed. This is so not only because they tell us something about the meaning of this event for the woman celebrating but because they, like a compass, set a direction for the unfolding of the commitment that is made. So let us turn to the readings:

## Jeremiah:

- This is one of the most beloved verses in the bible. You have heard it quoted, seen it on signs and posters and plaques. It is often inscribed on graduation cards, and shared with those who are sick, discouraged or in some sort of difficult situation.
- Website: [topverses.com](http://topverses.com): rates every verse in the bible by popularity. John 3:16 is number one. This verse from Jeremiah ranks number 29. Out of hundreds of thousands of verses it ranks very high.
- Rightfully so, it makes a wonderful promise, but there is a little problem – too often I have heard this passage used to provide hope for getting something we want. People use it as a kind of divine rabbit's foot.
- To hijack this text into our own lives for a personal blessing is to force an improper hermeneutic on the text that will only serve to bloat our heads and give us a false sense of security.
- It's not that we don't want to wish Sarah the security of knowing that God has good things in store for her... but that it may be a rather simplistic take on what is a very important passage.
  - Something Jeremiah said in this passage caused him to be attacked by his own brothers, beaten and put into the stocks by the priest, imprisoned by the king, threatened with death, thrown into a cistern by Judah's officials. Somehow what he was saying was not a source of good news.

### Over-simplified background:

- I hope you all know about the Exile – when the Israelites were forcibly removed from their land and many were taken to Babylon: in other words they were where they didn't want to be.
- Four steps got Israel there. (rather like Baytown, Sioux City, Dubuque, Tyler)
  1. The story of how basically they started in slavery: eventually God heard their cry and freed them.
  2. Then God needed a nation that could enact God's will in the world and Israel started to become this nation. Over a few generations Israel begins to get a more global reputation for how great a nation it was.
  3. The problem came when all this power went to their heads. Israel forgot that her purpose was to maintain justice and righteousness. They were supposed to bless and take care of those in need. Those who were freed from Egypt are now in the midst of creating their own Egypt - they have forced labor - building large military fortresses. Why? To protect all the stuff they had. It is now a nation that is about preserving what they have instead of being a nation that is bent on giving away and blessing those around them. So-they were not who they were intended to be, and did not do what was expected of them.
  4. This leaves God stuck: there is a word for when you have been given all sorts of blessings and wealth and influence, but completely forget why you were given it in the first place-- it is Exile. It's about getting kicked out of a location, but more importantly it is about the state of your soul.
    - So now Israel in Babylon rebels and complains, and has a real fit!
    - It is to this situation that Jeremiah speaks. Before we get to the lovely part of today's reading, Jeremiah first says to the exiles that they are to disregard the wild and easy promises of the false prophets, and settle down for a long stay, and normal life in Babylon.
    - They are to build houses, plant gardens and have children and grandchildren.

- And worse yet, they are to pray for the welfare of the Babylonians. Pray for the hated enemy and collaborate with Babylon for its welfare! Exile will last for 70 years. So expect the long haul. Don't even think about a quick fix, but believe in a promise that isn't coming for a long time.
- Very radical advice here. Must live alongside their oppressors so that they can truly be free. Freedom is no longer in getting to the promised land, but it is found in the interdependence of one another. Basically Jeremiah is saying to the people – if you want the blessing, you have got to learn how to have a common heart, not just with your own people but with all, even your enemies
- Not a popular thing to say – see why they wanted to put Jeremiah in a hole.

### **Now can we conjecture about what this reading might mean for our celebration today?**

- Religious life is always about going to the strange land of unmet needs, to the places in our world that lack justice, working for the liberation of both oppressors and those who are oppressed, to choose to be in exile from the dominant culture. And in those very places religious life is about developing a common heart. This is the work of Sarah's public life. This is what she commits to spending her days doing.
- And then on a personal level: only when one gets to that place of inner exile, to a really vulnerable place, can we really believe in the beauty of God saying "I have plans for your deep welfare, not for harm...but you have to go through some things to get there and when you do, you will find a future full of hope. When you really get to the core of who you are, when you really call on God not from a place of power and security but from that place of seeking with all your heart... then you will be restored." This of course is a life long journey, and it is the path of life Sarah says she wants to walk, the path of intimacy with God, openness to God's ways in her life.

### **Now a word about the gospel with its images of hearts, and treasures in a field, and selling everything.**

#### **Meaning:**

- Emphasis is on the great value of what is found, and the single minded response it should elicit.
- This person found something precious, not so much by chance as by work, stumbled upon it yes, but while working. It happened because she must have been digging deep, not merely scraping the surface. What was found was worth all she/he had, and the person took all the necessary measures to acquire it.
- The response comes out of joy: focus is on what is discovered, not on what is given up or on the struggle – no its not really about sacrifice, it's about receiving something of great value.
- I believe that Sarah comes to this profession day because she has discovered a great treasure here in the Sisters of St. Francis.
- To those who know the worth of the Kingdom, who know God's love in their hearts... everything else is loss. That's why Sarah said in our conversation – "It's what makes sense."
- Now this is not a message just for Sarah, and in using this word I think she is reminding all of us to go after that which is most important to us! But even more importantly she wants to remind us that in order to be faithful disciples in whatever our lifestyle, we need to leave behind anything that gets in the way.

**The final part of our gospel about selling everything: If you want to be perfect, go, sell, give to those who are poor.**

- Don't think of "perfect" in the sense we usually use the word. Jesus is saying if you want to be mature, complete, be whole hearted, then every obstacle to genuine discipleship must be put aside.
- The idea is that what you really consider important will determine the course of your activity and commitment. What are the values you set your heart on? Pedro Arrupe SJ says it this way:

***Nothing is more important than finding God - falling in love in a quite absolute way.  
What you are in love with seizes your imagination, and will affect everything.  
It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings,  
how you will spend your weekends, what you will read, who you will know, what breaks your heart,  
and amazes you with joy and gratitude.  
Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything for you.***

## **CONCLUSION:**

It is my experience that the words of our professions haunt us: so they will haunt you Sarah.

- You will get to your 25<sup>th</sup> Jubilee and you will still be wondering what it means to sell all and buy the field.
- You will get to your 50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee and you will still be digging deeper to determine what it means to seek God with all your heart in a land of exile. What does a "future full of hope" look like?

It is also my experience that scripture chosen for Profession is also prescriptive for one's life... this is the road you can expect to travel in the future, a life where every obstacle to genuine discipleship must be put aside, that you will always be detaching yourself from anything that could prevent you from giving yourself fully.

The comfort in this message is that this is something we do together forever, this seeking, and selling, and risking-we do this as partners, as sisters who believe with you that the joy of sharing a common heart is worth selling all.

This is what you promise today. So Sarah, I invite you to profess your life commitment to this way of life, to walk with us into a future that is in God's hands.