Opinion
Spirituality



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Sometimes I need to be reminded that, current political debacles aside, the whole world isn't going to hell in a hand basket.

Two weekends a year I meet with my "Mission Circle," which is composed of nine other sisters and one associate member in our Congregation of St. Joseph (CSJ). We travel from all over the country to be together and to engage in the quintessential CSJ spiritual practice of "sharing the state of the heart."

This centuries-old tradition dates to my community's founding in 1650 in LePuy, France. Our founding women were greatly influenced by Jesuit Fr. Jean-Pierre Médaille, who taught us how to notice what God is doing in our lives. And the way to know what God is doing is to notice what is (or is not) happening within us — are we sad, happy, puzzled, frightened, angry, grief-stricken, confused or (insert emoji here)?

Because, of course, as every good Jesuit-trained person knows, God is in *everything* — even the confusing, painful or frightening stuff.

At our mission circles, we focus especially on our ministerial endeavors as we seek to live out our call to love God and the "dear neighbor" without distinction. Such sharing is a way to stay rooted in the realities of our lives — as well as in the reality of an ever-faithful God.

I drank deeply of my sisters' witness at my last mission circle. Here are some of their stories. Names have been changed to protect privacy.

Mary is a therapist at a community mental health agency. Even though she has been there less than two years, she is already counted as senior staff. Her agency can be a revolving door for beginning therapists. Work with the chronically mentally ill is challenging, the caseloads are high, and the pay is low. After neophyte therapists get the experience they need, most move on to less demanding situations.

Mary stays in a stressful and sometimes dysfunctional system because she finds deep fulfillment in caring for people no one else cares much about. She is gratified when a client no longer thinks daily of committing suicide or at last begins to feel safe despite past trauma. "As a sister, I have the spiritual, financial and emotional

support from our congregation to fully engage with this population," she says. "I do love my clients, and I believe having a consistent therapist helps them move through the healing process. ..."

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Penny is well known in her small community for her anti-death penalty advocacy. She told us about a "miraculous" change of heart after a recent encounter with a victim's family at the court house. Even though most family members shot her angry glances, Penny decided to engage them in conversation. "I'm not against [the victim]," she told them, "but I am against the death penalty." Later, a family member sought her out to talk further, and to thank her.

Trish is a pastoral administrator to two rural faith communities that recently merged into one:

> At one moment you find your finger wrapped in the fist of a 2-week-old child baptized into the family of God. Later that same day, your hand is enclosed in the hand of one being preparing to pass to new life. Would that every day in the life of a pastoral administrator be so sublime! But someone has to hire the staff and authorize bill payment while balancing the budget ... [and] respond to security alarms, hoping it's just a bat and not a broken pipe, and nurture community among people who gather only once a week. ... So, too, a day in the life of a pastoral administrator.

Sharon has doctorate in ministry and shares her love of biblical spirituality with graduate theology students. She also teaches aspiring deacons in a nearby rural diocese. Sharon's contagious love of Scripture energizes her graduate students. The diaconate students, not so much. They are put off because Sharon is a woman, and they don't really want to trust her. Sigh.

Our dedicated CSJ associate, Kathy, has a unique holiday ministry:

> Every Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter for 34 years, family, friends and I donate, prepare, cook, package and deliver anywhere from 70-90 holiday meals to isolated elders in neighboring communities. ... Usually, recipients

have no one coming to see them on the holiday. Recently, we have also have been sending holiday meals to two houses of hospitality for detained immigrants. We do this in memory of my husband, Jim, who died in 1985. The program is nicknamed "Jimmy's hot to trot."

Joy Ellen is passionate about justice and ethical investing. "I always joke that I am doing a poor job in the Office of Peace and Justice because there is no peace and there is no justice!" she says. Joy has been working closely with immigration issues, especially families detained in facilities run by privately-owned prisons.

"Children do not belong in prison," she says emphatically.

"In our socially responsible investment work, we challenge the [prison] corporation to observe human rights and provide adequate health care to the people they detain." On behalf of religious shareholders, Joy also confronts companies about their use of water, their emissions and "other issue that relate to our delicate Earth."

A spiritual director from the south, Samantha reflects: "It seems to me that the Holy Spirit has used two great passions in me to produce a third — my love for promoting and living small Christian communities and the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius." She finds that people with this spiritual grounding "are now proliferating in works of peace and justice for the benefit of the community, the church and the world."

As I listened to my sisters, I had a sort of epiphany. So much of the time it seems we are plodding along trying to witness to God's great love and not getting very far. But now I see that what we do (and usually take for granted) is a powerful witness for what sisters are all about at a time when some think we are either irrelevant or dying out.

Trump-world aside, there are many beautiful things happening in our towns and cities, although they are often hidden in plain sight.

Perhaps Joy Ellen said it best: "We know that the Holy Spirit is guiding us in knowing what to do in helping create a just world. We only need to answer the call sincerely and with passion."

If everyone paid attention to the Spirit's gentle nudges, how brightly would God's great love shine forth in a world so in need of it!

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]

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