

Opening Reflection – DSC Leaders' Meeting  
Maryknoll, NY, October 3, 2018

Fragile

About two weeks ago, I read *St. Paul; the Apostle We Love to Hate*, by Karen Armstrong. I thought she did a great job of situating Paul in his extremity – I could feel his pain – as he wrote the second time to the Corinthians, “I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations . . . At first I didn’t think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and [God] told me, ‘My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.’ Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ’s strength moving in on my weakness . . . And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become. (2 Cor. 12:7-10, *The Message*)

It’s a paradox, isn’t it!

“Fragile. Handle with care,” the box reads. Yet the delivery man tosses it onto the truck with one hand, and then jams a heavier box on top of it – with two hands. How does this happen? And then, how long, with our frayed and fragile nerves, are we on the phone trying to get some satisfaction from customer service?

Fragile, the coral reefs, the ice fields, the beehives, the lives of immigrants and refugees – of women and children – in every country. There’s a song by Sting with the words, “Lest we forget how fragile we are - on and on the rain will fall like tears from a star, like tears from a star. On and on the rain will say, how

fragile we are, how fragile we are.” How is it that we don’t know? And when we know, that we don’t care - enough?

The ecosystem of the monarch butterfly is fragile, and somehow their plight has captured the imagination of many citizens all over our country. I see many home gardens in the Chicago area that have patches of native grasses, of ragweed and milkweed to provide some habitat for them. I learned recently that it took the concerted effort of caring citizens in Milwaukee to change building plans, so that a monarch habitat there could remain.

It takes the work of ordinary people together – studying – educating – showing up at city council meetings – volunteering at habitats – at phone banks – at demonstrations – reminding all of us over and over . . . on and on of how fragile we are – of how dependent on one another we are – of who we are and how connected we are.

Okay! It’s okay for the butterflies and the bees to be fragile. And those people, those refugees, maybe our older sisters. We can recognize their vulnerability. Moreover, we see this getting closer to us every day. But how would you feel if you discovered that someone had described you as “fragile?” Doesn’t that feel like an insult . . . a pejorative? And not only do we tend to hide from our own fragility, but we pretty much think that it is only we, the created who are fragile or lacking in something.

Since our recent gathering in St. Louis for LCWR, I have been thinking about the words of Teresa Maya and Simon Arnold . . . their words about fragility and vulnerability. I was especially moved by Simon’s words about the fragility of

God. He said, “God is vulnerable, unfinished and self-limited, because God is eternally committed to reciprocity, in order to make of our relationships the very movement of divinity.” Teresa’s words echoed this, “To lead a communion of faith we need to embrace the vulnerability that has brought us together. We cannot believe alone, we need to lead into the collaboration that will kindle our hope. Collaboration is the only way forward for our communion.”

Through our many emails, we’ve been celebrating our histories – the stories of our leaders in 1935 who, though fearful of amalgamation, came together anyway. And gradually, over time, we have learned that it is collaboration that knits our vulnerability and fragility into the strength that is needed today. That strength is with us as we enter into conversations about our global realities, the future of DSI, DSC, and Dominican Women Afire. We joyfully anticipate news on our collaborative endeavor on the Climate Investment Fund.

I chose the reading for our ritual this evening from the readings of the day, and I appreciate Nan Merrill’s gift in lifting the spirit of a penitential psalm, a psalm that certainly goes with this week’s readings from Job! If Job isn’t a model of fragility and vulnerability, I don’t know who is. Elizabeth Johnson quotes Job in her book, *Ask the Beasts*. “Ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.” (Job forgot to mention the butterflies) He continues, “Who among all these does not know that . . . in [God’s] hand is the life of every living thing?”

How do we know our God is fragile? It takes a fragile hand – tenderness – to hold fragility. It takes a light touch. No tight gripping. Only one who can be vulnerable can stand with another in her vulnerability. Only the one who is unafraid of her own tears can allow another to weep.

Simon said, “The ministry of leadership is to believe, trust and permit the providential and surprising fruitfulness of fragility... not to resist it.” I’ll bet those mothers general didn’t have today in mind when they gathered that first time in 1935 in San Rafael. Yet this gift of collaboration that we are still learning has the handwriting of the fragile Spirit of God all over it, and has drawn together the sisters of the Conference of the Dominican Mothers General, the Dominican Leadership Conference, and the Dominican Sisters Conference for 83 years.

As the psalm read, “Let your Love encircle and envelop us; in your mercy raise us up. Let peace become our companion all day long; by night free us from the bonds of fear.”

By the way, tomorrow you’ll find on your tables some photos of butterflies that you may keep.