

Mary Has Chosen the Better Part

and it shall not be taken from her.



Such was Jesus' reply to Martha when she complained that Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet while she herself had to do all the serving. Yes, we must be busy about many things, but the primacy of prayer must never be sacrificed to busyness. Jesus affirms that contemplation of His Face is the one thing necessary and must remain at the center of our lives. Sister Mildred Neuzil often said **“the first thing to go in a busy life is prayer.”** Traditionally, the Church has always taught the primacy of prayer as the lifeblood of a fruitful apostolate. Contemplatives and monks, symbolized in the image of Mary at the feet of Jesus, consecrate themselves exclusively to God as a powerhouse of prayer and penance for the needs of the Church and for the salvation of souls. What has happened to this powerhouse of prayer? Why are Contemplative groups of monks and sisters under so much attack in recent times?

Much of the debate centers around their use of the Latin Mass and their commitment to deeply rooted traditions within the Church. In 2016, Pope Francis published his Apostolic Constitution, ***Vultum Dei Quaerere: On Women's Contemplative Life***, which seeks to form similar groups into federations with a Federation President, and extend formation before final vows from six to nine or twelve years. Two years later came ***Cor Orans*** which would implement major changes in rules and regulations in the life of contemplative sisters, placing them under greater ecclesial supervision. Some communities wonder if they will survive in the spirit of their founders.

So, what happened to Sister Mildred Neuzil's Contemplative community? For years, Sister Florecita wanted to start a contemplative branch within the active order of the Sisters of the Precious Blood, but not until Archbishop Karl J. Altar spoke on their behalf at the Sisters' Chapter did the active order acquiesce and allow it. Archbishop McNicholas, however, warned the contemplative sisters that the order was too active to appreciate a contemplative vocation, and they should expect trouble down the road. It was July 1, 1957 when the cloister opened in the basement of the Our Lady of Nativity convent in New Riegel, Ohio; Sister Mildred entered it the following year. The cloistered sisters completely supported themselves, doing printing and weaving rugs. In a letter to Father Leibold, Sister Mildred expressed great concern with the trends in the active order. She wrote that she was in full agreement with Sister Florecita on the following:

Silence, solitude and strict enclosure. We are determined to go all the way. It has to be, Father. Half measures would never do. The situation in the Community right now, Father, is very serious. It seems that the Mother General has taken it upon herself to go ahead in certain matters without consulting the Council. I don't intend in any way to judge her or anyone else, as I believe she thinks it's alright for her to do as she is doing. ...What Sister and I are most worried about, Father, is that Rev. Mother, being such an active person, will make the cloister more active than contemplative. She has

as much as said so.... Now you know Father, this cannot be. If it's going to be that way, then we might as well not have it at all. If it should come to that, Father, Sister and I decided we would have to go and start elsewhere.

Bishop George J. Rehring set the cloister up with its own novitiate precisely so it could grow by accepting young women from the world who believed they had a contemplative vocation. In time, the active order shut their novitiate down, greatly curtailing any chance of growth. The cloistered sisters had raised \$800,000 to renovate the old convent and to add a new wing of bedrooms. At one time they had 15 sisters. When forced to accept the active order's modernization, they lost the grill, the habit, and the enclosure, the identifying features of a life hidden from the world to be with God. A group of priests and nuns evaluated the cloister and suggested the sisters separate from the active order if they wished to maintain their contemplative life. On February 9, 1978, seven of them petitioned Pope Paul VI to separate and retain their vows so they could start a new order. While waiting for word from Rome, enduring various interrogations and hardships, four left the group, then the foundress died of heart failure, leaving only Sr. Mildred and Sr. Joseph Therese. With only two remaining, Rome did not grant canonical recognition, and they ceased to exist, canonically speaking, by simple attrition.

When confronted with the option to return to the active order, Sr. Mildred said it would be impossible. The two remaining sisters were exclaustated (separated from the active order) and continued to live a quiet, prayerful life in Fostoria, Ohio, in a home supplied by a benefactor. Sister Mildred and Sister Joseph Therese made private vows with their spiritual director, Father Edmund Mormon, who told them: **"You are what you are, contemplative sisters."** A canon lawyer in Rome said they were now **"a private association of lay faithful living out a religious life in accordance with Catholic Church law."** Can we imagine the years of suffering and trials they endured to remain faithful to their contemplative vocation? A priest director told them in their exile, the more one's life is configured to the passion of Jesus, also rejected by His own, the more one can trust in the holiness of their lives. Sister Mildred was so deeply configured to Christ's sufferings that He invited her to wear His crown of thorns and to be nailed to His cross, to suffer for the salvation of souls. God does not ask that we be successful, but He does ask that we remain faithful.

In his Apostolic Exhortation ***Novo Millennio Ineunte*** Saint John Paul II placed sanctity as the most important priority of the Catholic Church. He called on our communities to be schools of prayer. He emphasized the primacy of Christ and the primacy of the interior life and of holiness. Who can give Jesus to others if he does not first possess Him? We must try **to be, be with the Lord**, before we can rightly know and do His work. **"Without Christ we can do nothing."** (John 5:15.)

With Jesus, the interior soul hears the voice of the world's crime rising up to heaven and calling down chastisement upon the guilty; and this soul delays the sentence by the omnipotence of suppliant prayer which is able to stay the hand of God, just when He is about to let loose His thunderbolt. "Those who pray do more for the world than those who fight, and if the world is going from bad to worse, it is because there are more battles than prayers." ...

A single burning prayer of the seraphic St. Theresa (of Avila) converted ten thousand heretics. And her soul, all on fire for Christ, could not conceive of a contemplative life, an interior life, which would take no interest in the Savior's intense anxiety for the redemption of souls. "I would accept Purgatory until the Last Judgment," she said, "to deliver but one of them. And what do I care how long I suffer, if I can thus set free a single soul, let alone many souls, for the greater glory of God?" No one in this world knows the reason for the conversion of pagans at the very ends of the earth, for the heroic endurance of Christians under persecution, for the heavenly joy of martyred missionaries. All this is invisibly bound up with the prayer of some humble, cloistered nun. Her fingers play upon the keyboard of divine forgiveness and of the eternal lights; her silent and lonely soul presides over the salvation of souls and the conquests of the Church. ... [Chautard quotes the Bishop of Cochin-China] "Ten Carmelite nuns praying will be of greater help to me than twenty missionaries preaching."

(Jean-Baptiste Chautard, THE SOUL OF THE APOSTOLATE, TAN Books, Charlotte, NC, 1946/reprint 2010, Pgs. 10-11, 36-37, 37-38.)

From an early age, Sister Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil had been convinced she was called to the Contemplative life. A July 26, 1954 letter of Father Paul F. Leibold, her spiritual director, stated that he was **"indeed pleased to hear the little hint you received pointing to the fact that you may in time receive the assignment your heart yearns for."** He encouraged her in those dark nights of the soul to be patient. He advised her to keep up her childlike devotion and to use holy water and to wear the habit or scapular of Mary as an armor of protection. He said he goes to bed with the rosary in one hand and a small crucifix in the other. He feels armed with the spiritual whip of Mary to drive off attackers, and has the sword of Christ to kill any enemy who might attack him. With strong faith in the angels at our sides and with Christ within us, how can we feel weak or fearful. A dove of itself cannot fight off a vulture, but if surrounded with powerful armor and guardian angels, even Christ's "little white dove" can soar aloft without fear. When Sister entered the Cloister in 1958 some of her sisters said she was wasting her life. Few knew of her visions, but one who did called her "crazy." Father's advice was this:

Surely you are going to have members of your own spiritual family who will never approve anything and never understand the objectives, and indeed some in high places; but again, that is a most normal thing. Look how you struggled more than 25 years before you got your first break in your great dream for the Cloister—years which I am sure at the time seemed sterile; finally, the seed broke through the ground—now like a young plant it must be guarded against the elements and other dangers that might kill it. ...Do not expect the young sapling to be covered with fruit and the admiration of all the first year it breaks the ground.

Father Leibold addressed Sister Mildred's trials and sufferings on behalf of souls.

May I say that your problems of 1950 and since do not surprise me in the slightest. Through the Tribunal one gets a look at both sides: souls that are spotless and pleasing to God (this helps the confessor's humility); souls that are weak, but sincerely trying; and then cold sin in all its horror. Indeed, the only answer in the balance is one of compensation—some souls must be made to suffer for those sins, otherwise God could not tolerate this sinful world any longer than He did Sodom and Gomorrah. More than once, I have tried to console spotless souls who are tormented that God is using them to balance the scales of His justice and mercy. I realize too how much more difficult it is to bear this cross than almost any other I know; for first of all there is the

ever-present fear of sin, which is most difficult for a holy soul to bear; then in most crosses one can find some little human consolations and encouragement, but in this cross, there is none, one cannot even speak about their trial to another; and surely there is nothing that saps the strength more than this cross. It is like a spiritual asthma, a constant gasping for breath, with the devil ever there to remind us that we could breathe so easily over in his room. Many saints suffered in this way.

He reminded her of St. Paul's sting of the flesh and St Catherine of Siena's spiritual stigma and her cries to the Lord, "**Where were you during all that terribleness?**" Jesus answered, He was right there with her, helping her. Father spoke encouragingly to Sister:



That Christ would offer you a copy of His crown to bear in sufferings in heart, soul and mind is indeed a real privilege and indication of His trust in you to be a real instrument of reparation in union with His Sacred Heart—for indeed these sufferings are the most keen and hardest to bear.

Jesus says He gives the call to holiness above all to His chosen ones. How few there are, even of these, who respond with their whole hearts to His call of love. "**Alas, My dear spouse, even My chosen, My beloved ones, have forgotten how to love.**"



I expect much of them because I have given them much. My little white dove, spouse of My Heart, if souls only understood Me better. I would teach them, if only they would come and ask. See, I hold out to them My Heart of love. O if they would only come, they would no longer be cold and tepid. Close to My Heart, they would partake of Its flames and themselves be

wholly on fire. (Letter of Sister Mildred Neuzil, 1957.)

Sister Mildred chose the better part and it was not taken from her!

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All quotes are taken from letters between Sister and her spiritual director, Father Paul F. Leibold.