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**Presentation to Sacred Heart Schools Heads and Deputies conference, Mount Anville House, Dublin, February 22, 23 2018**

***on her visits to***

**Sacred Heart Spirituality Forum**

**‘Celebrating 200 Years Crossing Frontiers, Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne, 1818-2018’**

**Saint Louis University, USA, July 12-16, 2017**

***and***

**Heads and Deputies European Network Conference**

**‘Heart and Mission’**

**Placeres, Spain, October5-8, 2017**

**Introduction**

I was invited by Margaret Martin to address the Heads and Deputies conference about my experience of the Spirituality Forum. I took the opportunity to integrate key messages from the Heads and Deputies European Network Conference, which I also attended, in my presentation.

The Spirituality Forum was a celebration of the bicentennial anniversary of the Society’s arrival in the United States and of their internationality. Some 360 representatives from 41 different countries attended the Forum. The Society’s mission spread to these 41 countries because of Sophie and Philippine’s relationship. The Society of the Sacred Heart is one of only three religious orders from that time that survived and grew.

I also attended the Heads and Deputies European Network conference which was held in Spain. The theme of the conference was ‘Heart and Mission… ***(One Heart and one Mind in the Heart of Christ)***

My talk today aims to share with you what I experienced and what inspired me. I am hoping that, by sharing with you, you will gain insight and that you will also be encouraged in your role as educators of the Society of the Sacred Heart.

I would, first of all, like to set my talk in the context of the mission of the Society of the Sacred Heart, which was founded by Saint Madeleine Sophie in 1800 and brought to the United States by Saint Philippine in 1818, two hundred years ago. Sophie and Philippine were women of hearts and minds and they very much of their time and environment. They were both committed to a deep life of prayer. They embodied the Society’s mission which is to: ‘**Make known the love of God revealed in the heart of Christ’**

Our challenge, in ensuring that this mission continues is to consider: how do we, in our various roles as educators of the Sacred Heart, walk in the footsteps of Sophie and Philippine; what are our challenges?

I would like to reflect on how I was inspired by the key note speakers and conversations at the Spirituality Forum and Heart and Mission Conference in the hope that these stories move you as they moved me.

**Heart and Mission and our Interior Life**

Much of the conversation centred on returning to the heart and our interior life. We were invited to be present to ourselves, return to our heart, to be calm, to have quiet times. Sophie said ‘***Take care of your heart; this is the source of life’.***

For a moment close your eyes and consider:

When do I feel others touch my heart?

What does touch the heart?

Sophie also challenges us, as she said, to ***’Have sincere and tender affection’***. How do we support and build the natural empathy and affection within ourselves?

Philippine believed that the ‘***best of each one of us comes from within’*** and that this is also true of our pupils. How do we recognise our internal beauty? How do we express it for us and others in our schools? Sophie looked at every child in the classroom, she believed that how we look at another should make that person feel worthy.

Philippine listened to the hearts of others and their needs. She believed in expressing gratefulness and living with simplicity and nearness, with presence as a human being.

Our role as educators is to help the children discover their own mission and to value it, to think about their own desires and to get to know themselves.

Generosity is a principle ingredient in our education; we are encouraged to thank people who touch our hearts. If our own internal space is opened and deepened, we can offer presence to the other.

Philippine acted with justice and compassion. She believed that every child could find their place in the world. She did not see education as just about academic achievement. She believed, like Sophie, that every child in the room mattered and that it was important to make eye contact with, and see each child each day.

Philippine learned from Sophie to lead by example. Sophie said ‘***People will forget what we have said, they will not forget how we made them feel’***.

Philippine was courageous and strong. She chose to live life with gratefulness and happiness in the joy of her relationship with her pupils and Jesus. Philippine’s prayer was ’***Jesus, I live only for you, I surrender only to you’.*** Her ultimate reality was her relationship with God which she had from the age of 10, a call that she felt deep in her heart. Philippine’s defining moment was expressed in a letter to Sophie 18/4/1806, where she spoke of her deep experience of God, of being alone with Jesus. Her words were that ***’She held Him close to her heart’.***

What made Philippine brave enough to cross frontiers? - Her choice of the absolute and her attachment to the real. She responded to a call that she felt deep in her heart and met her encounters with perspective and principles. She made contact with her own interior and chose to be happy with the wellness of others.

Philippine’s legacy and leadership are rooted in her faith, her femininity, and her simplicity. In essence, she was grounded in her faith and her devotion to prayer, which fed her capacity to love, and to build with determination.

Philippine faced battles, took risks and trusted. She wasn’t beaten by discouragement. She had a lot of illness, difficulties and had challenges with her leadership. She struggled with leadership and asked to be released from it. Sophie did not release her, and said: **‘But, times are changing and we too must adapt and change.*’*** While she was not a natural leader and had difficulty with learning a new language, she persisted. She chose to live life with gratefulness and happiness in the joy of her relationship with her pupils and Jesus.

Philippine had desires to be a missionary from the age of 12 and was influenced by a Jesuit priest who had been a missionary among the Native Americans of Illinois in North America. When Philippine eventually decided to go to the United States on the Rebecca at age 49 she left everything behind. She was going somewhere totally unfamiliar, to a completely different culture and with a language that she did not speak.

Philippine was ‘***Christ incarnate in the poor’*** …‘***her humility was part and parcel*** ***of her identity’***. Saint Francis Xavier was a great influence to her. She referred to him as ‘***Saint of my Heart’.***

When she eventually got to the U.S.A., she met people who were apparently ‘other’ than her. In the words of Catherine Mooney, keynote speaker at the Spirituality Forum:

***‘Philippine Duschesne crossed frontiers of many sorts, including frontiers that brought her face to face with people who were apparently other than she. The events of her life and her own writings indicate that she negotiated boundaries that separated blacks, mulattoes, whites and Amerindians; poor and rich; the enslaved and the free. The events of Philippine’s life and her own writings poignantly illuminate her diverse relationships: the spirituality that grounded them, the blind spots that obscured them, the tragedies that strengthened – and sometimes stymied them - The Gospel call that ‘all may be one‘ perhaps seems elusive in our very divided world. How can we build solidarity across the borders that separate us from other lives that matter? Philippine shines a light on our path’***

**Philippine joined the mission of the Potawatomi at Sugar Creek, Kansas**

In September 1838 more than 800 Native Americans, women and children, had been placed under military control and marched from Indiana to Sugar Creek Kansas on the ***‘Trail of Death’***. More than 40 of the weak and elderly died. In 1941, four RSCJ joined the Jesuit mission at Sugar Creek. Philippine was thought to be too ill to go but Father Peter Verhaegen, the Jesuit priest, insisted that she travel.

She had spent 30 years working in schools in the U.S.A. before she eventually got to pursue what she thought would be her life’s work, and lived with the Potawatomi at Sugar Creek, Kansas. She was 72 and ill. She could only pray. She said ‘***she got more than she could give’***. The Potawatomi called her the ***‘woman who prays always’*** and would touch the hem of her habit as she kneeled and prayed. She always believed that it was important to be present. She only lived with the Potawatomi for a year and had to return to Saint Charles due to her illness.

I took the pilgrimage to the Sugar Creek, Kansas and walked in Philippine’s footsteps. The sheer distance, isolation and remoteness of the journey and experience will stay with me. Life there was very bleak. To see the crosses in memory of the Potawatomi and read about the journey of their ‘trail of death’ was harrowing. One can only imagine what it was like in Philippine’s day. The heat was overwhelming and there was very little shelter, except among the trees where their little wooden cabin was situated.

**What can we learn from Philippine? How does she inspire us?**

I am inspired by her humility and gentility, her love of others and her life of devotion and prayer. Her determination and her willingness to suffer deeply in order to fulfil her call to serve and reach out to others was remarkable.

My journey to Sugar Creek, walking in the footsteps of Philippine and her companions, was deeply humbling. It left me with a sense of wonderment on the lives of Philippine and her companions and with feelings of deep sadness on the plight of the Potawatomi people.

**Philippine learned to go where she was most needed**

What can she teach us? What does it mean to go to mission and reach frontiers today? What are our new frontiers? How can we contribute?

If we see our schools as a community of pupils, staff, leadership, parents, we can be and act as one body. We can care for one another, Jesus sent his disciples out 2x2, and there are realities we cannot live through alone.

We can recognise the gift of our pupils, our leadership, our RSCJ, our trustees, principles, deputies and colleagues, of our network of schools, our internationality.

Let us now take a few moments to reflect on our own lives and on how we can inspire others through our faith and actions… (2 mins on each, then share)

* How can we live with gratitude and gratefulness?
* How can the everyday little things feed our souls?
* How can we share what we know and what we have learned from our founding Sisters?
* How can it become and be part of our interior lives in order to educate from the heart?
* What are Philippine’s gifts to us in this year? Ask her for a gift.

Now, having experienced the prayer that comes from these reflections, I would like to talk with you about another subject which was explored on my visit - How do we create a more contemplative space in our schools through prayer?

I attended two workshops on prayer, one with Paul Parker, who is Spiritual Director at our school in Carrolton, Miami, and one with Sister Quinn and Sister Hughes, who spent time in our own schools last year and spoke about prayer and discernment.

Paul Parker’s theme was ‘***We are called to silence ourselves, this is one of the calls of the Society of the Sacred Heart, Chapter 2016’***

We are called to silence ourselves and to create silence. How do we do this? Silence is practised for five minutes each day at their School, it is called ***Espacio***. The whole school, including administrative and maintenance staff, observes the silence. He spoke about his own experience at his School at Carrolton. He said ’I feel I am on holy ground’

He talked about prayer being about relationship. Like with any other relationship, first you become acquainted, then friendship, and eventually experience intimacy with Christ.

He referred to the practice of active prayer:

**‘Breath in, breath out, I am calm**

**I am silent**

**You in me**

**I in you**

**Present moment**

**Wondrous moment**

**Peace to the world’**

Prayer is important in order to discover our call. What is God calling us to do? What is God calling us to be? He suggested that we ask adults in the autumn ‘who do you need to be, what do you need to do?

Paul spoke about Matthew’s scripture 6:6, ‘When you pray go to your inner room, shut the door and pray to your Father’.

Contemplative prayer frees us. He spoke of the freedom to put down the false self, to get serious about our own personal transformation. For us to be contemplative in action, growing in love with staff and our school community……with affection, esteem, security and meaning.

He suggested that we ‘keep taking the first next step in our relationship with God, that God is always open and will always use the space to love and heal us’.

He referred to Andrew Greeley, the great mystic…Is it safe to trust?

**Sister Kathleen Hughes spoke of prayer and the interior life.**

In her workshop, Sister Hughes said ‘prayer is a mystery, what does it matter how we pray? She talked about Sophie and prayer. She said that Sophie saw prayer as a way of deepening our relationship with God. Be at peace; do not force yourself to meditate. Be content to remain quiet in God’s presence.

The sufferings of humanity inspired Sophie to pray. Sophie lived her life with a constant attitude of loving attentiveness. Sophie asked…***’what is interior spirit, it is intimate union of our soul with God, only let God in. God’s image has to be engraved in our hearts, God living in us’.***

Sophie saw prayer with three characteristics - simple, free and disciplined.

Sister Kathleen talked about the sacramental life, feasts and seasons of the church year as an opportunity for prayer. Retreats, mantras, the Eucharist, our desire to be nurtured by the Holy Spirit. She spoke about the stillness of the soul being overcome by the presence of God.

**Sister Barb Quinn**

Sister Barb asked ‘who is God for you’? She referred to Thomas Merton who said that there is a ‘hiddenness about God’.

She talked of the language of God’s spirit. Let the spirit teach us the language of prayer, focus our attention on God.

What is right and true versus turmoil and confusion? Peace and joy comes quietly to us, which is prayer. Prayer will help us move from fear and paralysis to courage and energy.

She spoke of the role of music and nature in prayfulness. She spoke of savouring our relationships. She said relationship breaks things open for us, helps us to know and love God.

She finished with a poem by Mary Oliver, which I will now leave you with as it brings us to the presence, in gratitude…

**‘There are moments when the veil seems  
almost to lift, and we understand what  
the earth is meant to mean to us – the  
trees in their docility, the hills in  
their patience, the flowers and the  
vines in their wild, sweet vitality.  
Then the Word is within us, and the  
Book is put away.’**