

HOMILY

The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time *February 8, 2009*

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By any chance, did you see the report that “60 Minutes” did a few months back on Sister Emmanuel? Sister Emmanuel was at retirement age when she fell on her knees and prayed that God would send her to the most desperate spot on earth.

He did.

Today, this 79-year-old French nun serves God in the “City of Garbage.” That is the name of a suburb of Cairo, Egypt, where the people who collect Cairo’s garbage live. They not only collect the garbage, they live in the garbage, eat the garbage, and salvage all their earthly belongings from the garbage as well. They are the most despised people in Egypt. For one thing, they raise pigs in their garbage “kingdom.” Pigs are forbidden in Moslem society as they were in the Old Testament.

Into this desperate situation came this retired nun to live among the garbage people, to love them, and to teach them and their children better ways to live. Has she succeeded? More than you might possibly imagine. There are schools now; and at her urging, the government is providing better housing. Many lives have been immeasurably improved. *Emmanuel* means *God with us*. Certainly, the people of the City of Garbage know that God is with them in the presence of this determined and dedicated nun. What is Sister Emmanuel’s reward? Nothing earthly to be sure. She lives as simply as do the people to whom she ministers.

What is it for which you are working? What is it that motivates you? Is it money? Money has a way of dominating our lives, particularly if we do not have it. We are like the man who happened to find a \$10 bill on the street. He was so happy that he spent the rest of his life walking with his head down hoping to find more. He accumulated hundreds of buttons, thousands of tabs off pop cans, a few scattered

pennies, a bent back, and a sore neck. Meanwhile, he missed the beauty of God's creation around him. There is a limit to the motivating power of money. You may have seen a study some time back which indicated that the professional football teams with the highest team salaries often finished in the bottom in their division.

What is it that motivates you? Is it the admiration and respect of other people? Have you noticed how ball teams play much better on their home floors? There is something about having people around you cheering for you that enhances performance. Is it the thrill of a job well done? Or is it something even higher than that?

After a tragic bombing in the Middle East, some of the wounded and dying were transported to a West German hospital. In one hospital lay a severely wounded Marine, moments away from death. His commander walked to the Marine's bed to speak with him and to offer some encouragement. The Marine from his deathbed struggled to voice the words, "*Semper Fi*," the Marine Corps motto "Always Faithful." That Marine was motivated by some higher calling.

What is it that motivates you? What, for instance, motivated Paul? It certainly wasn't money. Prestige? Hardly. Paul was reviled within the early Church. There were many of the redeemed who wouldn't walk across the street to speak to Paul. That was inside the Church. He was imprisoned and beaten by those outside of the Church. It wasn't prestige that motivated him. It certainly wasn't any sense of power or any of the other things that generally motivate people. What was it that motivated St. Paul? It was love. Love for the gospel. Love for other people. Love for the Lord.

What is it that motivates you? There is only one motivation that matters in the Christian faith, and that is LOVE! St. Paul says at the end of 1st Corinthians, "*Do all things in the spirit of love.*" Love follows from caring, sharing, being *simpatico*, having heart.

What is your purpose? Leo Buscaglia tells a fable in his book, *Loving Each Other*, about a young girl who was walking through a meadow. She saw a butterfly impaled upon a thorn. Very carefully she released the butterfly and it began to fly away. Then it came back and changed into a beautiful fairy. "For your kindness," the fairy told the little girl, "I will grant you your fondest wish." The little girl

thought for a moment and replied, “I want to be happy.” The fairy leaned toward her and whispered into her ear and suddenly vanished. As the girl grew older, no one in the land was happier than she. Whenever anyone asked her for the secret of her happiness, she would only smile and say, “I listened to a good fairy.” As she reached the last years of her life, her neighbors were afraid that the fabulous secret would die with her. “Tell us, please, they begged her. Tell us what the fairy said.” The now lovely old lady smiled and said, “She told me that everyone, no matter how secure they seem, has need of me.”

That is a great secret of life. Everyone has need of us. And the willingness to give ourselves to others is the secret of happiness. Do all things in the spirit of love. Love for others. Love for the Lord. Love for his church. That is what motivated Sister Emmanuel to go into the City of Garbage: Love for people; love for the Lord.

I'd like to close with a thought from John Cardinal Newman, a convert to Catholicism in the 19th Century:

God has created me to do for Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission...I am a link in a chain, a connection between people. God has not created me for nothing. I shall do good; I shall do His work; I shall be a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling.

