

Reflection for June 25, 2015
Anniversary of the six Sisters coming to the U.S.

I'm really happy to be invited to share a reflection with you today for more than one reason, first it's always good to be here with people I love, in this chapel that I also love, secondly, I want to celebrate with you this special anniversary of the six Sisters from Germany arriving at the New York harbor on June 25, 1876 bringing our Divine Providence charism with them. The third reason why I'm glad to be here is because I'm on the committee that has been writing the book on the history of the community for the last few years and I'm anxious to tell you something we've discovered, or maybe we've intuited, as we've worked with our chronicles and other sources of information about our past.

As I reflected on the Gospel chosen for today, I found myself comparing Jesus' invitation to the disciples to follow Him to the call our six foremothers received. There are similarities; both they and the disciples were asked to leave a lot behind, their homes, their families, their work. For the Sisters, it was leaving their country too. Both the disciples and our foremothers were asked to follow where Jesus led, which was inevitably where there were people in need. One difference between the two groups of people though, is related to what I wanted to share with you from our work on the history committee. As we learned more and more about our early Sisters, we kept noticing that from the beginning of our Congregation in the United States, the women who enter our community seem, not just to be invited or called, but rather, to actually be lured by our Provident God. We became so convinced of that amazing possibility that we named the book about our history, The Lure of Providence.

Daniel Webster tells us that a lure is an attraction, an enticement, and that "to lure someone" is to draw that person on with a promise of pleasure or gain. One difference between an invitation or a call and a lure is that one can say "no" to an invitation; to say "no" to a lure is much more difficult. Because our charism is to make God's Providence more visible in our world, it seems appropriate that God should lure us to live it, not just invite us or call us, but draw us on, almost pull us forward so that we are not tempted to say no. As Providence people, we believe that God is constantly attracting all creation to its completion, graciously luring people like us to cooperate in this process. Following divine lures involves our hearts and our emotions as well as our minds; it calls for a unique personal response. The committee members didn't think that the words "invite" or "call" seem dynamic enough to capture the significance of the special grace of being lured to co-create with God. Because God is the essence of creativity, the means Providence uses to lure us are multiple. One might be drawn, lured forward by another person, by an event, or even by a feeling that persists.

The Chronicles tell us that Mother Vincentia had no difficulty finding six volunteers to come to America. It's likely that she lured them with her description of the opportunities they would have in the New World to make God's Providence more visible, especially to those who were poor and needy there. It's clear, as we look back now, that only Sisters who felt a very strong pull to do what Mother Vincentia envisioned would have been able to endure the hardships our foremothers lived through: the eighteen day trip on the stormy ocean, the anxiety when no one met them when they docked in New York, the long stagecoach ride to Dungannon, Ohio, and the discovery when they arrived there that there was no decent housing for them and very little to eat. Despite moving into an old, drafty, vermin-infested house, having no money, needing to beg for food or steal a neighbor's eggs, and still feeling hungry most of the time, those Sisters managed to open a parish school only 52 days after their arrival in Ohio. How were they able to do such an amazing feat? What we can be sure of is that they must have felt lured by Providence and trusted so much in God's loving care, that it gave them the enormous strength and courage they needed to persevere in the midst of so many hardships. We should surely honor and celebrate their lives today.

I sometimes wonder though, did they know that they were initiating the pattern for the life story of future generations of Sisters of Divine Providence? Could they even have imagined back then, what we see now, that their story would be repeated over and over throughout the history of our Congregation? The story of Providence has had the same plot from 1851 to 2015: Providence lures us toward some good, we feel drawn to follow the lure; then despite hardships and heartaches, our courage increases as does our trust, and finally, God's Providence appears more visible than we ever even imagined.. That's the story we celebrate with our six foremothers today and it's the story of our community history since then.

If we think of the beginning of each of our provinces or each one of our institutions, we can recognize in hindsight the lures Providence sent to us and the courage it took for our Sisters to remain as strong in the midst of difficulties, as the original six Sisters did. I'm thinking of Sisters like Mother Mary Kenneth who followed the lure she felt in her heart encouraging her to open a Sisters college and the lure which Sr. de la Salle recognized when she worked so unstintingly to help the college survive. Both experienced heartaches in the process, but they followed the lure of Providence and their trust and courage never waned. Sr. Salvatore could surely tell the story of the lures that led her to bring God's Providence to Braddock Hospital, as could Sr. Miriam Colon about being lured to minister in Santo Domingo, or the strong urging Sr. Roberta felt to create a Center to help women in Puerto Rico. I'm sure you all could think of many similar stories in which Sisters are lured to a certain ministry or even a certain country. Many of these stories are included in our book on the community history.

In truth though, if we each shared our vocation story, we might also see how we were lured toward this community, how we've experienced both difficulties and joys through the years and how we've watched our trust in the love and care of our Provident God grow with each lure. As part of the celebration of our first six Sisters coming from Germany, I invite you to share with someone today your story of being lured by Providence to become a co-creator with God in bringing all creation to its completion. Then we can celebrate the gift of Providence in all our lives as well as in the lives of the Sisters in our history.

Sr. Mary Ellen Rufft, C.D.P.