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OPPORTUNITY IS RIGHT NOW

As we think about the people who have been part of our lives, some shine with a special radiance. We look at them today or we remember them from the past as givers of light. When we are in need, they appear on the scene of our personal drama in strong supporting roles. They make a real difference in what we become. Such a one for me was Mother Aloysius of the Blessed Sacrament, the prioress of Carmel in Concord, New Hampshire, who welcomed me as a postulant years ago. Since her death, her message has reached out to many through a short collection of her thoughts entitled "Fragrance from Alabaster." This little booklet is in its fourth printing and has been translated into French and Spanish. It contains words addressed to her Carmelite Sisters, and also to lay people who treasured her letters and remembered conversations they had with her at the monastery.

One aspect of her spirituality that especially enriched me was her emphasis on the importance of the passing moment. She urged me to focus on the present instant and see in it opportunity. Opportunity! It is a key word in Carmelite spirituality. Everything in our lives is like a door that can open new life for us if we choose rightly. Unhappily, we can also close that door, shut it tight if we reach for what deprives us of true life. She would say to us today as she did to a young novice, "Be generous in cooperating with God, whatever the moments hold of things pleasant or painful. It can be an unlooked-for service asked when your day is already planned, an experience when all goes wrong. Look upon such an occasion not as a trial but as an opportunity, and embrace it" (Fragrance from Alabaster, p 35). Opportunity!

We human creatures are subject to time, held fast in the Here and Now. This is where God finds us. And where we find God. In the Here and Now. The past is behind us. The future ahead of us. The Now encircles us. And in that encircling, we are clasped by God Who meets us just where we are. Sometimes this Now is a joyous place. Sometimes a sad one. Things positive and things negative come into our Nows. Mother Aloysius once offered this advice, "I begged our Lord to teach you the secret of sanctity and happiness in the sanctification of the present moment-peacefully." She underlined "peacefully" and went on, "The present moment contains all grace for our sanctification." She concludes, "It is the only thing that matters" (p 2). Holiness and happiness go together. To strive after holiness is not to walk a way of deprivation but to open ourselves to authentic and lasting gladness.

The parents of the future Carmelite met as workers on a wealthy estate near Boston. Her father was from Dublin and her mother from Cork, then called Queenstown. She grew up around farm animals and she always remembered them with affection. She knew every wild flower by name. Eight girls and two boys made up the family of Timothy and Mary Rogers. Understandably, their daughter Alice, later Sister Aloysius, had a strong

training in not wasting anything. Human striving must be aware of what can be squandered.

She once said to me, "Don't be thinking anxiously about what can happen in the future. The future isn't here. God gives you grace for what is taking place this instant. Whatever does come about will then have God's grace for you as part of it. You'll have all the help you need. Don't give your attention to what hasn't occurred. Otherwise, you lose the treasure of the present moment."

Time is a commodity we possess in limited supply. Entering Concord Carmel as a teenager, I saw the years ahead stretching in a long, long line. There seemed to be plenty of them. I needed to learn that time is precious and nothing we can be sure of. Our immediate certainty lies in what is right before us in the present. That we grasp. Don't let it go. Don't give it up by excessive misgivings about an unrealized future that may not be at all the way our imagination presents it. Of course, we need to make plans for what may eventuate. But we do so with a calm assurance that whatever comes to pass, we will not be alone in dealing with it. As day succeeds day, grace is given in ample measure.

When I grew older, Jesus' words to His disciples made more of an impact on me. "Which of you by worrying can add a moment to your life-span? If the smallest things are beyond your power, why be anxious about the rest?" (Lk 12, 25,26).

Concentrating on the present instant of time is to live in greater serenity. Mother wrote in a letter, "Keep your heart always lifted up and dwell peacefully in the Will of your Beloved (God), even His wills of every moment, for nothing happens but by His permission and for our greater good. Try to become more and more penetrated with the thought that God loves you. Believe in that love, and let this thought be to you the source of a joy that nothing on earth can disturb" (p 7).

Minutes and hours are treasures given into our keeping, to be used to profit not just ourselves but others too. "Whenever anyone comes for me, let me remember: this is God's moment. He made it. He sent it; He watches its effect. I will say to Him: "Give me Thy Spirit" (p 12). When we willingly spend out of the resources of our hearts, the return is high.

Stretching ourselves for the sake of someone else is simultaneously reaching out to Christ. "Let us urge ourselves to be generous whenever the occasion is offered. To give to Jesus the fruits of our love is to taste them ourselves-to taste the sweetness, the peace, and the all-satisfying joy of closer intimacy with Him" (p 22).

No matter where we are in our lives, the saving power of Jesus is available to us. His love encompasses us and asks for our response to Him in the current circumstances. Mother Aloysius would say to us in a world of tension and struggle, "Dwell peacefully in the Will of God, not only His "big" wills but His "little" wills of every moment. Look upon each as the footprints of His feet in which you are to follow quietly" (p.9).

To walk with Jesus is to find in time a firm bridge to portals that open to eternity.

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***Fragrance from Alabaster* may be purchased from the Carmelite Monastery, 275 Pleasant St., Concord, NH, 03301 at \$3.50 a copy.**