



A Future of Hope

By S. Mary Bookser

On Saturday, Oct. 10, 2009, surrounded by many members of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, her family from Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, and other friends, S. Alice Ann O'Neill pronounced her vows for life! She professed "to live in the spirit of charity, humility and simplicity, and make my vows of poverty, consecrated celibacy and obedience to God as a witness of my Baptismal promises. I freely commit myself for life to the service of God's people as a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. May I live as a joyful witness to God's love in our world." The profession Mass was a joyful celebration in the Spirit of Charity! Having accompanied S. Alice Ann in various ways since the beginning of her journey, I knew of her deep commitment to our mission, charism and vision.

For this article I chose to ask S. Alice Ann a question I hear many people asking today. Why would she, an intelligent and gifted woman in her 30s, decide to make her final profession of vows during a period in which apostolic Catholic sisters in the United States are under investigation by the Vatican, few Catholics are choosing religious life, and the Church itself is under stress?

S. Alice Ann's features brightened when I asked that question and she embarked onto one of her favorite themes. "The future can be filled with hope, and it is," she expressed enthusiastically. The readings from her vow Mass also share this strong belief in faith and strength of spirit. The first reading from the Book of Sirach (2:1-6, 8) stated "be sincere of heart and steadfast, and undisturbed in time of adversity. For gold is tested in fire." The letter to the Philippians advised us to be of the same mind, united in heart and love, and the Gospel reading from Mark (12:28-34) is what S. Alice Ann said she tries to focus on in her life, especially when faith is necessary. We are exhorted to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength (and) love your neighbor as yourself" – definitely the heart and soul of the Gospel message.

S. Alice Ann believes in the future of religious life within the Catholic Church and said, "Look at what Elizabeth Ann Seton and Mother Margaret George did with a very small number of dedicated women. We are strong women of faith, as they were, and we can trust that God is with us all the way. All will be well."

From her youth, S. Alice Ann felt an affinity for the spirit and charism of the Sisters of Charity, which she first encountered through our Sister of Charity cousins in New Brunswick. She firmly believes she has been called to follow in the footsteps of Elizabeth Seton and has found her "home" with the Sisters of Charity.



Anna Bumiller, a cello student of S. Alice Ann O'Neill from the University of Dayton, performed Bach's sixth suite as prelude music for the vow Mass.



Members of S. Alice Ann O'Neill's family traveled from Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, to attend her profession of final vows on Oct. 10 at the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception at Mount St. Joseph.



S. Alice Ann O'Neill signs her vows in front of president of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati S. Barbara Hagedorn (left), members of the Congregation, family and friends.

As a cellist and Suzuki cello teacher, as well as a college music professor, S. Alice Ann's ministry of education is enriched and made deeper by her participation in the long Charity commitment to excellent quality and holistic education, begun by Elizabeth Seton in Emmitsburg, Md. Her ministry with Suzuki teaching, based in the philosophy of Dr. Shinichi Suzuki, proposes that every child, if nurtured by love, can learn. She believes this philosophy dovetails wonderfully with the vision of SC educators throughout the past 200 years.

"It was important to me to make this commitment to our Congregation during this bicentennial anniversary year," S. Alice Ann said. "Elizabeth Ann Seton inspired my vocation and I hope that my commitment is an inspiration for our whole Community to have faith and hope in the future and for all that is to come."

When asked specifically about the current state of our Church, and particularly the investigation of apostolic women religious, she said, "I believe our Community has been faithful to what the Church asked of us after the Second Vatican Council. Based on prayerful discernment, the Sisters made major changes that put them more in accord with our founding values. Now I am witnessing the sadness and pain of many Sisters who feel they are facing skepticism and disrespect of their years of dedicated service to our Church. I have seen that we are willing to face this challenge and to once again discern and evaluate our faithfulness to Elizabeth's vision. I believe that women religious continue to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading. We continue to be dedicated to Gospel values and to serving however we are able. In the end, I believe our spirit of dedication and faithfulness will come to light and will be lauded as a result of the findings of this investigation. Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati continue to inspire me to continue on this Charity journey.

"Our way of living religious life is life-giving for me and for many whom I serve in ministry," S. Alice Ann noted. "Though I appear to be employed in the same manner I was before I entered the Congregation, my life now is completely different and filled with joy. Through prayer, discernment, Community relationships, the formation program, and of course, with God's help, I have been transformed. Everything I am and do is grounded in the spirit and vision of our Charity values. I am who I am and I do what I do 'impelled by the love of Christ' and inspired by Elizabeth, Vincent, Louise and Margaret and by all who grew out of their 'mustard seed.' I have belief and hope in us: in who we are, in our mission and charism, and in all we continue to be and do as Sisters of Charity."

S. Alice Ann spreads joy through her charming smile, yet she continues to call those of us she encounters each day to truly live our Charity charism and mission. S. Alice Ann, may you live a long and happy life as a Sister of Charity of Cincinnati, and thank you for sharing your spirit of faith and hope in our journey together.