

Living life of holiness topic of FFC speaker's address

By Marly Kosinski
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BOARDMAN – The First Friday Club of Greater Youngstown ended its second season of luncheon speakers recently with Dr. Donna Orsuto, professor at the Institute of Spirituality at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, speaking on the topic of “Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary: Living the Call to Holiness in the 21st Century.”

Dr. Orsuto is the co-founder and director of the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas, an international residential community fostering the intellectual and spiritual growth of students enrolled in one of Rome's Pontifical universities or institutes. Its mission is to promote Christian dialogue and unity.

Dr. Orsuto grew up in the Youngstown area and is the sister of Humility of Mary Sister Jean Orsuto, executive director of the Emmanuel Community Care Center in Girard. She began her talk by explaining that much of what she planned to say was inspired by her family life in the Youngstown Diocese. “In a way, coming here today is a way of recognizing the gift of what I have received in this place,” Dr. Orsuto said.

She said she recalled coming to Youngstown on March 29, 2007, to bring one of the first copies of her book on holiness to her sister, Arlene, who had been living at Park Vista (retirement community) for nearly three years before she died that October. Sister Jean had arranged the surprise visit for Arlene's birthday and Dr. Orsuto said her sister was doubly surprised at seeing her and learning she had dedicated her book to Arlene.

“She looked puzzled when I explained to her that she had been an inspiration for my book. “‘Why would you find inspiration from me on your book about holiness?’ she asked me,” Dr. Orsuto said. “Her question brings us to the heart of today's topic because it makes us ask the question ‘What do we mean by holiness?’”

She said from a secular perspective, few things could be less relevant than holiness. “Making a living, chasing dreams, tackling goals, conquering greater conquests, getting and doing are what most people are concerned about. For so many people, holiness is regarded as a sort of hybrid hobby for the piously impractical at best, and escapism, sissy stuff for the weak at worst. And yet, in the Christian tradition, we hold that holiness has a central place in our understanding of who God is and who we are.”

She said holiness is a free gift that all Christians receive at baptism, along with the gifts of faith, hope and charity. She went on to say that if God intended to give people these gifts, it is their duty to maintain and cultivate them through the practice of love of neighbor.

“These gifts also are a great responsibility and a challenge that can be very daunting in this computer-, cell phone-, and fast-food-obsessed world we live in. So I think I will use the story of my sister Arlene as a practical example of living a life of holiness,” Dr. Orsuto said.

She said that in the last phase of her sister's illness when one would have expected her to be at her worst, Arlene was paradoxically happy and sometimes even joyful. She said her sister's life was often difficult for her and the family, but if one looked at the whole picture, Arlene had two fundamental attitudes that helped her during those hard times – a strong sense of God's unconditional and providential love, and a willingness to seek and find the hand of God in everyday life.

“She knew how to find the extraordinary in the ordinary. During the last few years of her life, she discovered she could trust in God's love and see his providential gifts in the simple, barely perceptible things that make up daily life. That led to an everyday, practical, simple sort of holiness,” Dr. Orsuto said. She said she saw Arlene's experience as a way to demonstrate that God's holiness belongs to everyone in everyday situations as much as it belongs to the huge events that make people take notice.

Dr. Orsuto said there are many biblical passages about holiness, but one in particular epitomizes what Christians mean when they talk about the subject. John 15: 5-9 says “I am the vine and you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him bears much fruit....”

The speaker noted that, though the word holiness is not mentioned, the passage describes what holiness means: abiding in the life of Jesus and letting his life flow into one's own.

"Holiness means being in Christ. Before you do anything, you first must be in Christ," the speaker said. She used the example of Mother Teresa, who, she said "prayed for faithfulness, not success."

She showed the audience slides of St. Clement Basilica in Rome, whose sanctuary contains a 12th century mosaic depicting the Cross as the Tree of Life. The mosaic features the 12 apostles, Jesus, Mary and John the Baptist, with twisting vine tendrils leading to sheep below, which represent the faithful. Dr. Orsuto said the artwork depicts saints and ordinary people growing on the same vine, meaning everyone is one in the Father.

"Abide in Christ wherever you are in your everyday life. At work, at home, wherever, because wherever Christ is, there also is holiness," she said. She added that God calls people to holiness through their spouses and families. "Family is the crucible God has chosen to lead you to holiness. Take care of them, love them, honor them. Because wherever your family is, there also is holiness," Dr. Orsuto said.

She closed her talk by outlining three things Christians can do to live lives of holiness:

— Reflect on death and realize that one day you will die. Try to figure out what you have said or what you would have done if you knew the precise moment you would be called to God. Reflect on your deepest desires and what is really important to you.

— Let "the instrument" play you and let "the music" carry you away. "We can and should seek Christ in all we do, but it's greater to let God lift us up," she said.

— Find God in your daily routine, which she said, will ignite everything you do as a Christian.

"The Christian call to holiness means we allow ourselves to be changed into fire so we burn with God's love," she concluded.

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