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Solemnity of All Saints 2009

NDS Canada/US Chapter Gathering, Mono Mills

Both as religious women, and especially as Sisters of Sion, I suspect that you—probably more than *most* Catholics—have spent a *lot* of time reading, studying and praying over the Beatitudes. You have thought plenty about what they *mean*, and how they *apply*, to our individual lives, to the life of our Church, and to the life of our world. I suspect that there would be very little I could tell you this evening about these familiar lines that you haven't already heard; in fact, I suspect that, if you were to pool your collective life experiences and studies, the group of you could write a fairly rich commentary on them yourselves.

But if there is anything we Scripture folks like to emphasize, it's the importance of *context*. And not simply the historical, literary and socio-cultural context of the original Biblical world, but also the context in which that Scriptural Word is *heard*—the context of its audience, at any particular moment. Because, while the Scriptures are essentially *fixed* in terms of their Hebrew and Greek forms, those who *hear* and *listen to* those Scriptures are never the same twice. You were different *last* year when you heard these readings, and you will be different again *next* year. The *text* may remain the same, but the lived *context* is always new.

And as you gather here this weekend, the concrete context is that you are preparing for next year's General Chapter. And the key theme—which I see literally everywhere in the preparation materials I was sent—is the Latin line engraved on the rings many of you wear: *In Sion firmata sum*, “In Sion I am firmly established”. That phrase, taken from chapter 24 of Sirach, has been at the heart of your community almost from its foundations. You are firmly established—rooted—anchored in Zion—that is, in Jerusalem. And it is not merely that two of your principal houses are in Jerusalem and Ein Kerem. There is something greater, deeper, more profound. Last spring, I had the opportunity to spend an afternoon and evening animating a session with your four Dublin Sisters on precisely that phrase, and it was tremendously enriching for me and, I hope, for them.

To say that you are “firmly established in Zion” is more just than the deed to a piece of property in that holiest and most fractious of cities. It is not about legal incorporation or physical land-ownership. To be rooted in Zion is, I believe, to be, on the level of your hearts and souls, deeply and forever connected to that *city* and, even more importantly, to its *peoples*. It means that you have a link to Jerusalem in a way no other religious community does—not as an accident of history, but as a part of the very core of your charism. To the best of my knowledge, no other religious community in Catholicism has the city of Jerusalem built into its very *identity*. That alone makes you unique.

But it also implies a *responsibility*. If you are grounded, rooted, anchored in Zion—in Jerusalem—then you are also those who, in your everyday lives, wherever you may be, and whatever else you may do, must have a particular *attentiveness* to Jerusalem, to what is

happening there between Israelis and Palestinians, between Christians, Muslims and Jews. You are called, to use evangelical terminology, to “carry Jerusalem as a burden laid on your heart,” to consider the religious, political and social complexities of that city as part of your own life, even if you are living half a world away, in ministries that may have little directly to do with Jerusalem. But to be a true Sister of Zion, to be truly “*firmata in Sion*,” is to allow Jerusalem, its joys and sadnesses, to intrude on your life—to follow its news with interest, to carry its people in your prayer and devotions. If you are *firmata in Sion*, then the words of Psalm 137 apply to you in a particular way: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy”. For a Sister of Zion, Jerusalem—Zion—must always be a mental, spiritual and emotional priority ... to stay in touch with your Sisters there, to support the work of your Holy Land communities, to make Jerusalem, in very basic, concrete ways, a reality in *your* lives in a way that it is *not* in the life of any other community.

And into that commitment to the real, historical Zion come the words of the Beatitudes tonight. Many of them hold significance for you, but I would like to focus in on just one of them: “Blessed are the peacemakers”. It is perhaps bitterly ironic that we are listening to those words on the same weekend that Israelis are marking the 14th anniversary of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, arguably one of the greatest peacemakers in recent Middle Eastern history. And yet, as history and faith remind us, no single human being—not only the greatest diplomat—can truly *make* peace. Peace, first and foremost, is a gift of God ... a gift, sadly, that Jerusalem has so often been deprived of in its long history. Despite our greatest efforts, no one of us can really *make* peace.

But maybe “peacemaker” isn’t the only, or the best, translation. The Latin says “*Beati pacifici*”—Blessed are the peaceful ones, the ones who *radiate* peace, who *live* peace. And a couple of French translations have a rendering that I’m particularly fond of: *Bienheureux les artisans de la paix*—Blessed are the *artisans* of peace ... the ones who, with creativity and an eye for beauty, are able to *shape* peace, are able to *mould* peace, are able to take the actions that enable peace to flourish. The French reminds us that the building-up of peace is more of an art than a science. It does not yield to equations or formulas. It does, however, yield to the gentle, seasoned hand of a craftsman, of someone who slowly, deliberately and gently works to *craft* peace. Perhaps we cannot *make* peace, but we can certainly be *artisans* of peace ... and we *must* be.

And I believe that those two passages—*In Sion firmata sum*, and “*Bienheureux les artisans de la paix*”—unite in your community today in a particularly necessary and focussed way. As you look to your General Chapter, I think it is more important than ever that you be firmly rooted in Jerusalem, and in all that it represents, and that you commit, as individuals, as local communities, as a community generally, to explore the ways in which you can be *artisans de la paix*, people whose gentle contributions can pave the way for peace in all its dimensions, but especially peace in the Holy Land. How can you help to water the seeds of peace that others are sowing, and that are growing—slowly, sometimes tentatively and uncertainly—in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Israel and Palestine? How can you leverage your personal gifts and influence, and the collective experience and gifts of the *Soeurs de Notre-Dame-de-Sion*, to be

agents of peace, for whom Jerusalem must always be a focal point and a central emphasis? What would enable you to be more fully engaged in the struggle for peace, at this critical time? How can Zion—and its twisting, turning streets rich with the smells of coffee, spices, incense and roast meats—be more consciously a part of *your* daily life? And how can *your* daily life be more a part of Zion?

For “*In Sion firmata sum*” is about more than just where you were historically established, where you were “made firm”. Because the Latin *firmus* also means “strong, steadfast, enduring, powerful”. Zion is for you all a source of strength, vitality and power, just as the ancient Israelites believed it to be. It is a city like no other, and *you* are blessed to have a privileged connectedness to it that makes you unique and special, an opportunity to be “artisans of peace” in a city, and a land, that so badly *needs* such artisans. In all the Star Wars movies, the great blessing was always “The Force be with you”. My wish for you, instead, is that “*Zion* may be with you,” and that that relationship bear fruit, not merely for those who live in that blessed and tortured land, but for *all* humanity.