

## FRANCES DOMINICA

I never cease to wonder at God's selfless persistence. As someone once testified: "Even if I take the wings of the morning or dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea," we still hear God's relentless knocking at our door. Most of us try to ignore the knock of course. And a good way to do that is to clutter our life with mindless displacement activity. And the world is forever lining up opportunities for us to do that!

But many of us here will have given in, opened the door, and welcomed Him in. And just like our forebears at Emmaus, we will have found the stranger we met along the road is now sharing the bread of his life with us. And inviting us to be whisked up into his Dance of Life.

One young Scottish Lassie had already become used to visiting her younger brother David in Great Ormond St Hospital. So it was natural for her to respond to the knock at the door by going there to train as a paediatric nurse. But having once entered into the Dance, a growing realisation came alive in her that she should test that vocation to nursing within the framework of the Religious Life. A very significant Leap in the dance of life. She had not anticipated however that her novitiate would entail an eternity of scrubbing the floors round and round the cloister of the enormous London Colney Convent. But young Frances was already showing signs of that rather alarming 'determination' of hers that was later to become a hall mark – and so she scrubbed ever onward.

With her devotion to prayer, the singing of the Office, and yet more scrubbing, Her sense of God's abiding presence and call deepened all the more. It was therefore in 1969, that she made her vows at All Saints', London Colney, before

the avuncular Bishop Laurie Brown. That was now fifty years ago. And she has been dancing with the Lord of the Dance ever since.

So just what is the nature of this extraordinary thing we call Vocation? For our own part, is it simply: Seeking to take God seriously? The renowned theologian Austin Farrer maintained that he asked for ordination *simply on the grounds that* it would force him to take God very seriously. But living *is* a serious business and we each have a destiny to fulfil. So we must ever be alert to the signs of the Stranger at the door – for those ‘whispers of eternity’ often come when we least expect them.

When Moses was but a shepherd at Horeb, how easy it would have been for him to give the burning bush only a casual glance. He could so easily have missed his appointment with his destiny. For I suspect that, at that time, he did not know, as we know, just who Moses was supposed to be. We know who Moses was. But only by stepping aside and responding to the call did *He* become conscious of the Moses he was meant to become. Moses was originally given his name because he was ‘drawn’ from the waters of the Nile. But, he was to fulfil his vocation, and fulfil his name, by becoming the Moses who helped ‘draw’ his people out of Slavery – so that they could be free for their own dance of life with God.

For there is a potent energy in Vocation which has the power to Name us and Call us – even us – to play our part in God’s Kingdom strategy for the world.

I believe that every plant and every creature has a vocation – a call – to live out what it is called to become. And for us human beings it is an invitation from our creator to become who it is that most pleases him. Not to pretend to be someone else (after all, all those options are already taken) but to live our own life in such a way that we can un-cover who it is that God has given *us* the potential to be.

And for the Christian it is only in the company of Christ that that dance of discovery and transfiguration can occur. Colossians 3: “Your life” – your destiny if you please – “is hid with Christ in God, but when Christ, who is your life, is revealed – then shall you be revealed, with him, in glory.”

As the young Frances became ever more conscious of her call and sought to respond to the Lord of the Dance, little did she think that by 1977 she would be elected as Mother Superior General of her Order. And she certainly did not predict that in the very next year she would meet a young child named Helen who would fulfil her own vocation & destiny by prompting Frances to dream the impossible dream – the world’s first hospice for children.

After that astonishing achievement however, the world began to assume that it knew precisely who Frances was and forever would be – she was “the pioneer of the children’s hospice movement.” The BBC even caste her away on a desert island with eight gramophone records for company, probably expecting that she would inevitably build another children’s hospice on the island! But while that’s the way the world looks at us, God never labels nor limits us like that. His call to us is forever to dance the next step – slowly becoming our true selves – by allowing him to release us from whom we no longer need to be. We feel an overwhelming need to protect what we have, and who we think we are. Whilst Christ teaches us that we can even give that part of ourselves away – time and

again – emptying ourselves, and in so doing, find our true self deep in the heart of God.

But this entails tremendous risk: to love so much that we are happy that our masks – those we offer others and those we use to hide from ourselves – be thrown away. To risk that! – the vulnerability of True love. But when we do finally risk that vulnerability then, at long long last, we can finally own up to the fact of who we are, and know that we really are loved! Not our masks, not our pretences, but we ourselves – truly loved.

Perhaps that is the pinnacle of vocation – to know full-well that the Lord of the Dance loves us to bits, and so shares the bread of his life with us. Shares it so extravagantly, indeed, that it empowers us and frees us in turn to love others with all our heart – to share the bread of our life with them.

For we cannot become all that we can be, all that we are called to be, without helping others become all that they can be. As Frances once wrote: “Generosity of oneself, ones energies and gifts, is surely the key to happiness, blessedness, wholeness.”

Frances once shared with me that when Archbishop Michael Ramsay lived here at St John’s with the sisters, he would walk every morning to buy his newspaper from Mr Patel’s shop. One morning the newsagent inquired: “*Archbishop, may I ask how long you have been a priest?*” to which he responded, “Nearly sixty years.” “*My, my,*” replied Mr Patel, “*that is a very long friendship!*”

Thank you Frances for sharing with us today the joy and happiness of these 50 years of your own very long friendship, and allowing us to dance some of the steps along with you. AMEN.