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JMJ

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I feel like Saint Paul when he spoke to the Ephesians that though I am the least deserving, He graciously brought me here to pray with you and to share with you some of my experiences about our Church and our country.

It is a great blessing to witness, so many here today, in our nation's capital, united in faith that came to pray for our country. Crossing the bridge that connects, God and people, Church and country, has shaped my own personal religious experience and vocational call.

By birth, I am an Assyrian from Iraq. Because of my love for the people of my new country, I became an American citizen. I have been a religious sister for 21 years and professed my perpetual vows in the Roman Catholic Church and have served missions in 14 countries. Since finishing my English and theology courses in Boston in 2005, I have traveled to 40 States here in America to serve God's people on this blessed soil.

Years ago, as a young nun in Iraq, I used to minister in the prison of Abu Ghraib. For 7 years, I spent long hours with prisoners each week, including those who were kept underground. I journeyed with those who were sentenced to death. I was a volunteer offering humanitarian aid especially food and medications to the inmates. During those years of service, some prisoners asked why I was doing all that for them, since the majority weren't Christians and their own families wouldn't take the risk to be there. My answer was always the same: my love for God, and my love for His children. It was God's love that gave me strength during the many wars in Iraq to go into government facilities piled with dead bodies that were kept without identification, and to walk through the streets of Baghdad gathering the bodies of the deceased homeless people, so they all would be buried with dignity.

Studies in theology brought me to the United States in the summer of 2001, and then to my work as a university campus minister. This led to my speaking ministry, first in Boston, then in distant communities. It is through my travel for ministry across our country that I came to know the character of our nation through the goodness of people. I came to see the face of our Church in America by giving retreats and parish missions at various Dioceses. I also came to know ordinary people, from all walks of life, and of different religions and languages, whose families originated from across the world, as I had. They or their ancestors came here seeking protection, education, freedom, and opportunity. I came to understand the love of our American nation as a family that has embraced and nurtured the lives of so many immigrants who have assimilated as Americans over the centuries to reach their potential, and realize their dreams here.

It was during the years of ministering here in America that some began to call me “mother.” After a prayerful discernment in 2007, I made a decision based on my love for people to become an American citizen. I remember a bishop who knew the depth of my love for my birth-land, Iraq, asking me the reason for making such a decision. I told him that God brought me to the land of America where many of the spiritual children that I had served call me “mother” and it was time for their “mother” to be one with them. It was not a difficult decision in many ways because it was based on my faith in the Lord, Who came to be one with His children. So He has formed my heart to be one with His heart for the people that I am called to serve.

During that time I chose to study the history of the United States, not to pass the test for citizenship, but, because, when we love people, we want to know everything about them. I was so impressed by the history of our nation and the sacrifices of our ancestors to make this land the country in which we all take such pride. The day I became a citizen, one good friend gave me a copy of Governor William Bradford’s journal *Of Plymouth Plantation*. In his journal, he described the journey, the settlement and the struggles of his fellow Pilgrims, who arrived in this land in 1620 aboard the small ship “Mayflower,” and who had made a new home in Plymouth, Massachusetts, with the guidance of the Almighty God and the help of some Native Americans. He wrote: ***“Thus out of small beginnings greater things have been produced by God’s hand that made all things of nothing, and gives being to all things that are; and, as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled has shone unto many...”***

It is amazing to think that from a small group of Pilgrims this fertile and fruitful land that we call our home began. Indeed, for the people of good will and by the grace of God, all things are possible. Our forefathers faithfully have passed the torch not only to thousands, but also to the hundreds of millions who call themselves today Americans.

As a Catholic religious sister, I also wanted to know the history of the Catholic Church in the United States. Upon learning the history of Catholicism in America, I was very inspired by the countless holy men and women who built the faith foundation for many generations, and for those yet to come, on this blessed soil. They include 15 American Saints, 6 Blesseds, 19 Venerables and 29 Servants of God. They are the true expression and the finest fruits of America's Christian identity. Many of them were the pioneers of education, health and social systems in our country. I also came to encounter numerous living ordinary saintly men and women, young and old, clergy and laity serving in an ordinary hidden way, but with deep faith and great love.

This love for the past history of our nation leads me to the faith that I have in the present time that we live in. Though some might wonder what I mean by faith when we see and read through social media of tragedies and scandals, of protests and rallies in the streets. My faith is built on the power of prayer that works miracles. When I think of all the prayers in front of every tabernacle on this land where Jesus is present in our midst; when I think of all the faithful who read the Word of God and take the Bible as a road-map for their lives, when I think of the ever living Marian devotion prayers in the heart of every Catholic as I witness rosaries in the hands of the young and the old, in offices, in cars, and homes, I know that the Lord is still very much in our midst and the Blessed Virgin Mary, His Holy Mother is interceding for us.

Also, every year as I travel to the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception here in Washington DC for the March for Life, and I see more than 15,000 young people keeping vigil in honor of the sanctity of life, respect for dignity of women and men. When I witness hundreds of thousands; young and old, families, children, all marching despite the weather for the protection of life, I know that the Church is still very much alive, youthful and growing.

In December 2011, I received a blessing from Cardinal Sean O'Malley to start a new Religious Order of Sisters in the Archdiocese of Boston, the Daughters of Mary of Nazareth. Today, our sisters include postulants, novices and professed sisters. We are growing by the grace of God. Since last November, at our Convent, among our studies,

teaching and ministry of helping the poor and those in need at nursing homes, women's shelter, and hospitals and beyond, we scheduled special days of prayer for the election. We also held a day of Adoration Vigil the night before the inauguration for the intention of peace and unity in our country.

Also on the eve of the 100th Anniversary of Our Lady of Fatima, we opened our Convent's chapel to the public for 13 hours of Adoration overnight, accompanied by this National Pilgrim Statue of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for peace in the world. Throughout the evening and to the early hours in the morning, we had over 500 people stop by for Adoration and prayer. It was a similar response when we organized a Mass of thanksgiving and an appreciation event for public safety personnel in Quincy at our local parish.

The overwhelming response we received for holding these events of prayers tells me that our countrymen and women are very much people of faith. These stories might not make it to the headlines. However these moments are like the stars that illumine the skies each night until the sun rises with the morning. I believe that with God's help, our country and all its people will flourish.

Love and faith lead me to this hope that I have for the future of our country and for our Church, as long as we keep our roots grounded in the soil of grace that comes from God. The tree that has no roots will never blossom. When we forget where we came from, and where we have been planted, and what we need in order to flourish, we can lose hope. However, when we are living in hope we find the strength and courage to journey forward toward one another and with others to promote dialogue and build bridges. As Pope Francis said, ***“Hope, to be nourished, needs a ‘body’, in which the various members support and revive each other.”***

Blessed Pope Paul VI said the split between the Gospel and our modern culture is the drama of our time. I came from a region in the world where there was no separation between religion and government. Now in the west we live in a time and in a place where there is not only a total separation between religion and state, but also at times there is hesitation to speak about God even in the simplest ways, such as saying “God bless you,” when somebody sneezes. Not only have we taken prayer out of our schools, we are afraid to wear religious symbols in public offices, or to talk publicly about our religious values in our daily lives.

In my simple experience, I have witnessed great fruit when there is a healthy collaboration between the ecclesial community and the political community. The mutual independence of the faith community and the political community does not require a separation that dismisses cooperation. As we read in the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council's Pastoral Constitution, faith leaders and civil leaders can more effectively serve "*for the good of all if each works better for wholesome mutual cooperation in a way suitable to the circumstances of time and place*".

Here in America we take pride in our democracy. The true strength of the democracy should not only be seen as an expression of the political will of the people, but also in our embrace of our own identity as Americans, and appreciation of the religious roots of our foundation as a nation.

In December 2007, I made a special mission trip to Iraq to visit our American troops for Christmas, and to be with our military men and women who couldn't come home. Many people didn't understand why as an Iraqi religious woman I would risk going into the Green Zone when there was so much conflict and danger happening at that time and in that area. Also during my time in campus ministry in Boston, I used to host appreciation events for the ROTC students and their families. In all these occasions I was asked: why, as a religious sister, I make an effort to honor men and women in service? My answer was "**because we both give our lives to others out of love.**"

People in public service and people of faith are united in one vision, the common good of people that they serve. In that light, we can find the common ground of service for all parties, acting as Americans first. Our pilgrim fathers and those who have come after them offered many sacrifices to build of us not a country of many divided parties, but **one nation under God.**

Saint Teresa of Calcutta said you can do things I cannot do, and I can do things you cannot do, but together we can do something beautiful for God. We came here today because we believe that that indeed, together, we can do something beautiful for God and for our nation. We each can become the small candle, which can light a thousand, described by our Pilgrim forefather William Bradford. We can become a beacon for the ship of our country in today's world.

May our gathering today as people who love God and this country be a renewed commitment to rekindle the spirit of cooperation, which has accomplished so much good throughout the history of our nation. May the fruit of today's prayer for our nation be a grace for our people to experience a new birth of freedom, freedom planted with faith, grounded in hope, nourished by love in the soil of truth in service of the genuine good of all humanity.

I would like to conclude with a verse from an old American hymn: A Song of Peace

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine;
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine:
O hear my song, You God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.

Amen.

God Bless you all,
Mother Olga of the Sacred Heart