"Macht's Gut!"

Homily for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B for St. Joseph Catholic Church, Yakima, Washington, on the occasion of Sr. Alice St. Hilaire's departure

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! What does it mean to be a missionary? By happy coincidence our Sunday scriptures on mission and call align with our good-bye this Sunday to Sister Alice St. Hilaire and what will be – for her – a change in mission.

Sister Alice St. Hilaire's mission here in Yakima has its roots right here at St. Joseph parish. Like my own mother, Sr. St. Hilaire graduated from the old St. Joseph Academy and, like my own mother, went on a retreat sponsored by the Sisters of Providence. Sr. Alice St. Hilaire entered the Sisters of Providence. My mother – obviously – did not! So, if you like what I'm doing as bishop my mother is happy to take all the credit. But if you don't like what I'm doing you can blame all the Sisters of Providence because their managing to keep my mother out of the convent is why I am here today!

Beyond the humor, the point here is that a call and a mission always involved an ordeal. Again, call and mission always involve an ordeal. Our opening reading recalls the ordeal of Jonah and his reluctance at being sent as a missionary to the city of Nineveh. "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah," our opening Old Testament reading begins, " 'Set out for the great city of Nineveh." Now if you are a careful reader of the Sunday lectionary you will notice that this opening passage is from Chapter 3 of the Book of Jonah – not Chapter 1. So this command is not the first that Jonah receives from the Lord – but the second!

If you go back and read Chapter 1 from the Book of Jonah, the first time Jonah receives the command, "Set out for the great city of Nineveh." A little geography: Nineveh is located on the east bank of the Tigris river in the far north of modern day Iraq. It's currently held by the famous "ISIS" death cult that has been using Islam as a vehicle for terror and violence. The Book of Jonah suggests that ancient Nineveh was also in the death grip of false belief and Jonah is very reluctant to go to Nineveh.

So what does Jonah do? Chapter 1 of the Book of Jonah tells us he does exactly the opposite. He goes in the opposite direction. He catches the first boat he can to Tarshish. A little more geography: Most scripture scholars agree that Tarshish refers to an ancient sea port on what today is Spain's lovely and touristic "Costa del Sol." But as God would have it, a terrible storm kicks up on the Mediterranean Sea. The sailors decide there's too much weight on the boat and Jonah – being minor prophet – is not much use to the sailing crew so they put a millstone around his neck and throw him into the sea. But, again, as God would have it, a whale spots Jonah, swallows him up and three days later spews him out on the beach.

Thus by the time we get to Chapter 3 and this second command, "Set out for the great city of Nineveh," Jonah decides he's better off risking the citizens of Nineveh than tempting the Lord with his fate.

Call and mission always involve an ordeal. What was true for Jonah will become true for the call of those disciples we hear in today's Gospel from St. Mark: Andrew, James – the Son of Zebedee, and his brother John. Andrew was believed to have been crucified in the Greek city of Patras on an "X" shaped "saltire" cross. James is perhaps known as the first foreign missionary carrying the Gospel to the end of the known world – Compostella in Spain. After his return to Jerusalem, King Herod had him executed in 44 A.D. and thus we remember James – St. James the Greater – as the first martyr among the twelve apostles. John, the brother of James, on the other hand is the only one of the twelve apostles not to have died a martyr's death. However his ordeal was a bit different. Rather than martyrdom, John faced exile on the remote island of Patmos. Our Church tradition considers him to be the author behind The Gospel of St. John.

So if call and mission always involve an ordeal what's our ordeal and how might these scriptures speak to us? The obvious big ordeal today – and not just for this 9:00 a.m. English-speaking community – but all across the Yakima diocese – has been the shift in language and culture.

When I was little many in my St. Paul Cathedral neighborhood where I currently live spoke German – including my own family. And you all recall how the longtime bilingual German- and English-speaking pastor here at St. Joseph, Fr. Schoenberg, would hide from the Jesuit provincial whenever he was in town just to avoid accepting a new assignment. Similarly many of you – like my own mother – may recall that at the old St. Joseph Academy, there were always a few francophone Sisters exiled from Quebec and sent to Yakima so they could learn a bit more English.

Today – not only in this parish – but in the Diocese of Yakima – most folks attend Mass in Spanish. Even more, in Cowiche, Sunnyside, Grandview, Granger and Mabton, the English-language Masses are overwhelmingly Hispanic in attendance.

In her lifetime in this great city of Yakima, Sister Alice St. Hilaire has lived through this "ordeal" and remained faithful to her mission of Providence as a follower of Jesus Christ. How?

I had a little insight into this "how" of her mission several weeks ago when I joined Sister St. Hilaire and Sister Sylvia Troncoso for a little breakfast. Many of you know that normally when I am not traveling in the diocese or across the country I try to pick up the Tuesday noon Mass. Tuesday is the day Fr. Lalo gets away for time with his family and friends, so I pick up the noon Mass and Fr. Felipe has the 7:00 a.m. Mass. But because Fr. Felipe and I are good friends, I have come to know that 7:00 a.m. is not exactly Fr. Felipe's prime time. And because I am sometimes a merciful bishop, I will

pick up the 7:00 a.m. Mass – Mass at "o-dark-hundred" -- and when I do the Sisters often invite me to breakfast.

Sister Sylvia, as you know, does not speak much English, and Sister Alice does not speak much Spanish. About a month ago, after weaving between the two languages at the breakfast table I stopped and asked, "Just how does this work? You live together and pray together but how do you communicate." Sister Alice responded that "She talks to me in Spanish and I talk to her in English and we just kind of make it work."

Can you do that? Can you ". . . make it work . . . ?" I raise this edgy question because when we leave today and return to our work-a-day worlds, we enter a community that becomes easily polarized between English and Spanish, Mexican and American, Documented and Undocumented. Our culture would have us see these polarities competitively and sometimes when I speak to English speakers, I sense that the "gain" in the Hispanic population has been assimilated as a "loss" on the English-speaking side of the Church, and I don't want to minimize the "ordeal" of this transition.

But perhaps the witness of Sister St. Hilaire as well as the larger legacy of the Sisters of Providence is to view our "ordeal" like the ordeals of the prophets and apostles and it's not an ordeal of "gain or loss." Thus, God's "ordeal" with us is not in increasing the Hispanic community or decreasing the Anglophone community. Just like with our ancestors in our ancient scriptures, God's "ordeal" is bringing forth something new – a new Church – and our role in this "ordeal" is precisely what Sister Alice St. Hilaire has taught us: "to make it work" – to quite literally place our "ordeal" alongside the bread and the wine – fruit of earth and work of human hands – and allow God to transform the "ordeal" of our human struggles and human efforts into gifts that will become transformed into his very Body and Blood.

Sister Alice St. Hilaire, we are all very grateful for your witness with us. In our particular dialect of German once widely spoken here in Yakima, we have a way of saying "Good-bye" and it's not the standard High German, "Auf Wiedersehen." No. In our Schwäbish dialect it's "Macht's gut!" which is a statement of mission. It roughly translates "Do well! Do good!" – or even more literally, "May it work out well for you."

Perhaps, Sister Alice, that's our message for you. We will miss you and we thank you for all you are, all you have been for all of us and all you will be. We thank you for showing us how to be good missionaries. But we are not saying good-bye. Rather, we are sending you off on the next mission your community has entrusted to you in West Seattle as a Sister of Providence at the St. Joseph Residence. Take all of the "ordeals" of your life and ministry here in Yakima and place them before the altar as gifts offered to Christ, and kindly bring all of us to mind during your retreats and in your times of prayer. In short: "Macht's Gut!" Peace be with you!