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OPINION | MAIN STREET

Down Syndrome and the Gift of Innocence

A French convent's Christmas message: 'We are made for very great things.'



By William McGurn

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Innocence isn't much prized these days. Yet at Christmas it's impossible to escape: The splendor of the music, the warm visions of hearth and home, the whole wonder of the season—all rest on the joy brought a weary world by innocence made incarnate.

Even those of us who lost our innocence long ago sometimes look back wistfully on Christmases past, when as children we believed not only in Santa but in the loving world that went with him: safe, caring, kind. For most of us, this never rises above sentiment or nostalgia. But what if someone decided innocence was worth holding onto and built a whole way of life around it?

It might look like the lives led by a small group of contemplative nuns in the French countryside just outside Le Blanc. These are the Little Sisters Disciples of the Lamb, and among religious orders they enjoy a singular distinction: They exist so that “those who are in last place in the world”—women with Down syndrome—can “hold in the church the exceptional role of spouses of Christ.”

In practice this means that able-bodied sisters devote their lives to ensuring their fellow sisters with Down syndrome can live their vocations. Living with Down syndrome is not all sweetness and light, even among nuns. The difference is that these women take this innocence, leaven the difficult and imperfect parts with love, and gift it back to the world in more sublime form through both prayer and example.

The order was founded in 1985 with a community of two: Mother Line, now prioress, and Sister Véronique, who felt a vocation but could not find an order to accept her because she has Down syndrome. Today there are 10 sisters, eight with Down syndrome.

“The smiling faces of our little sisters with Down syndrome are a great message of hope for many injured families,” Mother Line tells me. “Our smallness will also say that we are made for very great things: to love and to be loved.” She particularly asks for prayers that able-bodied “young American girls” might consider life among her flock.

A Christmas confession: I’m a sucker for those Facebook videos showing some basketball team letting the boy with Down syndrome shoot until he sinks a basket, or photos of a high-school senior with Down beaming because her classmates have elected her prom queen. Even the most jaded—maybe especially the most jaded—recognizes, and perhaps even envies, the special joy reserved for the pure of heart.

Then you pull back and look at the faces of those cheering these things on—the fans at the basketball game, the other couples at the prom. Is their happiness any less? Not to mention the inner rejoicing of a tired mom who has just watched a crowd of people look at her child and see what she sees: a beautiful and unique human being who is a source of delight.

This is the everyday witness of the Little Sisters Disciples of the Lamb. In the world outside their walls, innocence can be dismissed as childish ignorance or dangerous naiveté. Inside, the nuns choose to cherish and exalt innocence—and the unconditional love and trust that comes with it—as an example of how we are meant to live with one another.

In Morris West’s novel “The Clowns of God,” Christ returns to earth, where people have trouble recognizing him. At one point he goes to a school for children with Down syndrome, and picks up a little girl.

“I know what you are thinking,” he says. “You need a sign. What better one could I give but to make this little one whole and new? I could do it, but I will not. . . . I gave this mite a gift I denied to all of you—eternal innocence. To you she looks imperfect—but to me she is flawless.”

He goes on: “She is necessary to you. She will evoke the kindness that will keep you human. Her infirmity will prompt you to gratitude for your own good fortune. . . . This little one is my sign to you. Treasure her!”

So it is in Le Blanc. Hours after these words appear, the Little Sisters Disciples of the Lamb will welcome the birth of the Savior. Whatever there may be in the way of presents will be modest and mostly homemade. But for those hoping for a glimmer of the light that burst into the skies over Bethlehem that first Christmas, nowhere will it shine more brilliantly than in this nondescript little convent in the center of France.

Merry Christmas, sisters.

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