

Sylvia Wright - Spiritual Appeal

This week(end) Sylvia Wright has her 80th birthday.
This is an occasion for us to send her our good wishes.
It is especially a time to pray for her.

Sylvia has always said: 'Without you I can do nothing'. How true this is.

We might think first of the various projects which have been enabled by the generous financial support that has been provided by our parishioners, and by the many other people of good will who have donated towards the development of the several enterprises in Thiruvannamali which Sylvia has initiated over the past thirty years. First there was her mobile clinic; then the hospital, the training of nurses, special provision for the education of deaf children, and - most recently - for those with a physical disability.

The establishment and the maintenance of these institutions has only been possible because of the administrative skills that have been brought to bear through the operation of the Sylvia Wright Trust. That is, by all those people, many of them (of course) parishioners of ours, who have spread the word about the needs which Sylvia has sought to address, and who have played an essential role in her support. Such as in fund raising and financial management, in communications and publicity, in arranging sponsorship, and in other dimensions of running an effective, transparent, and accountable Charity.

This is a time to acknowledge all these efforts - and also to thank God for the grace bestowed upon all these persons to take on these various responsibilities.
It is quite wonderful what has been achieved - by Sylvia, and by all who have come to her aid in one way or another.

But Sylvia has always been the first to declare her need for **spiritual support**. This is the purpose of my Appeal today - to encourage you to sustain Sylvia, and her associates, by your **prayer**.

There have been various challenges to Sylvia from the outset for which she has needed inner strength. If you know her story in any detail you will know what they have been. They will be familiar also to anyone who has engaged in trying to build up the Kingdom of God on earth, a Kingdom of Justice, Love and Peace. They are certainly well known to the founders of Religious Congregations and Lay Institutes of Charity. They could be summarised in two words: the need for **Courage**, and for **Humility**.

Undoubtedly, Sylvia needed courage at the very beginning - to leave her secure and valuable work in the nursing profession here in Leeds, to sell everything she possessed, and go out alone to an impoverished district of a distant country to try to meet the needs of the poorest of the poor.

Of course, there would have been a certain delight in her heart at doing this: the pleasure that arises within someone when they follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps there was even something almost 'romantic' about such an adventure!

If there was, it would soon have faded away as the hard graft of undertaking such demanding work in such challenging circumstances became clear.
Her own habits of prayer would have been essential to keep her going at that time - and likewise that of her friends and supporters, here and there.

We know that at certain times over the years Sylvia felt that she had had enough, and couldn't go on. This too is a common experience of those to try to live out the Gospel of Jesus. She has reminisced about actually setting off to come home to England, leaving those left behind to take up the work. But, even on such a journey, being freshly graced by the Lord to turn around and face the challenges once more.

There is the well known legend about St Peter fleeing from Rome in the time of persecution when he hears the voice of Jesus speak in his head and heart: *Quo Vadis, Petrus - Where are you going?* - and the realisation that he was running away from his duty and his destiny. Sylvia also admitted to a 'running away' - but she too **turned back** - and that was the fruit of her own prayer and that of kindred spirits.

There must have been times when Sylvia wondered why she was giving so much of herself, and engaging others, in an enterprise of improving health care which was surely - primarily - the responsibility of the national and local Government. Why was not more being done by those in power?

Indeed, there were times when Sylvia's work was actually impeded or at least questioned by those who suspected her motives as somehow 'neo-colonial' (!) How hurtful that must have been; how debilitating! It is good to know that now her work is being supported in some measure by the Indian authorities and medical profession, and that a share of management and maintenance of the projects is being taken on by them. This is also the fruit of prayer which supported Sylvia's enduring commitment and that of her colleagues in the field and awoke a sense of responsibility in the hearts of those in positions of professional and civic leadership.

In 1997 Sylvia was prevailed upon to write a short account of her spiritual journey. These are some sentences from it which reveal something of her inner struggles which continue to this day. "On a personal level my life has been far from easy. I have experienced great loneliness and known much misunderstanding and have been deeply hurt many times...I pray always for God's guidance and I have great trust in Him. What the future holds I do not know. I simply try to leave all in God's hands and respond and go where he leads".

And now, another important phase in the development of Sylvia's work has been reached. At 80 years of age she personally, and her associates, have to address the issue of continuity, of transition, of passing the baton, of handing over the reins. It is essential that, as energy levels lessen, and the mind and heart weary and flag, others are being prepared to take on responsibility so that the great work will continue. For the founder of any great endeavour this is the ultimate challenge, the acid test of leadership.

It is one, of course, which Jesus himself had to face. He would have been especially aware of the limitations of his apostles, and of his other committed disciples. Yet, the Time came, the Hour, when He had to entrust them with the furtherance of his work. They would be inspired and motivated by the same Spirit, but - of course - had all their shortcomings and human failings to contend with.

Every founder of every enterprise has to undertake this most difficult task of 'handing over'. And in the business of building the Kingdom of God it will only be **attempted**, and will only **succeed**, as the result of prayer. This is a time - like no other - for courage and for humility.

We should therefore pray earnestly for Sylvia to be graced with wisdom as to the best courses of action to prepare well for the future.

We should pray for the Trustees of the Charity that bears her name, that they too may be guided and strengthened to make the best decisions to ensure the continuation of its work.

And we should pray for those in positions of management in Thiruvannamali itself. May they may find people who can share in Sylvia's vision and deploy them to continue effectively the work which she initiated and which has developed so wonderfully down these several decades.

It is not the wish of the Trustees that this be a fund-raising Appeal; there will be no retiring collection. The Appeal is for your Prayers. There will be another visit here by Sylvia in the summer so a Collection may be taken then.

Let us in our prayer in this Mass give thanks to God for the commitment of people like Sylvia Wright, and of all her supporters who have enabled her dreams to be realised. And pray also that appropriate decisions may be made by Sylvia and her closest associates to ensure that this great work is sustained and develops still further in the years to come.

*Fr Pat Smythe,
Parish Priest,
Our Lady of Kirkstall
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