

One of the things that is at the center of our faith as Catholics is that each of us plays a major role in the life of the Church. All of us are called to evangelize; to grow in holiness; to live out the faith through word and action. And it's only working together that the Church grows and wins souls for heaven.

If you were to ask many who plays the most important role in evangelization, I suspect some people would point to the pope and his travels around the world, or his writings; others might point to bishops or big events like World Youth Day; or perhaps major apologists of the faith like Bishop Robert Barron of Word on Fire, or Matthew Kelly, the author whose books we gave out over Christmas. And these are all great examples. But what we can't forget is that while some names get more attention, it's again all of us, each in our own way, making a big difference when we take our baptismal call of being a priest, prophet and king seriously.

Consider for example, the story of the Little Sisters Disciples of the Lamb. The existence of this Order, according to their Prioress is "to allow those who have the 'last place 'in the world, to hold in the Church the exceptional

place of spouses of Jesus Christ, and to allow those whose life is held in contempt to the extent of being in danger from a culture of death, to witness by their consecration to the Gospel of Life.” This is a group of religious sisters who live in France. And while there are of course religious communities all over the world, what makes this religious community unique is that they are the first contemplative community in the world to welcome into consecrated life people with Down Syndrome, religious sisters who are doing so much for our faith.

The seeds of the community began in the 1980s. It started with a friendship. A woman who became prioress, named Line, was on a spiritual search of her own and felt a calling to work with children. She had a friendship with Véronique, now Sister Veronique, who is a young woman with Down syndrome who felt a vocation to the consecrated life.

Line visited several communities, thinking perhaps there was a good one for them, but came to realize none were suitable for Veronique’s vocation.

Véronique wanted to respond to her vocation to serve the Lord, but was refused by all the communities she approached because she has Down

syndrome. Canon Law and monastic rules do not provide for the admission of people with mental disabilities to religious life. But that didn't stop these two women. It took Line and Véronique 14 years to get the statutes of this special community, with its own original style, recognized.

Line and Véronique began their community of two in 1985 in a small apartment, a council house. Later, another girl with Down syndrome joined them. In 1990, they asked the future cardinal and Archbishop of Tours, Jean Honoré (1920-2013), to recognize them as a public association of lay faithful. It was the support of Cardinal Honoré, who defended their case in Rome, that allowed this small community to be recognized.

In 1995, the growing number of "associates" obliged the Little Sisters to move to a larger convent. An archbishop helped them get official recognition.

The order now numbers 10 members: eight of the Little Sisters have Down syndrome. The community hopes to welcome more sisters, as those with Down syndrome need assistance and support, even though, according to Mother Line, they are mostly independent because the contemplative life

allows them to live at their own pace. For people with Down syndrome, she says changes are difficult, but when life is very regular they manage well.

That regular lifestyle unfolds in daily functions and tasks. Holy Mass is celebrated and they receive daily Communion, and the various activities include weaving and pottery workshops and, most recently, the creation of a garden of medicinal plants. Ultimately, this extraordinary vocation is expressed in the ordinary things of life, in the humility of service, following the “little path” revealed by St. Therese of Lisieux, whose spirituality is the source of their inspiration.

In talking about her vocation, Sister Veronique says: “Thirty-four years have passed since I heard the call of Jesus...I have tried to know Jesus by reading the Bible and the Gospel. I was born with a disability called Down syndrome. I am happy. I love Life. I pray, but I am sad for the children with Down syndrome who will not feel this same joy of living. For those who felt called to live, like St. Therese, the vocation to love, the journey was long but her patience and her faith gave their fruits. Jesus made me grow in His love.”

After facing rejection by other communities, Sr. Véronique describes experiencing her greatest joy on June 20, 2009, when she made her perpetual vows in the Institute of the Little Sisters Disciples of the Lamb, and became “the bride of Jesus.”

“At a time when society lacks points of reference, no longer finding meaning in life or giving it value, our community wants to reaffirm the sacred character of life and the human person through the simple witness of our life consecrated to God,” say the Little Sisters. This witness of God has built up the faith of so many, such as Mother Line. She says she has discovered great spiritual strength in her sisters with Down syndrome.

“They know the Bible, the lives of the saints, and they have a fabulous memory,” she says. “They are souls of prayer, they are very spiritual, very close to Jesus.”

Mother Line sees in their simplicity a prophetic sign for our time. “Their souls are not disabled! On the contrary, they are closer to the Lord, they communicate with Him more easily. The other sisters of the community admire their ability to forgive, to encourage their sisters by finding the right phrase from the Bible that helps give meaning to the day.”

To some, the experience of this community may seem unusual. To others, it responds to an anthropological challenge in a world obsessed with efficiency and productivity. A world in which there appears to be no place for people with Down syndrome.

According to Mother Line, however, their capacity to love and to be close to the Lord produces surprising fruits. Theirs is a world to be discovered, she concludes. “They bring joy to society and, above all, they bring love to the world. A world that needs it so much.”

They’ve caught the attention of many, including William McGurn of the *Wall Street Journal* who wrote an article about them in how they’ve moved him too. He wrote an article called “Down Syndrome and the Gift of Innocence.” In talking about the innocence of the season of Christmas, where we look back on our own past there can be nostalgia; but the sisters built a way of life around it. In the case of these sisters, he points out, they take the innocence, leaven the difficult and imperfect parts with love, and gift it back to the world in more sublime form through prayer and example. The able bodied sisters devote their lives to their fellow sisters with Down Syndrome

so they can in turn live out their vocation; but each sister helps the other. Mother Line said to him that “The smiling faces of our little sisters with Down Syndrome are a great message of hope for many injured families. Our smallness will also say that we are made for very great things: to love and to be loved.”

How right she is. But do we realize that truth when we look in the mirror ourselves? That we are all put here for a reason and can do such great things?

Today, we celebrate the baptism of the Lord; when Jesus begins his earthly mission. It ends our Christmas season as we prepare to begin Ordinary Time, which is the time of the year that’s not in a season of feasting or penance but where like much of our lives the daily living out of our faith occurs. And it also gives us the chance to think about our own baptism and all that it entailed; for on the day of our baptism we were linked in a special way with Jesus, namely as a priest, prophet and king. And like those sisters, in our own way we, too, live each of these characteristics out.

With respect to priesthood, there's the ministerial or ordained priesthood but also the priesthood of all the faithful. A priest in the Bible was someone who would make sacrifices, who would pray for people on their behalf; a kind of mediator between God and man. We are reminded of this at Mass when the ordained priest leading the Mass says "pray that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father," meaning we are together offering Mass as a congregation. How we live this out is by taking a page from those sisters, who each help one another to grow in holiness by sacrifice, love and prayer - they bring one another closer to God. As they sacrificed for one another in their convent, when we sacrifice for others, such as all a parent does for a child or a child does for a parent often later in life; or the way we volunteer and give back, we live out our priesthood. We also live it out through our prayer and growing closer to God especially through coming to Mass, and actively participating and talking to our kids about why it's so important.

With respect to being a prophet, a prophet is someone who speaks the words of God. Often this is not easy. Returning to the story of Mother Line and Sister Veronique, it took 14 years for their small order to get off the ground. But what were they but prophets to the Church, to help us as a

Church to expand our way of thinking about who can become part of a religious order, and to the world too. A Catholic is a prophet when as a parent they talk about the faith with their kids, and teach them right from wrong, and that faith matters more than even sports, school and other things that fill a child's life. A Catholic is a prophet when we say yes to some things and no to others even if they are very counter cultural. A Catholic is a prophet when we, out of love, express our concern to someone about a decision or lifestyle choice they are making rather than stay silent. A Catholic is a prophet when we are willing to face sometimes animosity or hate for doing the right thing, knowing that resentment and anger can come both from people under our own roofs and in our families to the greater world. Prophets in the Bible often suffered greatly, and so too do we at times when we live out our faith - but prophets also passed on the faith and helped people find the right path, which is what we are called to do.

Lastly, a king in a spiritual context is someone who uses what they have been given to bring people closer to God. A king uses their gifts for God's glory, but also helps others to do this too, much like an army general or orchestra conductor. In the case of the sisters, Mother Line and others

have helped the members of their community with Down Syndrome to unlock their gifts and use them for God's glory. Parents do that when they help their kids follow their dreams and find the gifts God has given them. A king is also someone who is king of themselves too; meaning we are all divided at times in our souls, sometimes choosing the wrong; we exercise kingship when we learn how to move away from sin and make better choices. We see kingship too in how we apply our faith to our work in life; think of Dorothy Day, or Martin Luther King, Jr, or Bishop Fulton Sheen.

William McGurn closes his article by writing:

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.

He’s right, but I’d also say that light shines in our homes, in our offices, in our schools and in our communities because of you and me. For on this feast of the Baptism of the Lord, while we pack away the trees and Christmas lights for another year, the light of Christ in our souls is what is now meant to shine brilliantly as you and I, like those sisters, become other Christs, for we are anointed. To quote Saint Therese of Lisieux:

“I understood that every flower created by Him is beautiful, that the brilliance of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not lessen the perfume of the violet or the sweet simplicity of the daisy. I understood that if all the

lowly flowers wished to be roses, nature would no longer be enameled with lovely hues. And so it is in the world of souls, Our Lord's living garden." We aren't all roses, but we are all an important part - an equally important part - of the garden. May we use what we have been given to prepare souls for the harvest by being priests, prophets and kings, letting our lights shine before God and one another.