

Lives That Matter: Philippine Duchesne and Solidarity Across Frontiers

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Introduction [SLIDE]

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak on a topic dear to my heart, Philippine Duchesne, to a gathering of people also close to my heart, the Sacred Heart family and friends. I'm thrilled too that we are today representing the global Sacred Heart family and, keeping our many languages and cultures in mind, I will try to speak more slowly that is my normal custom. Do feel free to wave your hands widely if I need to slow down or to speak more loudly (which is not usually my problem!)

Philippine Duchesne crossed frontiers of many sorts, including frontiers that brought her face-to-face with people who were apparently "other" than she. This is my topic for today. Without delving into all the details of her complex biography, I will highlight points in her life and writings that indicate how she negotiated boundaries that separated her from other groups of people. Of course, we humans naturally organize ourselves into groups; it's a natural social process. Teachers & students, rich and poor, Asians and Africans, good people and bad people – we need to think in categories. These might involve prejudice, judging people before we have the evidence; it might not.

Today I want to focus on particular groups Philippine encountered who were prejudged and sometimes the target of systematic racism. A powerful phrase in English today, which I hope will translate well into French and Spanish, is othering, making

someone into an “other.” It refers to mentally classifying someone as intrinsically different from me and “my kind”; it puts them into a sort of straitjacket as aliens.

This is a timely topic for so many of us here in the United States. One thinks, for example:

- of the many killings of innocent black people, even by our own police that are then not appropriately punished;
- of Jewish Centers being threatened with bomb attacks or defaced by Nazi Swastikas.

But this is more than a United States story.

- We’ve all watched right-wing racists grow more visible in Europe and turn their hostility on immigrants and Muslims.
- Soccer fans in Argentina scream at players from elsewhere in Latin America; a recent poll showed that over 1/3 of Argentines think “Argentina should be only for Argentines.”¹
- An organization called Reconciliation Australia reports that in the last six months almost half of aboriginal Australians experienced racism.²
- Africans have experienced racism for centuries, and within Africa there is plentiful ethnic strife.

I need not make this list longer. The uplifting stories about race relations in our world seem, at the moment, to be fewer than the discouraging stories.

So this is a timely topic, but also a timeless topic, for I think we would all agree both that God’s will for humankind is that we live united in love, and that the sweep of human history shows that humankind is not very good at this.

Philippine, especially in America, found herself among a dizzying number of groups who had been “othered” in the sense of being stereotyped. Her writings are peppered with specific observations regarding French-speaking whites, English-speaking whites, free blacks, enslaved blacks, mulattoes (a term for persons of mixed black and white ancestry), Indians (whom she sometimes called savages, a term Europeans often employed and that did not convey quite the same degree of denigration it does today), and mestizoes and half-breeds (terms Philippine used for persons of mixed Indian and other ancestry). I hope I will not offend anyone by using the debated term “Indian” today. I will use it simply because it is the term Philippine herself employed.

Philippine comments on these various groups because 1) she views them in some ways as qualitatively different from herself and her own group, and 2) sometimes because she challenges the very stereotypes that other people had imposed on these groups. They are all “lives that matter,” the phrase I use in the title of this talk. The phrase is inspired by the “Black Lives Matter” movement in the United States. The movement is a response to many recent violent incidents here in the U.S. against people of color whose lives seem not to matter as much as white lives. But it’s a rallying cry that easily translates to the lives of so many other people in our world who also suffer unjust exclusions and oppressions.

And it’s worth noting, at the outset, that so many of the groups oppressed in Philippine’s day were also people of color. Throughout the Middle Ages, many races of people, with different skin hues, including white people, had been enslaved. But once the African slave-trade dramatically increased in the 16th century, and black people

became the overwhelming majority of slaves, racism became increasingly color coded. Races, of course, are a social construct rather than a reality: there is only one race, the human race, but our socially-constructed notion of race and races has real-life implications. To this day, in much of the world, not just in the United States, one often notes a hierarchy of color, in which the power and privileges accorded to lighter-skinned people progressively diminish as people's skin gets darker. This, in part, explains why in Philippine's day black Africans and African Americans, who were often quite dark, were the most oppressed, mulattoes less so, and so forth. Although racial systems are more complex and varied than this, I have no doubt that some of you here today could tell stories about the color scales in your countries. This too makes an exploration of Philippine's life a timely topic for thinking about how we might we build solidarity across frontiers that divide us from "other" lives that matter.

History & hagiography

I don't intend to present a blow-by-blow account of Philippine's life. Rather than present Philippine's biography, I want to highlight how she struggled to build bridges between herself and people who were, in some respects, foreign to her and her culture. I'll be interweaving features of her life that may disappoint or even anger us, with features that—even 150 years after her death—still prove inspiring. Why, you might wonder, will I share information about Saint Philippine Duchesne in a Spirituality Forum that – well – is not altogether spiritually uplifting?

I think it's important to resist making Philippine into more of a saint than she actually is. As a historian who studies saints, and as a seeker inspired by them, I have thought a lot about the relationship between history and hagiography. Now, history

regards the study of “what happened” or, at least, what we think happened. Historians focus their attention on this world “down below” where human actors and events display an array of attributes: foolishness and wisdom, greed and generosity, sin and virtue. Solid historical scholarship never romanticizes the lives of the people of the past because – simply put – they were human. Who they were and what they accomplished is never one-sided – either all positive or all negative.

Hagiography is a particular genre of writing that focuses on saints and aims to write about their lives in such a way that readers will be edified. In common parlance, we say someone’s portrayal is “hagiographic” when the individual’s virtues are so polished or embellished that their ordinary limitations and faults disappear. This may have proved edifying in the distant past, but near perfect saints today seem artificial, too good to be true.

Let me share with you a wonderful quotation from Philippine, one some of you may already know since it’s appeared in (two) books³ and on many websites, including a few Sacred Heart sites. She said (and I have the quotations in three languages here):

[slide]

You may dazzle the mind with a thousand brilliant discoveries of natural science; you may open new worlds of knowledge which were never dreamed of before; yet, if you have not developed in the soul of the pupil strong habits of virtue which will sustain **her** in the struggle of life, you have not educated **her**, but only put in **her** hand a powerful instrument of self-destruction.⁴

It’s a spectacular quote – too good to be true, in fact. The statement instead was made

in 1900 by a Jesuit who was speaking about Madeleine Sophie Barat.⁵ Often the longer saints are dead, the saintlier they become. In a certain sense, there can be no saint unless there is a public that venerates and sees the person as a saint. It is the venerating public – in the case of Philippine, many of us here today – that determines how a saint's life is presented generation after generation, in a cycle of varying depictions that keep the saint's cult alive and meaningful. A saint, in this sense, is constructed by a community.

So how Philippine's story is told today matters. A more demystified approach to sanctity appeals to today's more incarnational theology. Rather than flee the earthly world to escape to heaven, we see creation as a vehicle of grace; a place in which God speaks to us through creation, through the challenges we face, and through the people around us (both friends and foes). The world, with its tangle of bumps and bruises, is the divine milieu, permeated by God's grace, inviting us to grow from self-centeredness toward love; from divisions toward communion. Seeing saints as our brothers and sisters, imperfections and all, also finds support in the New Testament where the term saints refers to all living Christians, rather than the superstars the Church elevates through canonization. St. Paul writes that all Christians have been sanctified in Christ, all are saints by calling.⁶

[Philippine's French Culture]

Philippine's context goes a long way toward explaining many of her actions and attitudes that we, today, reject.

[Family, Social Class, and Humility]

Philippine's family was tremendously privileged. Although not aristocratic, the

men in her family were influential, powerful, and prosperous – in some cases – wildly prosperous. Lawyers, bankers, merchants, and politicians, they commanded attention.

[slide] Biographies of Philippine often note that her beloved Uncle Claude offered his magnificent home, the Château de Vizille, here pictured, as the meeting place for men preparing the French Revolution. From our vantage point – and that of some of Philippine’s biographers – it makes him appear to be progressive, challenging monarchy and improving French society. But he and Philippine’s other male relatives abandoned the Revolution once they had improved their own rights and social classes below theirs began to clamor for rights of their own.⁷ Claude, who had inherited great wealth, vastly increased it. One avenue for that enrichment was his sugar plantation in the French colony today known as Haiti. Ninety percent all the people there were enslaved. 250 slaves worked on Claude’s plantation. **[slide: “Slaves cutting sugar can on Haitian plantation]** I do not know what, if anything, Philippine might have known of this. Women in her class were not educated or encouraged to develop their critical thinking about commerce, politics, and the like. But her correspondence shows she was aware of the great sugar plantations in the Caribbean at least by the time she was in America, and also that there had been a dramatic slave uprising.⁸ Claude, who also profited from a cloth factory in which poor children worked from early morning to late at night,⁹ would bequeath his vast fortune to his children. One of the children was Philippine’s very dear cousin Josephine **[SLIDE]**, who donated some of her wealth to good works, including the Society of the Sacred Heart and its foundations in America. The complexity of good works sometimes being funded by ill-gotten gains is a poignant

and challenging reality.

Philippine broke rank with her social circle by her early attraction to serve the poor. It was not so revolutionary since engaging in charitable works was an acceptable activity for Catholic women of good breeding. But Philippine took this much farther than most women would. Her entrance into religious life as a Visitation nun was interrupted by the French Revolution and during that time Philippine struck out from her family's country home to care, principally, for priests in prison or in hiding. In keeping with her time, religious work and the salvation of souls was always Philippine's main concern. But, at some risk to herself, she also helped the sick and the dying. When her alarmed relatives tried to stop her, she said: "Let me alone; it is my happiness and glory to serve my divine Saviour in the person of the unfortunate and the poor." In other words, assisting the poor for Philippine was not a means for her to win the reward of heaven – no, she saw Christ incarnate in the poor; serving them was an end in itself. As we read in the gospel: "What you do to the least of these, you do to me."¹⁰ Serving the poor was serving – and loving – Christ.¹¹ And, in language of the Sacred Heart family, she was making Christ's love known to the world.

[\[Hierarchy, Authority, and Humility\]](#)

In Philippine's particular French culture, a hierarchical ordering of society was presumed. The French Revolution, through which she lived, challenged and reconfigured hierarchies, of course, but the culture immediately surrounding Philippine believed more than we do today in a discrete and well-ordered ranking of social groups. Philippine's social circle and the church hierarchy in France – (almost all of whom were wealthy aristocrats) – defended the monarchy. Popes would continued to link the

universal Church's well-being with the preservation of national monarchies throughout Europe well-past Philippine's lifetime.¹² [slide] And here we have Pius VI, pope at the time of the French Revolution, in a friendly meeting with the Swedish monarch. This pro-monarchical sentiment adds context to and helps explain Philippine's confusion when she encountered a strong egalitarian ethos on the American frontier. And it sheds light on why she was not more critical of some of the hierarchies that did rank some groups of people below others on the frontier.

But as we shall see, Philippine's experience in America did lead her to question some hierarchies that prejudiced the lives of certain groups. And throughout her life, as shown in her many letters and accounts about her written by people who knew her, Philippine – this well-born woman – saw herself as the lowest. At times, her self-denigration borders on an exaggerated self-debasement, but Philippine's humility was part-and-parcel of her deepest self-identity. For many years she served as Superior of her religious community, and Superior over all the communities in America. She exercised authority, but did not seek it. She exercised authority, but was not authoritarian.

[\[Missionary impulse\]](#)

Besides humility, another trait in Philippine's life was her attraction to be a missionary. It seemed to spring from the very core of her being; it was a true vocation. In her late 40s, just about to set off for America [1818], she recalled the first stirring of this missionary impulse:

My first enthusiasm for missionary life was roused by the tales of a good Jesuit Father who had been on the missions in Louisiana and who told us

stories about the Indians. I was just eight or ten years old, but already I considered it a great privilege to be a missionary. I envied their labors without being frightened by the dangers to which they were exposed, for I was at this time reading stories of the martyrs, in which I was keenly interested.¹³

Philippine's favorite saint, notably, was St. Francis Xavier,¹⁴ famous for his evangelization of Asia, and also a dear friend of Ignatius of Loyola. There's an analogy to be drawn here: Ignatius of Loyola, like Sophie Barat, yearned to be a missionary – but both founders were tied down in Europe by their orders' respective administrative tasks. Just as Ignatius found vicarious satisfaction in his close friend Xavier's missionary activity in Asia, so too did Sophie live her missionary dream via her friend Philippine's brave foray across the Atlantic.¹⁵ Of Xavier, Philippine wrote:

I loved his touching appeals to the European schools to send him missionaries. How often have I not said to him since then, in my impatience to be a missionary, "great Saint, why do you not call me? I would respond at once." Xavier is the saint of my heart.¹⁶

Two other figures particularly inspired Philippine. First, the Jesuit John Francis Regis (d. 1640) had, interestingly, wanted to do be a missionary outside of his native France, but instead became a missionary to the poor within France – a fitting hero for Philippine. Second **[SLIDE]**, the French Marie of the Incarnation, a 17th-century Ursuline nun who traveled to French Canada and there educated both French girls, who paid tuition, and Native American girls, who attended school for free. It was a dual model of education Philippine would herself employ in America.¹⁷

After years in France as a Sacred Heart nun – and all the while regularly haranguing Sophie Barat to send her to the missions – Philippine realized her dream. She was 48 years old. [SLIDE] In our own day of rapid and safe travel and, for most of us, easy access to material comforts, it is hard to imagine what her voyage on the ship *Rebecca*, taking her and four sisters to the American frontier, signified. They were about to say good-bye – for most of them, forever – to their land and loved ones. Yet Philippine described this moment as one of the greatest graces in her life.¹⁸

[America] [SLIDE]

And so Philippine arrived in America, first in New Orleans, Louisiana, which had recently joined the United States, and on up the Mississippi to St. Louis, and then St. Charles, in what was then known as the Missouri Territory.

[Egalitarian spirit]

Philippine was struck, and perplexed, by the presumption of so many people on the American frontier that all people were equal. By “all people,” it is worth noting, they meant all white people. White settlers did not want to be hired out as servants or do work on other people’s lands or in their homes. Egalitarianism, a leveling of class distinctions, was an ideal for these whites. It confused Philippine, whose upbringing in France presumed a stricter and – in her mind – a natural social hierarchy.

Within a year of arriving in Missouri,¹⁹ she saw that the egalitarian spirit in America would make it hard even to attract vocations. Why? Because the Society of the Sacred Heart had a two-class system. Choir sisters, who were generally of higher social standing and more educated, took on the leadership positions in the Society and

taught in the schools. Coadjutrix sisters – and the term coadjutrix means “assistant” or “helper” – were generally of humbler backgrounds and did the more manual work in the Society, such as cleaning and cooking. Philippine wrote to Sophie Barat:

If you said to someone here that on entering the Society – that they had come serve – this would be unacceptable, even to a Native American.²⁰

[Slaves and slavery]

In America, Philippine immediately encountered groups of people she had heard of, but never met: enslaved black people, mullatoes, and native Americans. Some of Philippine’s attitudes and actions prove jarring to contemporary thinking. I do not want to cover up, rationalize, or “rescue” Philippine from these. I would like us to know the human saint. But it is important to provide context, especially regarding slavery.

It may surprise some of you to know that throughout its history and even past Philippine’s lifetime, the Catholic church had accepted slavery as a natural and justifiable institution. Popes and other leaders sometimes denounced the cruel and inhuman practice of slave traders – ([slide] and here we see the lower level of a typical slave ship transporting humans in inhumane conditions) – but mostly, the popes did little, effectively, to combat slavery. Significantly, the Jesuit John Carroll (1735-1815), a founder of the Catholic Church in the United States and its first bishop (1789), helped manage the Jesuits’ plantations – plantations which that were worked by slaves.²¹ He himself owned at least one slave, whose freedom he granted only in his will.²²

There as some change during Philippine’s lifetime. In 1839, when she was about 60, Pope Gregory XVI issued a bull denouncing Christians who enslaved or

trafficked in Indians, blacks, or others. But his bull fell short of condemning slavery itself. He does not, for example, condemn owning slaves.²³ Church leaders, priests, and religious sisters and brothers in America thus felt fully justified in buying, selling, and owning slaves, as long as such people already were enslaved.

It is true that Catholic leaders had long taught that slaves should be given religious instruction²⁴ and be treated humanely. But the reality was often otherwise, as , Archbishop Carroll himself informed the Roman curia.²⁵ Moreover, Catholic clergy taught that slaves, since they were property, had to obey their masters. The very year Phillippine died – when America was on the cusp of the Civil War and in the midst of heated debates about slavery – the Catholic bishops of America, gathered in Baltimore, noted that enslaved individuals needed to be prayed for, but said not a word about any of their other needs – such as freedom. There was by then a very strong movement to abolish slavery throughout America. Many Protestant leaders were involved, but, disappointingly, few Catholic leaders took part in the abolitionist movement. [SLIDE] In Missouri, where Phillippine lived and as slaves were being sold in these busy St. Louis markets, [SLIDE] the debate about slave-owning was particularly heated. In her letters, Phillippine refers to the debate, but falls in line with other Catholics by voicing no objections to slavery *per se*. Phillippine's writings convey some very challenging features of her think (and I would like to acknowledge the help of Sr. Lyn Osiek, who is with us today, in locating some of this material).

- Phillippine favorably compared slaves who had bit of land to cultivate when they were not doing their slave labor, with French peasants whose land yielded less

with more work. She seems unaware that the very fact of being enslaved – and toiling most of their hours for others – made free French peasants position much more enviable. Plus, Philippine noted, the pope had given the slaves permission to work on Sundays.

She criticizes blacks for vanity in decking themselves out [clothing themselves] in finery sent from the north. “Pray much,” she writes, “for people so ignorant and sinful.”²⁶ She also speaks of the ignorance of Indians and other groups. We know what she means; many of these people had no access to formal education. Plus, their customs of dress, merry-making, eating, and attitudes toward work often collided with Philippine’s French upbringing. Some customs we would not find objectionable, she calls vices. Other vices, such as laziness, excessive drinking or thievery – we would probably contextualize by acknowledging various reasons why a poor person, for example, might steal, or why an enslaved person not care about working hard.

Philippine criticized slave couples who did not marry, but marriage could be a harsh burden for slaves. It made unions permanent that might be divided when a master sold a husband or wife. Moreover, American law did not offer slaves any of the legal benefits or civil protections offered to white married couples.²⁷

- Writing to the novices in Grenoble about one difficult child who made a salacious remark about Philippine, she made this generalization:

Blood mingled with that of the Indians and blacks forms a race that is difficult to lead to virtue. We had to send away a child of this kind, unable

to do anything with her. She was indolent, lazy, violent, and a glutton.²⁸

By contrast, Philippine wrote that “the children who are not of mixed blood with Indians or Negroes are generally docile and easy to guide and just as intelligent as those in France.”²⁹

- Especially striking, I find, is the fact that while Philippine sometimes acknowledged the misfortunes of blacks, she did not – as far as I know – speak out against the institution of slavery. Philippine notes that she preferred not to have slaves, but why not? In her letters she mentions, variously, the prohibitive cost of slaves, their poor working habits, their propensity to get into trouble, and the disruptive effect that their presence sometimes had on the sisters’ community and cloister,³⁰ for example, when a female slave would be lodged in their home, or a male slave might accidentally open the cloister door and see the nuns not fully clothed. As far as I know, Philippine never objected to owning slaves because she thought slave-owing itself was unjustified.³¹ In this, she shared the perspectives of most Catholics and many people in Missouri.
- But with few white settlers willing to work as servants on the frontier, Philippine eventually accepted slaves as gifts and in lieu of tuition.³² She also purchased and sold slaves.³³ Slaves were particularly numerous in the southern communities of the Society. In 1821, Philippine wrote to Sophie Barat about the gift of land for the foundation of the community of Grand Coteau, Louisiana **[SLIDE]**, about 230 kilometers from New Orleans.³⁴ A historian who we are fortunate to have among us today, Emory Webre, has researched the slaves owned by the community of St. Michael’s, near New Orleans. Some were given

to the Society as part of the dowries of entering novices; others were purchased by individual religious, including Philippine, her niece Amélie Jouve, and Aloysia Hardey, a woman central to the expansion of the Society in the United States, Canada, and Cuba. Some of these St. Michael's slaves were later sold.³⁵

[slide] Let's all take just a moment to contemplate the names Emory Webre has put to these people who helped found the Society of the Sacred Heart in America. **[Brief pause]** You'll be interested to know too that the Religious of the Sacred Heart are currently in communication with descendants of some of these slaves, a number of whom have been located through the dedicated efforts, especially, of Sr. Maureen Chicoine, also here today.

[Ignatian spirituality: facing ourselves]

Now these above comments paint a sobering picture of Philippine and her sisters. Honestly looking at these flaws reminds me of a good retreat or even a brief spiritual examen where we take stock of ourselves. Retreats and examens aim to bring us closer to God, to attune us to God's presence in the people, events, and challenges of our everyday lives. One might superficially approach such an opportunity looking for an experience of warm glowing feelings. But good retreats and examens virtually always begin with our creatureliness. For example, Ignatius of Loyola's systematized program for a month-long retreat begins by having the retreatant dedicate the entire First Week to the topic of sin – sin throughout human history, and sin in one's own particular life. The person trying to deepen their relationship with God is called to examine the evil that may be operative in their thoughts, words, and deeds. It may be

an evil they had not previously been aware of. Now, I do not know all the details of Philippine and her sisters' slave-owning, but I think it's safe to say that, by and large, it was without malice. They had a blind spot. While others in America were denouncing slavery, they continued to be implicated in the evil. They were blind and did not see.

Retreats begin with a reflection on our creatureliness, our limitations, because we can only truly deepen our relationship with our God if we present ourselves truly before our Creator. If we approach God with only the sanitized "sweetness and light" version of ourselves – that is, a false self – then the true self will not experience God's saving love and mercy.

[Institutional Change]

Let me balance what I've shared above about Philippine by introducing also her earnest attempts to improve the situations of the new peoples she encountered:

- Philippine speaks specifically of black people and people of mixed race living like saints.³⁶ The same is true for the Potawatomes, the Indians she was finally allowed to live among as an old woman. **[slide]** We should recall that it was especially for the Indians that Philippine had come to America. In 1824, when the Society's schools in Florissant, Missouri were failing, Philippine thought it might be a sign that God wanted the nuns to be training Indians instead.

More than I appreciated over 25 years ago when I wrote my biography of Philippine, I see now how persistently Philippine tried to introduce institutional changes in the Society of the Sacred Heart's dealings with people of color. Her efforts are fascinating both for what they achieved and for what they did not. Some examples:

- First, her beloved Indians: In 1824, Philippine founded the first school for Indian girls west of the Mississippi. Painfully, it closed about five years later because students were too few. In a letter, Philippine keenly analyzes what was happening to native Americans: the government was buying the land, pushing the Indians westward, and restricting their territories. Scarce land increased tribal conflicts and led to more Indian deaths. Without adequate access to hunting grounds, parents had to withdraw their children from the school and move elsewhere.³⁷ She saw how this undermined her institutional efforts.
- Second, the schools: Philippine inquired shortly after arriving in America whether she could admit black and mulatto girls into the Society's boarding and free schools. The local bishop [Dubourg] said "No" because it would drive the white students away. He cited the authority of the top churchman in the America, Archbishop John Carroll.³⁸ Although Carroll knew that disdain for people of color was a racial prejudice, he argued that segregation had to be maintained to "safeguard manners in the country."³⁹ Sophie Barat too was adamant. She wrote to Philippine:

Do not make the foolish mistake of mixing the white and people of colour.

You would have no more pupils.⁴⁰

Philippine accepted her superiors' decisions, and came to see herself that whites would not accept an institution that included people of color.⁴¹ Even so, years later in the early 1830s, Philippine still sought to establish a separate school for mulatto girls.⁴²

- Third, the commisioner sisters: Since the egalitarian spirit of white settlers meant

that vocations would be few for coadjutrix sisters, Philippine suggested to Sophie Barat that the Society accept women of color to do the manual labor. They would be called “commissioner sisters” and wear a habit different from the white coadjutrix sisters in order not to upset them. Through a long process of formation, Philippine thought some women of color might be able to transfer to the rank coadjutrix sisters, and, then, even to the rank of choir sisters. In several ways, Philippine continued to push Sophie Barat on the appropriateness of the two-class system of choir and coadjutrix sisters. The story is complex and I am not sure if commissioner sisters were ever accepted to work separate from but alongside coadjutrix sisters in America. What is clear is that Sophie Barat strongly insisted that the two-rank system of sisters be vigorously maintained in America in order to preserve uniformity with the rest of the Society of the Sacred Heart. Moreover, she said that if commissioner sisters were ever accepted, they could not be identified as members of the Society.⁴³ They would remain outside the institution.

- Fourth, the Society itself: Sophie Barat early shut down the idea of admitting women of color as novices. There there could be no mixing of whites and people of colour. She explained to Philippine:

No one will join the Society if you accept coloured novices. Later on we will see what we can do for the black women. The essential thing at the beginning is to win confidence and attract [white] novices and students.¹⁴⁴

Twelve years later [1830], Philippine was still hoping to open a pathway to religious life for women of color. She wrote to her local bishop about a mulatto

girl attending their school in Florissant.

She longs with her whole heart to enter with us, but we may not accept her as a religious. This has suggested to me the idea of offering our house out there for the use of colored girls, either like the Sisters of St. Martha or like the St. Michael nuns in Paris... Could not we, too, gather together colored girls who want to leave this world and set aside for them one or two of our own nuns until they would be able to continue on their own as a community or congregation according to their special calling?⁴⁵

These and other examples show us, on the one hand, that Philippine was far-seeing in terms of the need for institutional innovations to qualitatively improve the welfare of people of color. On the other hand, these examples betray the insidious workings of institutional racism.

One good definition of racism is that it is a “system that allows the racial group that’s already in power to retain power.” [SLIDE] White people in the United States – and I think those of you from elsewhere can adapt this to your own cultures – fit this definition of racism because they generally “used their power to create preferential access to survival resources” – such as jobs, education, and legal protections – “for white people, while simultaneously impeding people of color’s access to these same resources.”

Thus, refusing to mix people of color with white people preserved white people’s privileged access to education, religious life, and so forth. Philippine concluded that the Indian school for girls had to be kept separate from the boarding school. The bishop and Sophie Barat, to protect the interests of white settlers, ruled that Philippine should

not admit people of color into the Society's schools (although I note, as an aside, that some mulattoes did gain entrance.) Commissioner sisters, even if doing the very same work as coadjutrix sisters, would not share the name or the clothing of the coadjutrix sisters, or be called members of the order. "Separate, but equal," as we know, is never truly equal.

The fact that Philippine's creative attempts to make institutional changes were stymied by her superiors is another trait of institutional racism. Try as she might to bend its rules – the complex and combined pressures of finances, reputation, responding to the privileged group's demands, and so forth – undermined her valiant attempts.

[Conclusion: Building a world of communion]

It is easy and wholly unfair to criticize our forebearers from the distant past for not seeing what we more easily see today. One of the most impressive things about Philippine is that she persisted throughout her life to push boundaries and seek to cross new frontiers. As an old woman, living among the Potawatomi, the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, she gained a title perhaps more exalted than that of Saint: "Woman-who-prays-always." Aged 73, she remarkably spoke about traveling West to a further frontier, the Rocky Mountains, where she would meet other Native Americans. She was a woman still striving to build communion. Yes, she had some blind spots, some serious blind spots. But they make me ask: What are our blind spots? The nature of a blind spot is that we can't see it. Could Philippine be a model for us by inspiring us to stretch our borders and seek further where God wants us to be?

[Two types of saints]

Saints and the way they are portrayed are sometimes divided into two types: saints so dazzling they can only be admired, and saints sufficiently human they can actually be imitated. The classification is too simple, but captures a truth. We can paint an entirely heroic picture of Philippine, a woman whose virtues are so outsized, that we stand in awe before and never fathom that we could do the same. [SLIDE] This image of what I will call Super Saint Philippine – apparently being assumed into heaven – captures this type of saint. This image on the web is variously identified as Philippine or Madeleine Sophie; it looks like Madeleine Sophie to me, but no matter, Super Saints usually resemble each other – perfectly prayerful, self-sacrificing, prayerful, and holy.⁴⁶ A more honest depiction of Philippine which I’m fond of is this lithograph depicting Philippine late in her life [SLIDE]. She communicates *gravitas*, a woman who has struggled, built things, suffered, sometimes failed, always loved, and who continued to push boundaries. Philippine, I hope, will be a saint for imitation.

[slide] The religious cross she wore signaled the Sacred Heart motto, *Cor unum et anima una in corde Jesu*. It means “One heart and one mind in the heart of Jesus.” The motto recalls a well-known line from the Acts of the Apostles, describing the early Christian community. “All the believers were one in heart and mind.”⁴⁷ The Society’s motto enhances that line by specifying that the one heart and mind that they share is the heart and mind of Jesus Christ. This is a motto for all of us, calling us to conform our hearts and minds, feelings and actions, to those of Christ who came, as the evangelist John puts it, so that “all may be one.”⁴⁸

The recent General Chapter [2017] of the RSCJ, playing on the image of the

Rebecca, the ship that brought Philippine and the first RSCJ to the American shore, spoke of their “Rebecca moment.” Their words about themselves ring uncannily true for all of us in the Sacred Heart family. [SLIDE] The Rebecca moment:

“is a moment of leaving behind what is known in order to open ourselves to what is new; a time of letting go of security in order to enter into the tumult affecting so many lives; an opportunity to sense ourselves more blessed in our diversity and to feel more intensely the bond of being sisters [and brothers].... The world is crying out to us, challenging us in its suffering, ... its lives ravaged by violence...and at the same time, it beckons with all of its gifts as well.... *Who is God calling us to be? What is God calling us to do?*

I believe God is calling us to is to be people of communion and to challenge the structures that divide us from one another.