

SOCIETÀ DEL SACRO CUORE – CASA GENERALIZIA

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My dear Sisters,

This letter had its remote beginnings in our little community of Campanas, Argentina, in the province of La Rioja, known as “the land of martyrs” because of the murders in 1976 of Bishop Enrique Angelelli, two priests and a layman, for being on the side of the poor, for joining their struggle for a life worthy of their dignity. That visit last July touched me deeply. It tapped into my own “conversion”, many years ago, inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States and the assassination of Martin Luther King, and deepened by the death, twelve years later, of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador. These men, and so many other men and women whose lives were taken from them because they were voices for the poor and were consequently a threat to those in power, continue to be an inspiration and challenge. During those days in Campanas I found myself asking: Are the poor really at the center of my thoughts, my decisions, my heart, my life? Does Jesus poor acknowledge me as belonging to Him? Does He recognize the Society as being on the side of those whom the world does not value? Am I living this one life I have been given as radically as I can?...

The questions that haunted me then still haunt me, as do these words of the 1815 Constitutions:

“Let all be thoroughly convinced that the true spirit of poverty is so essential to the Society of the Sacred Heart, that were it to be lost, Jesus Christ would no longer acknowledge it as belonging to Him, and He would abandon it to itself, that is to say, to speedy ruin.”

(Summary of 1815 Constitutions, #339, on the vow of poverty)

I sensed in Campanas that at some point I would write a letter to the Society inviting a reflection on these questions. For years I have asked myself how I can live my vow of poverty – my following of Jesus poor – more congruently. Now that I find myself in a role that touches the whole Society I ask this question on the part of all of us. I have the sense that many of us who have heard the cry of the poor struggle to live poverty authentically in the midst of a technological revolution that is widening the chasm between rich and poor, a world that urges us to consume more and more, a “throw-away” society that values efficiency and speed over care for the earth and relationships. I offer my own thoughts with a certain trepidation, not only because I feel inadequate to the task, but because I am aware of our great diversity of cultures, of political and economic realities, of age, of theology and experience. In trying to speak a word that everyone can hear I run the risk of reaching no one. How do I speak the same word to those in poor countries as to those in affluent countries? to those who come from wealth as to those who have grown up in poverty? Our diversity is both a richness and a challenge: to go deeply enough to find the point where our ideals and convictions meet and where we can be called – together – to go even deeper. I would like to invite us all to begin a reflection on **where we are – individuals, communities, provinces, and Society -- in relation to our professed desire to follow Jesus poor.**

In preparing this letter, I took time to reflect on what each country where the Society is present has experienced during the past year. Although there were some bright moments (a positive public election, gestures of solidarity in the midst of difficulty, successful grassroots initiatives) the pervading sense is one of a world community gripped by a feeling of outrage, mistrust and powerless. Despite the rainbow colored “peace” banners hanging from thousands of balconies and windows in Rome, silent witnesses of the groundswell of public outcry against the war in Iraq, the violence in our world, whether random or premeditated, seems to be escalating. And the companion of violence is fear. **FEAR is in the air we breathe** regardless of the continent on which we live... fear of terrorist or rebel attacks, fear of inter-religious tensions, fear of AIDS or of the more recent SARS virus (which has been described as a “globalized disease”), fear of natural disasters, fear of economic collapse, fear of political leaders who betray their own people and indignation at their disrespect for the sovereignty of other nations. What has happened to the hope we experienced as we anticipated a fresh new moment at the dawning of a new millenium? We are part of our world and, together with our brothers and sisters of all nations, races and creeds, we experience ourselves as vulnerable and insecure before an unknown future.

The presence of the Society in Latin America

At such a time of uncertainty and anxiety we can be helped and strengthened by getting in touch with God’s fidelity throughout our history, by remembering those who have gone before us, those who lived our vocation in times that were very different from our own but perhaps just as challenging. It seems that with each passing year we mark a significant anniversary! Last year it was the 150th anniversary of the death of Philippine Duchesne and this year, 2003, we celebrate **the 150th anniversary of the Society’s presence in Latin America**. There is a close connection between the two events, for Anna du Rousier, the first RSCJ to set foot on Latin American soil, was no stranger to Philippine. Let us take a few moments to become acquainted with this great woman whom many of us probably do not know.

Like Philippine, Anna was born in France. She and Philippine first met at Poitiers where Anna was a young student, just before Philippine’s departure for America in 1818. Philippine’s zeal kindled something in Anna’s own heart. Five years later, at the age of sixteen, Anna entered the Society. The bishop who put the white veil of a novice on her head startled the congregation with his prophetic words: “You will be, in the hands of God, like a leaf borne by the wind, like a seed carried to far places, to yield there its fruit. Let yourself go on the wind of grace.” And indeed Anna went to far places: to the north of Italy where she founded eight convents, as well as one in Austria and one in Poland. Driven out of Piedmont (Italy) by the revolution of 1848 she was sent to the Rue de Varenne in Paris as Mistress General. After three years, Sophie sent her as her representative to visit the convents in North America. She made it to St. Charles, through a snowstorm, as Philippine lay dying. Philippine asked her for her blessing, blessed Anna in return and the two exchanged profession crosses. Two days later, having “passed the torch”, Philippine died.

After spending the winter in Grand Coteau, Natchitoches and St. Michael’s, Louisiana, Anna visited houses in the north. It was in Buffalo, New York that she received a letter from Sophie telling her of an opportunity to leave for Chile from New York City several days later, “to check out” the possibility of a foundation there. (Sophie had no idea of the distances involved!) Unlike Philippine, who seemed to be oblivious to the price of launching out into the unknown, Anna spent one agonizing night before the Blessed Sacrament, battling

her fear of accepting and embracing this desire of her superior general. Later she wrote to Mère de Limminghe:

“I will confide to you alone that at that moment I experienced the greatest interior struggle of my life. The thought of traveling beyond the banks of Lake Erie to practically the far end of South America, aroused in me so great a repugnance and revolt that the entire night after receiving the letter was spent in a terrible battle. At that moment I seemed to have experienced something like Jesus’ agony in the Garden of Olives: heart, mind, imagination, all were in a turmoil; the dangers of the long journey, the loneliness, the feeling of abandonment, the difficulties I would encounter, a thousand other fears and apprehensions so frightened me that despite my pleading and my prayers, I felt my soul collapse. However, despite the storm, after repeated acts of acceptance of *everything* and of surrender to *everything*, repeating the *Ita Pater* from my heart, the fury of the storm calmed down and a deep feeling of surrender and loving peace enveloped my soul.”¹

Anna’s journey to Chile, including a stop in Jamaica, reads like a novel. She arrived in Santiago on September 14, 1853. From there she went on to found other houses in Chile: in Talca, Concepción, Valparaiso, and Chillán, as well as houses in Lima, Peru and Buenos Aires, Argentina. By the time of her death in Santiago in 1880, the Society in Latin America was well planted. The “seed carried to far places” had clearly yielded its fruit and that fruit has endured.

The gift of Latin America to the Society

Anna du Rousier’s story, like the story of so many of our foremothers in the Society, is fascinating and inspiring. Her generosity and courage are a spur to our own. But it is not enough to marvel at the history of how the Society found its way to Chile, to Latin America 150 years ago. This anniversary is **an opportunity to celebrate and thank God for the lives poured out in love throughout those years, and in particular to acknowledge with deep gratitude the contribution of our sisters in Latin America to the Society’s renewal since Vatican Council II.** Their years of reading the signs of the times and making congruent choices have been and continue to be an example and a challenge to the rest of us.

I think it is true to say that it is largely through them that we as a Society awakened to the fact that the majority of our brothers and sisters live in poverty, and that our following of Jesus poor, humbled and crucified, leads us inexorably to meet Him in the poor, marginalized and excluded of this world. Being a North American, I have often longed to live in what seems from the outside to be the clarity of the situation of Latin America, and my visits to Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay have only confirmed that sense. Our Latin American sisters would be the first to point out that not every bishop is a Helder Camera or a Samuel Ruíz, that the Church of the Poor is more visible in some places than in others, but the orientations set by the Church at the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín, Colombia in 1968 were clear. These were the urgent desires that were brought to the General Chapter of 1970 where, for the first time as a Society, we stated clearly that we wished to stand in **solidarity with the poor, solidarity with the Third World**, with a new awareness of our “one and necessarily pluriform” **international community**. We reaffirmed our **educational mission as our service in the Church**, while recognizing the need to examine the apostolic

¹ Madeleine d’Ernemont, *La Vie Voyageuse et Missionnaire de la Révérende Mère Anna du Rousier, Religieuse du Sacré-Coeur*, 1932, pp. 112-13

value of our institutions, and we recognized the need to renew our life at depth in **truly evangelical communities**. This was the Chapter where we said:

*“either we live our fellowship authentically,
in the spirit of the Beatitudes,
or our life ceases to have meaning.”*

(General Chapter of 1970, p. 7)

Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are you poor

The General Chapter of 1970 brought the Society face to face, with “the challenge of a world where so many suffer, where so many have no hope of a human life.” (p. 7) It is this realization that throughout these past thirty years, not without painful searching and struggle, has given new meaning to our vow of poverty, leading us as a Society beyond personal asceticism (though certainly it was in imitation of the poverty of Jesus) to an option for the poor which expresses itself in **a constant effort to confront and contribute to the transformation of economic, political, cultural and religious structures that maintain and promote the dominance of the rich and powerful over the mass of ordinary people and peoples**. If the option for the poor is a commitment of the universal Church and each Christian to respond to the unjust structures of society, for religious, since Vatican II, it has been a source of transformation.² In fact, in many of our communities that transformation is happening.

Freely choosing to make a vow of poverty has always been counter-cultural -- the desire to possess is in every human heart -- but in recent years when greed is rampant in our world and desire for material possessions is taken for granted, how could anyone *choose* a life of poverty? And yet, the very fact of belonging to a religious congregation makes us part of the privileged minority of our world. Certainly Sophie experienced the same paradox, as evidenced in the section on the Poor School in the 1815 Constitutions: *“Amongst these poor children they will find reason to humble themselves when they reflect, that whereas they, who have made a vow of poverty, want for nothing, these poor children without any such obligation, seem in want of everything.”* (#350) That was 1815. Nearly 200 years later, where are we with regard to the personal and communitarian daily living of our vow of poverty? What does living the vow of poverty mean in our diverse realities? In Indonesia, in the United States, in Haiti, in Australia, in Congo, in Germany, in Venezuela... in each country where we are? How are the poor... how is Jesus poor... at the center of our thoughts, our decisions, our heart, our life?

In pondering these questions I was helped by a talk given in early March by Father Ghilain Ndonji, ofm, to a gathering of religious in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He spoke of how **Jesus was not only the incarnation of Yahweh, the “God of the poor”, “God for the poor” but went further still, becoming Himself “God poor”**: emptying himself, becoming one of us, opening his arms on the Cross in utter vulnerability, becoming obedient to death.

Fr. Ndonji went on to say:

² For further development of “option for the poor” as integral to Christian life and to the vow of poverty see Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1983 and Pedro Trigo, S.J. *Consagrados Hoy al Dios de la Vida*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 1995

“Through the vow of poverty, we have not only the duty **to be for the poor** ... we have equally the obligation **to be poor**, at least if we wish to follow the example of Jesus. But I have noticed that in the concrete, we are more specialists and defenders of the poor than poor ourselves. We experience a great deal of difficulty in realizing the synthesis of Jesus; ‘to be for the poor’ and ‘to be poor’. This is what I call *the crisis of truth*.”³

This synthesis is *a real call* to live a congruent life, united and conformed to the Heart of Jesus whose own self-emptying was a process. Keeping our eyes fixed on him we can learn to be *for* the poor, whatever our age or ministry, “participating in God’s work of transformation of persons and societies” (General Chapter 2000, p. 17). Keeping our eyes fixed on Him we can learn to *be* poor in our attitudes, our choices, and the acceptance of our weaknesses including ill health, dependence, and the ultimate poverty that no one of us can escape, our own death. **It is the poverty of Jesus, freely chosen out of love, that unites us in mind and heart** and announces that a new world is possible, the Reign of God, where every tear will be wiped away, where hunger and violence and fear will be no more.

That union is deepened as well by putting in common all that we have and all that we are: by truly living **community of goods**. In a world that is becoming more and more individualistic we want to look at ourselves as one family, without frontiers, where the gift of each person, community, and province, is received with gratitude, and all receive according to their need, where “your pain is mine; your need is mine to fill.” We are grateful to the International Finance Commission for initiating a reflection on the community of goods, in response to the recommendation of the General Chapter 2000 “to strengthen community of goods in the provinces and among provinces” (p. 47). When we use the term “community of goods” we tend to think immediately of our finances. But another aspect of our sharing is our personnel. Our international community looks very different from the way it looked thirty years ago when those generous-hearted people who offered to be sent wherever there was a need were many. There are still great needs and there are still generous-hearted people who are ready to be sent, but those provinces that were formerly the source of “missionary vocations” are aging. **Thirty years ago we gave from our abundance. Can we now find ways to give from our poverty?** Are there provinces that formerly received that can now give? It is not only younger people who are needed. Often an older person with wisdom and experience can be a real blessing.

Ever conscious of the need for “laborers in the vineyard” let us not underestimate the gift of our elderly “at home”, whose diminishment is lived with open hands, whose prayer for and solidarity with provinces in need is a form of participation in their mission -our common mission- regardless of where we live it.

Conclusion

As I was in the midst of writing this letter, one of those “missionary vocations”, our sister Czeslawa Lorek died a tragic death in the Democratic Republic of Congo, sharing the fate of so many in that country that for years has been torn apart by violence, much of it instigated by other nations, greedy to exploit its rich natural resources. Now that Czes is face to face with God, one with Sophie, Philippine and Anna in the communion of Society saints, may she intercede for the country to which she gave her life, for her homeland of Poland, for

³ Père Ghilain NDONJI, ofm, “La problématique de la pauvreté religieuse dans un contexte de misère sociale. Une question de choix et de liberté”, ASUMA-USUMA Colloque sur la Vie Consacrée, Kinshasa, 2-8 mars 2003

our world, and for all of us, that we may live our option for the poor as congruently as she did.

As we fix our gaze on Jesus poor and once more resolve to follow him in the midst of our fear-gripped world, our logo of the world inside the Heart takes on a new meaning. The Heart of Jesus is a place of refuge and welcome, a shelter, a safe place, a place of peace where every fear is put to rest. His is a Heart open to ALL. Like a mother, He reaches out to the weakest and most vulnerable, the mentally and physically handicapped, the psychologically fragile, the addict, the prisoner, the refugee, the unwanted and unloved, those suffering any form of rejection. His Heart *is* the wounded heart of humanity, pierced by injustice and oppression, crushed by rejection and exclusion, crying out “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?”

United in our celebration of Jesus’ unfathomable, inexhaustible love, let us ask in all honesty: do we look upon the invitation to follow Jesus poor as a precious gift that is integral to our vocation? Does it fill us with joy? Are our efforts to be *for* the poor and to *be* poor rooted and grounded in love for Him and for those who bear His wounds?

“Mary, woman of faith among the People of God, lives close to us, as she does to everything that radiates the life of her Son.” (#9 Constitutions) She accompanied the process of His self-emptying. She stood by the cross and did not abandon Him. She would have witnessed the soldier piercing His side. Widowed mother, mother of the homeless, mother of the condemned and executed criminal, Mother of the Poor, she accompanies us with a mother’s love. May she teach us the meaning of her Magnificat, her sensitivity to those in need, her constancy in accompanying her Son to His death.

I can find no better way to end these reflections, offered with a grateful heart, than by paraphrasing Paul’s words to the Ephesians, the second reading of the liturgy of our feast:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant us in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith; that rooted and grounded in love, we may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

(Ephesians 3:14-21)

With much love from your sister who prays for you and counts on your prayer,

Clare Pratt, rscj
Superior General