



Society of  
the Sacred Heart  
of Jesus

OPENING CONFERENCE  
PROBATION 2023-2024

September 14, 2023

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Superior General

# *Come as you are - with Mary to Jesus*



Today is the official opening of this special time which we call probation and a particularly special time for each one of you, Mary, Ruth, Barbara, Uche, Nataly, Gloria, and Nancy. We on the General Council, Anne Corry, Marie-Jeanne Elonga Abompi, Monica Esquivel, Daphne Sequeira, and myself, welcome each one of you to the Villa Lante where you are about to begin your immediate preparation for your life commitment, your final profession, as a Religious of the Sacred Heart. Of course, you have been preparing for this time for many years in your home provinces of Congo-



Chad, Chile, Colombia, Poland, Uganda-Kenya, and United States-Canada. Each one of you has been sent to probation with the love and support of your province, your communities, your families and friends, and those with whom you minister. We also welcome and give special thanks to your probation team, Christine Mukoko from Congo-Chad and Gerardette Philips from Indonesia who have been called to walk with you during these months as you explore more deeply your call to religious life in our world and in our church.

During these next months, the nine of you will form a new community here in Rome at the Villa Lante. You come with the richness and the challenge of your diversity of culture and experience. Hopefully you will come to know and love each other deeply. How you form community will not only be a gift to each one of you but also this new community is a gift to the Society. These months are an opportunity to intentionally and consciously live the calls of the General Chapter of 2016 together among the nine of you – to open yourself up to new frontiers, to live more humanly, to create silence, and to be and act as one body.

Your new home, Casa Betania, has been prepared especially for the probation community, to give you a place of simple beauty with space for solitude, prayer, celebration, and creativity. You are here in the heart of Rome and live in the midst of an urban garden, our own local place to live Laudato Si! Our sister, Sophie, walked in this garden, as you will and as many of us have. Sophie breathed in its beauty, contemplated her reality, certainly having times of deep joy and also times of searching, struggle and sometimes suffering. Sophie will be with you during these months as you explore your inner world, your heart and your soul, your life in this religious congregation, your ministry among God's people, our place in the Church. I urge you also to explore the environs of Rome, to walk the streets, visit the churches and historical sites, to look into the eyes of the people you meet. Discover where God is present in you and in this place.

It is also important to remember that you are coming to probation at a very important time in both the Church and in the Society. In about two weeks, Pope Francis will convene an historic synod to explore a more inclusive, participative way for the Church to move into the future. As you experience the Church universal, each one of you brings your own experience of church from your countries and contexts, some of them painful, some of them joyful. The opportunity to share your experience with each other is a learning in itself and will widen your understanding of this key aspect of our vocation. We are blessed to be here in Rome during this time and doubly blessed to have one of our sisters, Maria Cimperman, as a participant in this synod experience. I'm sure you will have the opportunity to talk with her and hear her experience and insights. It is very important that we all pray for the outcome of this synod gathering, that those who are part of this gathering will listen deeply to the Spirit speaking among God's people and that what comes out of this gathering will bring hope to the many, especially those who experience themselves on the margin.

You are also here together in probation as the whole Society prepares for the General Chapter of 2024. I am sure that over the past several years you have participated in many conversations



and gatherings in your own provinces about the Society's future – who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do? You are privileged to be together at this moment, to live in a cross-cultural, cross-provincial community and to have the space to create something new. Probation will give you the time and the space to share more deeply with your peers from other countries, to explore how to live this moment in the Society and discover your way to contribute to the future of our mission and our world as woman in the church, as professed religious of the Sacred Heart. We hope that you will take the time to explore the call of our apostolic priorities in your own lives and also how you can continue to connect through them after probation with this little community and with your peers in the Society and in the larger Sacred Heart family. This is not only our desire for you, but also a reminder that this is part of your responsibility as fully professed members of the Society. We as a General Council look forward to hearing your insights, your hopes and your challenges. You will also have the chance as you complete your long retreat to begin the Spiritual Journey together as a probation group, joining with the whole Society in preparation for the General Chapter. Being here at the Villa Lante and close to Sophie will certainly enrich your spiritual journey that is the essence of probation.

We pray and know that Mary, first woman of the Church in whom the Word became flesh, will be with you during these months as you are invited to enter into the Heart of her Son and know more deeply the tenderness of his love for you and for humanity. Gera and Christine, along with the General Council, has chosen a special icon to accompany you on the way during these months. Maybe you have already visited the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere and spent time gazing at the icon of Mary and Jesus above the main altar. If not, it's a short walk from the Villa Lante and it is a wonderful place to just sit and be.

The icon reminds us of Jesus' tender relationship with his mother. Many paintings show us Mary's role as mother to her child, as nurturer, teacher, guardian and guide. We all know Mary as Mater Admirabilis, the young woman who sits quietly doing her daily tasks, preparing to become the mother of Jesus. Tomorrow we celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrow, a feast particularly important to Sophie. Soon you will be able to see the painting that Sophie prayed in front of in the Villa Lante Chapel. The unique mosaic that has been chosen for this probation shows Mary and Jesus as adults, with a tender and mature relationship. We know that they have walked together the road of life, with all its joys and pains. For sure their relationship changed over the course of Jesus's life – from an innocent child born in a manger to a prophetic man who died on the cross for the sake of humanity, accompanied always by his faithful mother. Both Mary and Jesus are with us in this icon. Mary points to her Son and invites us to know Jesus, to be with Jesus, and allow the Word Incarnate, to enter into our being. You will have the time and the space here at the Villa Lante, like Mary, to ponder and deepen your relationship with Jesus as a mature, adult RSCJ. You will also have the time and space to thank God for the ways God has been revealed to you through your life experience, through your relationships with your family, with the Society, and with those whose lives you touch through your ministry. Take the time to listen to the Word, let it germinate within you in the silence, water it with your long times of prayer and perhaps your tears, discover and thank God for the way Jesus has journeyed with you to this day.



Know that we are all with you, especially during this time of probation. Each one of us on the General Council is looking forward to spending time with you and getting to know you. The whole Society is praying for you and I ask you to pray for all of your sisters and our Sacred Heart family throughout the world, that we may be one, ready to serve God's people with courage and confidence.

Let us end this conference and enter to the probation experience fully by praying this short litany<sup>i</sup>.

*Mary, woman of faith among the people of God, live close to us. **PRAY FOR US***

*Mary, whose heart is united and conformed to that of Jesus, and leads us to Jesus.  
**PRAY FOR US***

*Mary, who welcomed and gave Christ to the world, so all may have life. **PRAY FOR US***

*Mary who was called to follow Christ in a life conformed to His. **PRAY FOR US***

*Mary, you who keep all things in your heart, teach us to welcome the Word of God and to go forth and announce the Word with joy. **PRAY FOR US***

*Mary, Mother of Church, watch over God's people, help us to be faithful to the Word of God made flesh and bold in our living this Word each day. **PRAY FOR US***

*We ask all this of you, Mary, Mother of God, through your son and our brother, Jesus.*

*Amen.*

Let us join together and sing the Magnificat

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<sup>i</sup> This litany is taken from the references to Mary in our Constitutions, paragraphs 9, 22, 41, 90, 118 and 119

