



SOCIETÀ DEL SACRO CUORE
CASA GENERALIZIA

Ref. No. 18/60

Rome, 25th May 2018

Dear Sisters and Family of the Sacred Heart,

This letter brings you much love, prayer and greetings for the Feast of St. Madeleine Sophie and for the Feast of the Sacred Heart, the day we celebrate the core of our charism and as Religious of the Sacred Heart, renew our commitment to our life and mission.

Over the past months especially since the beginning of Lent, the Central Team and I have been thinking and praying about the message for the Feast of the Sacred Heart. This pondering, like all of our prayer and contemplation, has taken place in the midst of where we are experiencing life on a daily basis, trying to live the gospel in light of our charism, mission and the Chapter calls while visiting the communities of Europe.

After nearly 1 ½ years in this ministry of service to the international Society, the five of us realize the gift and the challenge we have received through experiencing the Society in so many places. We know that we sit in a privileged place, with the opportunity to see the whole. We experience with our sisters and the members of the family of the Sacred Heart both the sadness of loss and the enormous joy and desire for new life. The strong sufferings of the people with whom “our little Society” lives and serves – in places like Venezuela and Congo and India where our people and friends are suffering persecution and death can be overwhelming on many levels. At the same time, we meet new life in many places like Almeria in Spain, Agrigento in Sicily, on the border between the U.S. and Mexico where we accompany immigrant people who are searching for new life oftentimes in very challenging situations. We see new life in women and men who share our charism and spirituality and take leadership in schools and projects carrying out our mission with strength and clarity. We accompany people and provinces where we are growing smaller and the death of so many of our beloved sisters reminds us of our mortality. We thank God for the many lay people who care for our sisters in times of illness and fragility. We see signs of new life both in emerging provinces and in places where small groups of RSCJ and lay colleagues are taking initiatives in support of justice, peace and the integrity of creation which also revitalizes our life and mission.

In a world which is reeling with an abundance of material wealth and death-dealing poverty, where national leaders and people often create conflict rather than reconciliation and peace, we as a Society are entering into a critical time in our own history, a moment in which each of us is called to enter into the mystery of life and death, to CHOOSE LIFE as one body all for the sake of our MISSION. In fact, this is not a new

journey but one that has been clarified, crystallized and energized by the calls, mandates and recommendations of the General Chapter 2016.

Three things strike me as essential to this journey – to increase our capacity to listen to the Spirit, to open ourselves to dialogue with the other and to let go of those preoccupations, attitudes and life choices that block new life from happening.

As I thought and prayed about writing to you, three gospel events kept speaking to me about us as Religious of the Sacred Heart and our growing family in the 21st century. I am happy to share my own simple reflections and I invite you to take some time between the celebration of Sophie's feast and the Feast of the Sacred Heart to reread your own life right now in the light of these readings as we ready ourselves to renew our vows, to *follow Jesus Christ forever in the Society of the Sacred Heart* and commit ourselves again to be co-creators of the future, to CHOOSE LIFE! We invite the family of the Sacred Heart to join with us as they recommit themselves to live our spirituality and mission as committed lay men and women.

The first reflection is on the gospel of Sophie's feast which we all know so well. Jesus reminds us that He is the vine, the source of life, we are the branches. As always, John's gospel gives us insight into God's action in our lives. As an amateur gardener, I always find pruning difficult. It is always hard for me to believe that cutting away the branches or pulling out plants that are growing too close together is the right thing to do. But if you want to reach the goal of producing the best fruit, prune you must. Pruning grape vines is an art, best done in dormant times. The farmer must discern which branches to cut off in order to give energy to the new branches. One has only to look at the difference between vines that are tended and those that are not tended to see where life flourishes and where it does not. Pruning the vines at the right time, not all in the same way – older vines, newer vines, the time of year, the place – the principle is the same, the goal is produce healthy plants and the fullest flavored fruit.

I believe that this is where we are and what we are called to do both individually and as a community – listen to the Spirit, discern together what needs to be pruned and what needs to be nurtured for new life. It's important, I think, to remember that we are not the owners of the field. Christ is! The experience of our people, locally and globally, moves us to work the field; they are the sun and soil of all that we are and do. We are the workers who need to listen and pay attention. We also need to remember that we are not the only workers in the vineyard and likely the yield will be better if we work together.

As an international Society, we are about to enter into a communal discernment. We will be invited to live this moment with an open mind, an open heart, and an open will, to be realistic and to dare to imagine the future. Entering into a discernment assumes that we put ourselves into an attitude of prayer, indifference and letting go. The central question of the Chapter 2016 continues to call us – *What is God calling us to be? What is God calling us to do?* Let us pray together on Sophie's feast for courage and the confidence.

The second reflection I offer you comes from the Easter readings especially from John 20 where Mary of Magdala came early in the morning to the tomb of Jesus, filled with both expectation and grief. Imagine Mary's shock when she saw and experienced the empty

tomb. She wept for her loss but she did not run away or crumble. Rather, she entered into the experience of the tomb. She discovered something new when she entered into a dialogue with herself, with the angel and with Jesus. She received the gift and consolation of recognizing the risen Lord in a tender and loving encounter. The experience of the empty tomb and the personal encounter with the Risen Lord gives rise to hope and the capacity to go beyond herself and respond to the call of Jesus the Christ to go out and proclaim what she had experienced.

We are living a Holy Saturday moment. Some writers refer to this time as “liminal space” – the time in between what is known and what is unknown. In many ways, the General Chapter 2016 was an invitation to enter into this space in between what has been and what will be. Without losing faith in God’s presence and call, we recognized at the Chapter that the “old order is passing away”. Rather than run away or fall into despair, we are called to enter into our gospel moment as co-creators with Christ of a new creation, a new moment in which we are called to proclaim our mission and charism in a new way.

I have been thinking lately about the role of dialogue in communal discernment and especially within our community of the Society as we aspire to “build One Body”. More and more I am aware that we are a very diverse group of women, not only because we come from 41+ different countries and cultures and speak different languages but also because we view the world and life from different perspectives. Talking, sharing, dialoguing with each other is not easy. If we really want and are willing to discern together, to build the Body, to live our *Cor Unum*, we need to strengthen our capacity to enter into conversations with each other about issues and situations in which we do not necessarily agree. If we don’t find ways to enter into the experience of the other, to listen with respect, to agree or disagree with love, we run the risk of living very respectful lives but not really being able to discern that which is most essential together.

Lastly, a reflection on the gospel for our feast. Each year I look forward to seeing the gospel for the Feast of the Sacred Heart, knowing that these words have something to say about my life and our life. This year we enter into the experience of Jesus dead on the cross. The disciples and his family must have felt despair – that which they had hoped for had ended. The kingdom they had imagined was not going to happen. I am sure that Mary and the women who surrounded Jesus as well as his disciples were fixed on the profound experience of death, totally forgetting any talk or allusion to overcoming death and the resurrection. The first part of his journey was over. As the disciples shared on the road to Emmaus, “we had hoped”. And yet there is the hint of what was to come – the blood and water flowing from side of Jesus– out of the wounds that he carried, the wounds of humanity and the death he experienced there is new life.

In some ways we can be very much like the followers of Jesus who stood by the cross, so bewildered by loss or suffering or death that we miss the signs of new life. We know from our own lives that it is essential to grieve. We also know that profound loss and suffering pushes us at some moment to seek new life. We are called as Religious of the Sacred Heart to enter into the mystery of the open side of Jesus, to enter into Christ’s suffering and the suffering of humanity and allow the depth of this suffering to transform us from the inside out into women of hope. Our Constitutions remind us that gathering as one people around the table of life in Eucharist, we enter into the mystery of the open

side of Jesus, celebrating His death and resurrection, the heart of which is the sufferings and hopes of the human family (Constitutions, 5). We need to ask ourselves what is this new life that we seek, what are the things that get in the way or block us from seeing new life, and what does our community want to do new because Christ has risen?

As we pray with Sophie on her feast and renew our vows on the feast of the Sacred Heart, please know that each one of us has a part in this journey we are on together. All of us are called to pray deeply. We are called to deepen our love – within the Heart of Christ, for each other and for our world and its people. We are called to participate in whatever way is possible for us. No one is too old or too young to be co-creators of our future. Remember, *each one of us has a basic responsibility which she cannot surrender and which no one can carry out for her: that of living in the truth of her heart and her life, wherever she may be, the charism of Saint Madeleine Sophie (Constitutions, 140).*

May the same spirit that guided Sophie throughout her life strengthen and enlighten us. May we pray together that this Spirit will give us the gifts we need to live deeply and united in this very important moment for the life of our world, our Church and our Society.

This brings you much love and prayer,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Barbara Dawson". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Barbara Dawson RSCJ