

**Cover image:** Luke 13:13: *“And immediately she was made straight, and she praised God.”*

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**Document Commission:** Ellen Collesano, Nancy Durand, Mariola Lopez, Clara Malo, Noellina Namusisi, Gerardette Philips, with Catherine Lloyd

**Reflection from the Initial Formation Meeting**  
**Guadalajara, July 23rd – August 3rd, 2012**

“I have come that they may have life,  
and have it to the full.”

John 10:10

“It is always *here* and it is always *now*.  
All our raw material for sanctity is in the now, just as it is.”

Janet Stuart

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November 2013

Dear Sisters,

We are very happy to present to you this document, ***Life Unfolding... Offering the Gift Received***, which is a reflection from the Initial Formation Meeting held in Guadalajara, Mexico in July-August 2012.

It was a clear conviction of the meeting that formation is a life-long process, one to which we re-commit ourselves continually so that we may grow in living our life and mission more fully in changing times and contexts. This document then is for each one of us. Its invitations and call to conversion are issued to all of us. In renewing the living of our vocation at depth, in responding to these calls to us today, we will fashion the wineskins that are needed to hold the wine of God's love and life in these new times.

This document is the fruit of a process lived throughout the Society over several years. Chapter 2008 asked that an



international formation meeting be convoked. A preparatory commission invited all of us to reflect on various aspects of our living of religious life with a view to identifying those elements which are important to reinforce today. The process which came to be known as ***“The Water Jars”***, from the text of John 2,7: *“So they filled the jars to the brim,”* was a very

renewing experience for our provinces and provided rich material to be considered in the preparation for the formation meeting.



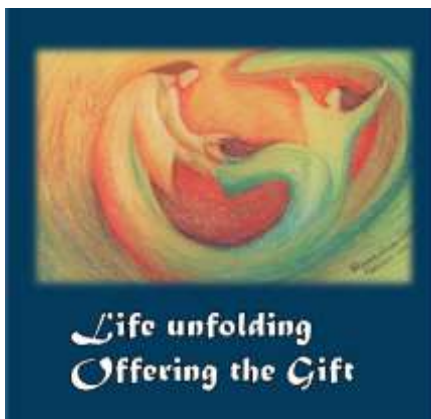
**The Initial Formation Meeting** had as a theme **New wineskins for new wine**. Formation teams from provinces with people in initial formation gathered “to draw together the fundamental elements which we hold in common in our formation in the Society and, taking into account our diverse contexts, to support the implementation of these elements so that they become incarnated in our lives.” Through various lenses the participants explored the new wine we are receiving from God and from our newer members, and the new wineskins that we need to contain it.

The synthesis of the fruit of the *Water Jars* process into twelve fundamental elements was strongly affirmed in the first days of the meeting. We realized with joy that within all the diversity which we have been living in recent years is the common core of our vocation as RSCJ.



In a process of discernment, the participants then considered the realities of our world today, the needs of our newer and more experienced members, and the calls and dreams which will lead us into the future. The Spirit was clearly moving in the gathering and in the congregation as we sensed the new wine that is already present among us and the calls it offers us to new life. At the end of the meeting the participants wrote a letter to the Society in which they shared the convictions and calls which were the fruit of the meeting and promised that a more complete document would come in the future. The General Council

then named a document commission which has prepared the document you are now receiving: ***“Life Unfolding ... Offering the Gift Received”***. We know that the Spirit will continue to work in us as we ponder and live this document.



On behalf of the whole Society, we want to express our gratitude to all those who have participated in these processes, to the Preparatory Commission<sup>1</sup>, the persons and communities who have shared their reflections, the Initial Formation teams, the

Document commission<sup>2</sup>, the support staff in Guadalajara, the translators at every stage, and to so many more whose assistance and prayer have borne fruit in this document.

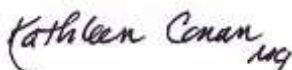
The formators came together to talk about formation and they ended up talking about LIFE, our life and our common call. We hope that we will sense in this document the strength of the common elements of our vocation, the power and hope evoked in the calls, and the deep desire and courage that will enable us to engage in living them.

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<sup>1</sup>Preparatory Commission: Ana Cicero, Rita Crivelli, Nancy Durand, Kim Young Ae, Rebecca Loukae, Catherine Lloyd and Kathleen McGrath

<sup>2</sup>Document Commission: Ellen Collesano, Nancy Durand, Mariola Lopez, Clara Malo, Noellina Namusisi, Gerardette Philips, with Catherine Lloyd

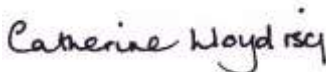
Ultimately, formation happens through our openness to the Spirit of God, and once again, we want “to take seriously the responsibility of collaborating with the work of God throughout our lives.”(Constitutions §73). Let us read this document with our hearts, listening deeply for that to which it is calling us. Let us encourage and support one another as we commit to the transforming process to which it calls us. Thus may our lives unfold ever more into offering the gift we have received, that the Spirit may shape us more fully into being God’s love for God’s people today.



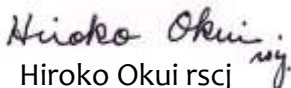
Kathleen Conan rscj



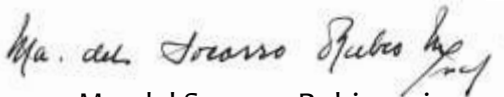
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# Life unfolding Offering the Gift

## Re-visiting the experience

As we look back on our experience at the International Formation Meeting, held in Guadalajara (Mexico), from July 23<sup>rd</sup> to August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, we *felt our hearts burning*, because almost without realising it, like the disciples at the first meeting with the Risen Christ, we were living our own resurrection story. We were all able to receive its gifts: joy, profound hope, and a new ability to celebrate and take risks. We felt a strong union among ourselves; we also listened deeply to the voices and intuitions of the diverse regions and provinces. Although not all the provinces were represented at the meeting, all of them contributed their responses through the reflection process.<sup>3</sup>

The union of the Society was a central value for Sophie and for us too, as we shared our charism and our spirituality. On various levels we became convinced that we were “*one heart and one soul*”: in the provinces, in the reality of our countries, and within ourselves. There are global situations

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<sup>3</sup> Each province, district and area of the Society reflected on the fundamental elements of our life. This process “*So they filled the jars to the brim*” was prepared by an International commission and took place between 2011-2012.

that affect us all, and we acknowledge them with respect and concern. The spirit of those days let us see that, beyond language differences, there is a real desire to listen to one another. During these last years in the Society there has been much emphasis on *cultural diversity* and on differences. We can now see the importance of recognising and valuing the considerable amount we have in common. Internationality brings us hope and allows us to keep on dreaming. We live in a time with more possibilities of sharing among ourselves. Our vulnerability makes us need one another and opens us to interchange; no longer can any province stand alone.

Following the process of reflection carried out by the whole Society, the Formation Meeting in Mexico gathered up the intuitions, dreams and desires of all the provinces.<sup>4</sup> The water in our jars has been transformed into wine and now we need new skins to contain it, to welcome God's new wine in ourselves and to continue offering it in the banquet of life. We came together to talk about formation and we ended up talking about LIFE – the life of each one – and how these lives are interconnected. We are in a process of formation that never ends.

Although we can see inequalities and injustice in our world, God is always present working through our humanity to bring about the Kingdom. We are involved in the story of God's love for humanity, and we want to be in tune with that story, through which God is ensuring that we all have life.

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<sup>4</sup>This material was synthesized and sent on a CD to the whole Society.

The Kingdom of God and the mission of Jesus give direction and meaning to our formation. For us RSCJ, formation is a way of being open to life, a constant invitation to learn, to grow, to let ourselves be transformed.

As we re-read our story, we notice that we have lived through times of crisis that have opened the door to new opportunities. As women we are experiencing the need to keep on being more deeply present to this process of transformation that God is accomplishing in us. We have come to realise that transformation is not the same as change. The strategies of change come from our own initiative, while transformation is always the fruit of an Encounter. It happens when we venture with our whole being into a deep, sincere encounter with God and let ourselves be encountered by God, just as we are, with nothing in our lives remaining outside of this encounter.

At this time in the story of the Society and in a world that is calling us to renew our commitment to the poor, to the care of creation and to the cause of justice, we feel called to be women with a deep experience of the love of Jesus, desiring to live this relationship through community, aware of our need for growth and development in order to be more available for mission.

## **The process in recent years**

In 1990, two meetings on Initial Formation were organised, one in Barcelona and the other in Rio de Janeiro. The fruit of

this reflection is the document “*The fate of the Society is in our hands*” (1992). In addition, we have lived other processes, prayerful reflections and three General Chapters (1994/2000/2008), which have helped us to delve more deeply into the meaning of our life and mission.

The world has also changed rapidly. There have been extraordinary advances in technology and communication, but at the same time there are still no solutions to the problems of hunger, inequality, violence and injustice. In many places these situations have become worse. We have gained fresh awareness of the suffering of the Earth and of the responsibility we bear if we want our planet to keep on sustaining life. These and other calls demand an urgent response. During these years we have seen that some provinces have taken courageous decisions, that new sisters have joined us in various parts of the world, and at the same time we have experienced in different ways vulnerability and limitation in some areas of the Society. We have also felt encouraged by the spirit of openness and the new hope that is springing up in the Church; God never stops surprising us!

We have seen throughout the world how people are uniting in spite of social, political, cultural and religious differences. Urban movements have sprung up in which young people are prominent. To some extent, this is possible because humanity is advancing towards a long desired unity. Difference, which we are invited to recognise, is an expression of the unity that leads us to a deeper understanding of the mystery of God. In the face of that reality, we must enter into our hearts and listen.



## Three calls that are both blessing and challenge

We feel invited once again to connect with our roots, with the wisdom of the women who preceded us, and to explore the gift and potential of our spirituality for today. We need to move, to let ourselves be transformed and renewed, so that we can respond from the depths of our being and throughout our lives, remembering who we are and by Whom we were called.

In Mexico, together we received different invitations that brought us to recognise that from the basis of our charism – that grace-filled space – we need to deepen and recreate our being as RSCJ in these three basic dimensions of our life:

- **Community**
- **Interior Life**
- **A Simple Life among the Poor**

Each RSCJ is involved in a lifelong process of formation. The invitations and orientations for formation that are addressed to each RSCJ, at whatever stage of life, but which are especially important in initial formation, are to be found at the end of each section.

## Life in community

Community is the place where we are called by God to live as sisters and where, at times, we also receive the blessing of friendship so valued by Sophie. Our life together is a gift and a process that invites us to constant transformation and, for that reason, always involves a challenge for us. Community is the central place of our formation, in that relationships do their work in us and we offer each other the possibility of experiencing greater integration.

We live in a world in which there is conflict between the desire for significant relationships and the lack of trust and time required to build them. We are conscious that the concept of time has been altered by the impact of new technologies, the speed of communications, instant information and the ease with which we can travel. These factors influence our life-styles and invite us to discern new ways of relating, because we live the Gospel not only through our apostolic actions, but also through the gratuitous gift of ourselves to each other in community.

Our communities are called to create a space that invites us to live a life based on love, an open space to share with other men and women the paths of respect, intimacy, justice, hope and a life that is kind to all. Community is a space in which we can recognise our vulnerability and take the risk of giving and receiving forgiveness.

We want to continue to be present to one another in a free, relaxed atmosphere, supporting each other in order to grow



in love and self-knowledge, and helping each other to take care of the quality of our relationship with Jesus. We want to learn to welcome and accept one another with all that makes us equal and also with what makes us different and unique, with the certainty that we can address our differences because at the core we are united.

By our vocation, we are invited to put in common all that we have and are, to grow in dialogue with our differences, to open ourselves to receive the wealth of the other cultures and spiritualities that we encounter. We need to grow in reverence for realities less familiar to us. As an international community, our sense of interdependence has deepened. No province can be sufficient to itself. In all the regions, experiences of collaboration and mutual help are springing up (interprovincial novitiates, provinces that welcome students, exchange of resources...). We see this as a sign of life and of hope for our future, as well as an invitation to keep on seeking, with creativity and solidarity, how to respond together to the needs of formation in the different provinces and regions.

As women of faith, in the Church, we accept our responsibility and wish to strengthen our commitment to the project of the Kingdom, with the same joy and courage that characterised the men and women of the first Christian communities. In a time of so much searching, in which people need the Church to be a sign of hope, we feel urged to reflect on our understanding of Church, our sense of belonging and of finding our place in it.

At this crucial point of history, Jesus is still calling us to be “Women of the Heart”, giving us the possibility of listening once more to God’s dream for humanity, which moves us to make each action of our lives brim over with love. In community we wish to give each other mutual support in the certainty that the dream can be fulfilled.

Our passion for the apostolic life comes from a profound experience of the Love that opens out our full capacity for loving. Impelled by the strength of that great love, we are called, at all stages of life, to sustain one another, caring for and nurturing our own vocation and the vocation of our sisters.

Mutual accompaniment, revealing ourselves as we are, empathy and compassion will create the atmosphere for embracing our humanity and being ready to touch our wounds. Doing so opens us to the capacity for healing and also allows us to experience in ourselves the strength of God’s love, profound and transforming, which is the source that sustains our life together.

## **Orientations for Formation:**

- ↪ Live community as mission and community for mission (GC 2008).
- ↪ Strengthen the fundamental elements of our community life and, at the same time, dare to construct new ways of welcoming, especially those who are beginning their journey with us.
- ↪ Integrate the new members with their stories and help them to become what they are called to be, as well as appreciate that they are also helping us to be who we are called to be.
- ↪ Take responsibility for the process of human and faith development throughout our lives and accompany one another on this path of transformation.
- ↪ Balance our contemplative dimension with the commitment to serve and the desire to be available for others.
- ↪ Encourage the creation of communities that can receive and accompany young people.
- ↪ Share our spirituality, our faith experience and the Word of God with others, bringing mutual enrichment to one another.

## Interior life

For Sophie *“the spirit of the Society is essentially founded on prayer and the interior life”* (Constitutions 17). She invites us to care for our interior life, because it is a source of fruitfulness, joy and vitality for us. It is the place where the human and the divine come together, the place of our encounter with the risen Christ, to which we bring our joys and sorrows and from which we draw strength to pronounce our “yes”.

Our incarnational spirituality flows from our deep relationship with Jesus. We see the link between this experience of Jesus and our own way of living and growing in relationship with others. Our contemplative life is what helps us to discover God’s love in the wounds of the world. We need to be transformed so that we may glimpse the face of Christ in the faces of the poor and in one another.

We seek to incarnate in our daily life, through our presence and service, the compassion and forgiveness of the Heart of Jesus and, with other men and women, to bring to birth a world where humanity, justice and tenderness are possible. It is essential for our mission that we find the conditions for praying at depth. We recognise a healthy interior life when it shows itself in the quality of our relationships, in our capacity for intimacy and our commitment to others. Our experience of the Eucharist, the memory of the love of Jesus offered until the end, helps us to enter deeply into the movement of his gift.

We need to make ourselves receptive to God's life in us, to dedicate time to it, and humbly balance the moments of silence and solitude with the urgency of responding to the world's needs. We feel called to go on unifying our inner selves, our relationships and our mission, so that they may become in our lives as simple as breathing in and breathing out. To this end we wish to live at a deeper level, open to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, in a constant attitude of discernment, returning time after time to the encounter with Jesus, the Gospel, our charism and the needs of the world as the basis for our decisions and choices.

Accompaniment and daily or periodic re-reading of what we are living and experiencing will help us to grow in personal integration and to develop healthy, loving relationships as an important part of our interior life.

Learning from Mary, who pondered all things in her heart, we try to develop awareness and a contemplative outlook that will help us to be thankful for the diversity, depth and beauty of the world and to feel the divine mystery within it. This contemplative approach leads to action and calls us to transform reality wherever we are.

As women of hope and compassion, let us anchor our lives in the One who is our centre, knowing that God desires fullness of life for each of us and for our world. The congruence between what we believe and experience in our hearts and our way of living day to day will continue to be a challenge for us.



### **Orientations for Formation:**

- ↪ Give priority to our interior life, treasuring as a precious gift moments of prayer, reflection and study.
- ↪ Ensure times of silence, solitude, friendship and mutual support.
- ↪ Strengthen our lived experience of the Eucharist and our participation in the Christian community.

- ↩ Ensure personal accompaniment and develop skills for re-reading daily life that will help us grow in sensitivity to recognise God's presence and develop our capacity for discernment.
- ↩ Commit ourselves to a formation that incorporates the whole person in her physical, psychological, emotional, affective and spiritual dimensions and provide resources that support this integration.
- ↩ Form ourselves in order to accompany others in an integrated way.
- ↩ Promote theological formation and Scripture study.
- ↩ Grow in knowledge of our history and heritage and the lives of those who preceded us.
- ↩ Discern the use of new technologies as both gift and challenge for communication and relationships.

## A life of simplicity among those who are poor

Within the context of today's world, we feel called to deepen our commitment to the poor and to reflect on the way we live and how we understand our vow of poverty. We hear from Jesus a renewed call drawing us toward the marginalized, the fragile, the excluded, and those who lack the basic necessities of life, inviting us to collaborate with those who put their energies at the service of the Kingdom.

We have a spirituality that unifies our commitment to the world and the contemplative experience. Formation, both initial and on-going, must help reveal that God is here, hidden in life's story, and it is in this concrete story where we discover the signs of God's love and where we are sent to make it manifest. We want to cultivate a passion for what happens in the world, for each expression of life, here among the men and women of our own time. Our spirituality is embodied by our becoming global citizens and it revitalizes our vocation to transform the world with the hearts and minds of educators.

At the beginning of religious life, direct contact with those who are poor is fundamental. The encounter with those who suffer and are marginalized in our world, touching their pain, is what will help us develop and internalize our option for the poor and our commitment to justice, which we are called to live wherever we find ourselves.

The ultimate goal of formation does not lie within us alone. The faces of *“those who have been pierced”* (John 19) must



always be present in our process of maturing. In the Gospel we see that the Kingdom of God has a human face: the face of the tax collector and the prostitute, the leper and the woman with the haemorrhage. As celibate women we want to centre our desires on building up a society based on the dignity of the human person and the dreams of God. Like Jesus, we want those who are marginalized and excluded to take radical priority in our hearts.<sup>5</sup>

In daily life, the poor participate in our formation, teaching us to be generous and welcoming because they receive us with generosity in spite of their lack of resources. Seeing and touching their needs contribute to our discernment of what is essential.

We want to live in communities with simple lifestyles, in close proximity to the lives and concerns of the poor and vulnerable, through which we can have affective and effective relationships with them. For us, as RSCJ, this dimension of our lives springs forth from and bears the fruit of an interior life that has its origin in the following of Jesus and his Gospel.

We also need to shape and inform the socio-political dimension of our life, integrating a critical consciousness into our daily actions and way of viewing the world. The transformational role of responding to the needs of the times was present in Sophie's first intuitions: education was a means to transform the wounded and unjust society in

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<sup>5</sup> Carlos Dominguez, SJ, "The challenge of evangelical celibacy" (Guadalajara, 2012)

which she lived, and we are called as educators to do the same.

We need to grow in the awareness that the Earth itself suffers and that those who have the least are the most affected by its deterioration. We must care for the well-being of our planet.

This concern requires reflection about our lifestyle. In a consumer-oriented society where there is an ever increasing gap between those who have choices and those who lack them, we wish to live with a greater congruence. Choosing anew a lifestyle of simplicity allows us to put our priorities in order and discover what is truly important. Living the vow of poverty can ensure that we stay receptive and open. Simplicity and gratitude for the gifts of each day are acts and attitudes that bring joy. We want to nurture both of them in our lives.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lynn Levo, CSJ, “Joy requires tending” (Guadalajara, 2012)

## **Orientations for Formation:**

- ↪ Assure experiences of presence among and work with those who are poor and vulnerable throughout our formation.
- ↪ Review and revise where needed our lifestyle and daily choices in light of the lived reality.
- ↪ Promote a critical consciousness through analysing reality and reflecting on global and local situations with the hearts and minds of educators.
- ↪ Be aware of the current and changing groups of those who are excluded and the new types of poverty that are arising.
- ↪ Build into our relationships, in daily life, attitudes of nonviolence, tolerance and respect.
- ↪ Continue to grow in an awareness that impels us to act in favour of peace, caring for our planet and promoting sustainable development.



## **An invitation to live in a more integrated way**

Throughout the meeting we experienced an invitation to live our lives in a way that is integrated, full, and free and with deepened awareness of both the gifts and limitations of our bodies and the affective/sexual dimension of our lives. Also, the invitation was one of living with greater joy as women, ever broadening our capacity to love and to be loved.

Living in this way, assumes that at the centre of our being, we integrate the different dimensions of our life: physical, affective/sexual, psychological and transcendental. This also needs an understanding that each dimension requires its own space so that life can unfold.

When we are blocked or life does not flow, the body contracts and withdraws and we can become sick. When life is in flow, the body echoes that and expands, opening up and communicating that life. We feel more vital this way and become channels for the Good News of the Kingdom.

We need healthy care for our bodies, respect for its rhythms of activity and rest. There are excesses of stimulation, information and impulsivity that affect our capacity to pay attention. Our perceptions are fragmented and dispersed, and we need time for silence in mind and body to recoup a loving attention to life and to others.

In the Constitutions, we find many instances of the verb, to *grow*. Words that accompany this growth are *balance, integration, maturity, unification*. To integrate life also implies integrating and healing our history: all that has been hurt along the way and needs restoring. Each stage of life offers us a light, a new possibility, to continue reconciling our history. Until the end of our days, God gives us the gift of being able to look at our own history and see it as the *history of salvation*.

It is always the opportune time (2 Cor 6:2); it is never too late in the process to take hold of and love our own life. We are always in a position to begin anew, to accept our whole selves, with all that we have lived, and to do so through the eyes and Heart of God. The fullness of each person is the glory of God's Heart.

Within each of us, there is a deep place where we know ourselves to be inhabited by a Greater Presence and from this place springs forth our hope. This hope is connected to a balanced life and especially a life that is connected with others. We confirm our need for greater harmony in our lives so that we may be both more human and more for the Kingdom of God.



## Offering the gift we have received

The love of Jesus as it was made known through the fullness of his life shapes our style of formation. We want to incorporate in our day to day reality what it means for us today to “*live united and conformed to Jesus*” (Constitutions 4). Formation is for life and mission, and in our daily life, by our gestures, words, attitudes and choices we personally and collectively live this process of human and spiritual maturation.

We are aware that formation is the work of God in us throughout the length of our journey. It is a journey that has its important stages, its different landscapes, its surprises

and learnings, and it is one we walk together, accompanying one another. Therefore, to speak of formation is to speak of all of us, for whatever the moment of our life, whether in growth or diminishment, we belong wholly and completely to this work of God.

We have a spirituality that has the great strength to centre us in what is essential. It is there, centred in the essential, that we recognize ourselves as the Society, there in the midst of all of our diverse ways of making that manifest and expressing it. We need to awaken all of the potential in our lives as RSCJ for today's day and age. We ask Sophie for wisdom and boldness to be able to joyfully offer this way of life to other women.

Together we discover that each time we *break bread with others* (Luke 24), each time we return to feeling *called by name* (John 20), each time we are able to *touch wounds with love* (John 20), the Society is born anew.

The Resurrected One waits with us in our own Galilees, in the blessings and challenges of reality, to make us more human and more able to give and receive love. In community, in mission, in the precious life of each one, in every face we meet, as disciples of Jesus we want to continue to offer *his gift*: to bring joy and to heal, to reconcile and celebrate, to care for and make beautiful... to give to each person the possibility of beginning once again.