

Dear Madam Ambassador of France

Madam Ambassador of Ireland

Barbara Dawson, our Superior General

Dear Religious of the Sacred Heart

Dear brothers-in-law

Reverend Fathers,

Dear colleagues, and friends,

I am delighted, surprised and deeply moved by this recognition.

Thank you, Madam Ambassador, for nominating me for the National Order of Merit, and for awarding it to me on behalf of the Republic. Thank you for the beautiful portrait of my life that you have just painted.

I wanted to share this honor with all of you who have come here today, since this recognition goes to the many people of all nationalities who have, in one way or another, encouraged me in the course of my professional and religious life,

Thank you to my parents, but also to the support of my sisters, the infallible clan of the four Villeon girls.

Thank you to the Religious of the Sacred. They gave birth to my vocation to serve young people. They also gave me the freedom I needed to survive. They have resisted my family's strong character - Breton and sometimes stubborn, sometimes adventurous and fond of taking to the open sea.

Thank you to my colleagues and to the leaders of the International Union of Superiors General, the UISG, who have enabled me to live on the front line, with migrants and now in the accompaniment of congregations seeking to engage in this field of migration.

The probation motto, we received at the time of our perpetual profession, "*Union of hearts in the diversity of cultures*", profoundly affects me every day of my life. So, I'd like to thank the UISG and Sister Pat Murray IBVM for giving me the opportunity to make this dream a reality: to bring cultures closer together, to get them talking to one other, while breaking down geographic barriers through the miracle of technology. It is an essential means to promote better understanding of one another and the avoiding conflict.

I would like to thank you, my friends and family, for your friendship, our debates and the coaching that has helped to shape me.

This recognition is a great joy and a great surprise for me. I was not expecting such an honor from France at a time when I am trying to retire.

You have made me look again at my career path and realize that following Christ has led me to work with the Ministry of Cooperation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for several years. At the Délégation Catholique pour la Coopération (Catholic Delegation for Cooperation), and then with Jesuit Refugee Service, we trained young people who went on mission to help the poorest of the poor and to alleviate the suffering of those fleeing war and living in refugee camps.

Today, my commitment is to inter-congregational and international service, but this insignia (medal) makes me realize that over the last few years, I have spent a lot of time in embassies, working alongside you diplomats. Thank you, Madam Ambassador, for having listened to and recognized the immense work done by UISG sisters around the world in the grassroots communities where they serve.

It is to them that this insignia (medal) goes.

Thanks to you, I have met politicians, deputies and senators from many countries who were visiting Rome. I have spent a lot of time giving witness, passing on what is happening in migrant reception centers in Italy

and elsewhere in the camps. I have done this with the conviction that only true testimonies can help our political leaders take decisions to stop the traffickers, to finance aid to those who suffer injustice and are looking for a welcoming country.

There are no easy solutions to prevent the exodus of migrants, but when faced with difficult problems, I have always been inspired by Antoine de St Exupéry's words in the final pages of *Night Flight*: "In life, there are no solutions. There are forces at work: you have to create the movement, and the solutions will come."

In the letter I received from General Lecointre, he wrote: "This recognition from the nation comes as a reward for the distinguished services you have rendered through your professional or associative activities. It designates you as a model of civic-mindedness for our fellow citizens, but also constitutes an incentive to pursue your commitment to the common good."

Be assured, Madam Ambassador, if I'm taking a break from my work with migrants arriving in Lampedusa, it's to regain my strength and think about a new commitment, this time as a retiree.

However, does retirement exist in religious life? After being touched by so many shattered lives, and transformed by the discovery of so much injustice, can I stop? No. I still have the desire to continue, with my sisters, with young people, with migrants, with all of you, to find ways of learning to live together despite our differences.

Finally, I can only turn to the One who is the source of my life and my *raison d'être*. I would like to give thanks for the Lord's unfailing presence at my side. It is He who guides my steps, for which I am infinitely grateful.

Thanks to each of you. Thank you, Madame Ambassador.

Florence de la Villéon rscj

April 2024