

## BUILDING A NEW BETHLEHEM



*“Be not afraid, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by all the people”* (Lk 2:10). With this joy proclaimed by the angel, Jesus wants to invite us to experience the mystery of his Incarnation. I am sure that this long and beautiful time of Advent has helped to prepare the heart of each and every community, to welcome this embrace of God for humanity. With this same joy we are invited to give thanks to God for our Congregation. Each Christmas we remember and thank the faithfulness of our founders to the Plan of the Love of God for them and our religious family.

The Incarnation of the Son of God is something that goes beyond our understanding. The child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger overwhelms us; we are surprised by the weakness of a God who descends from all his power and glory, to enter into history, to mingle with suffering humanity, without any immunity, becoming *“one of many”* (Phil 2,7); thus experiencing what millions of human beings experience. Although each year we celebrate this mystery, we are always surprised by God’s way of being, who chooses to become incarnate in a child, with all that entails of smallness and fragility. God wanted to offer us salvation not from above but from below; not from being first, but from being last; not from power, but from weakness, from what does not count.

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Over this Christmas with the providence that God gives us, I want to invite you to experience what the shepherds experienced, to go further, beyond the routine of everyday life, to approach the Bethlehem of our hearts and the hearts

of those whom we serve, and where God is being born every day. This Christmas let us allow the Lord to help us to find it in our lives, and in those that God puts us in our way, especially those who are most fragile and in need of our love.

In our Congregational process, the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus can help us to throw light on what we are experiencing, to accept, to assume and to live the new phase of the journey we will soon begin. In this context we can ask ourselves: what attitudes do we need to cultivate and share in order to build the new path along which the 35<sup>th</sup> General Chapter has invited us to travel? How are we preparing to live it? Consider the attitudes of some biblical Christmas figures that can illuminate us.

**Mary**, at the time of the Annunciation, could not imagine what the future was going to bring her, or how what the angel was proclaiming to her would end. However, she said *“let it be done”*, she is clear that she has to be part of the story, that she cannot stay outside it, and decides to commit to it. Mary trusts God, but she also had questions *“how will this be?”* concerns... But neither fear, nor doubt nor uncertainty distances her from doing God's will: *“Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done unto me according to your word”* (Lk 1:38).

**Joseph**, listens to God and trusts in Him, welcomes the mission entrusted to him, although he does not know how it will be, what will be demanded of him and what the consequences will be.

**The shepherds**, people who are simple, free, with a simple way of looking at things, able to risk and to journey at night; overcoming doubts or failure as they set out, without power or wealth, only with a lucid intuition and with a heart capable of being surprised at the newness that their eyes observe.

**The angels** are the ones who proclaim the great news that brings about great joy to the people, they remember the promises of God to their brothers and sisters.

**The Magi**, let themselves be led to Bethlehem, they know how to discover together the sign that is offered to them and follow it, they are willing to open their coffers, and offer the most valuable of what they have.

These attitudes speak to us of openness, welcome, availability, dispossession, humility... These are attitudes that tell us much in the process that the Congregation is experiencing, because they invite us to open up to the new, accepting what it entails of risk, uncertainty... and overcoming doubts, resistances and fears as we set out on the road, with the only certainty that the Lord does not leave us alone, *“I am with you always...”* (Mt 18,20).

One of the biblical texts we have reflected on in Advent says: *“No need to remember the past , no need to think about what was done before, see, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light, can you not see it? Yes, I am making a road in the wilderness, paths in the wilds. The wild beasts will honour me, jackals and ostriches, because I am putting water in the wilderness, (rivers in the wild) to give my chosen people drink. The people I have formed for myself will sing my praises”*.

*“I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light, can you not see it?”*

(Is 43: 18-21). This text can give us the light to look to the future with more hope. When we are caught up in the thoughts and events of the known and certain past, it is not difficult to accept and

assume the new and different; we cannot see the way the Lord is opening up for us, it costs us to discover it and much more to assume it and to live it.

God always looks to the future and never tires of doing wonders for the good of His chosen ones; what he asks of us is to set out with the confidence that He does not abandon us. Let us cultivate our generous and faithful opening up to the new that we are seeking for and building together to respond to what the Lord asked through the 35<sup>th</sup> General Chapter and to prepare ourselves to experience this “new stage of the journey” with an attitude of faith and hope, from what we are and what we have, from our frailties, darkness and possibilities, and, especially from a life that is passionate for Jesus and his Kingdom.

The Lord, through the Congregation, asks us to go to the other shore, to the unknown, to something more universal. It is an invitation to leave the familiar land, to open up to the novelty of a new road that together we will travel. In this journey we need to believe that the Lord comes in our boat and tells us over and over, “*Trust me, do not be afraid*”. The Lord promises to be present with us when the boat goes through calm waters and when it is in the midst of storms. May we have this certainty and live from it, with the assurance that the Spirit is guiding our path.

**The Lord, through the Congregation,  
asks us to go to the other shore**

In all this process, let us not forget the call of the Lord that is also the call of our last General Chapter: “*Look, I place before you today, life and happiness, death and misfortune... Choose life and you and your descendants will live...*” (Dt 30). Every choice requires renunciations that often hurt, there are risks to be faced, but you have to get on the right path. Choosing life is walking and walking forward Choosing life is to live from joy, Hope, responsibility and fidelity. To choose life is to live grounded in the Lord “*Incarnate Word*”, illuminated by His Word and led by His Spirit.

May the Child of Bethlehem teach us to live keeping in mind his attitudes so that in the New Year we will do something new, attentive to his Spirit so that together we may do his will. Let us ask the Lord to grant us the grace to experience Christ, allowing him to come into our lives in the way He wants to come.

***A happy Christmas and may 2017 be a year full of blessings for all of you.***

*“Joy and fervour always go together. So, try to keep the community in peace, unity, good will and mutual support that demonstrates the good spirit and leniency of the superiors” (GM).*

The month of November is for us SS.CC. religious a congregational month, because it invites us to remember gratefully the life and mission of our Foundress, and in remembering, we are inevitably led to our congregational roots.

In the process the Congregation is experiencing, and in a particular way in the process of implementing the “new configuration” of the Congregation, it will greatly help us to let ourselves be accompanied by the Good Mother; let us be inspired by her, by her words and by her testimony of life.

The 35<sup>th</sup> General Chapter asks us to go through a process of reorganization of the Congregation with a leadership that is inclusive, participative, and in dialogue, as Jesus would have done. In this sense it has seemed very significant and illuminating to be reminded of the leadership of the Good Mother. In these times of change, the Good Mother can help us to look at things in a new way, with an open mind, with a heart that is amazed by the surprises of God and in this way, to allow life emerge with fidelity and creative audacity.

To look at things in a new way, with an open mind, with a heart that is amazed by the surprises of God

To speak of the Good Mother and her leadership to those who are supposed to know much of all this, seems very risky. However, remembering what we already know and remembering it gratefully is good for us all.

Re-reading her writings, “the notes” and the correspondence, we found no document on leadership, nothing... But what we found is much more important. We found her life, her testimony, and some written advice she sent to Superiors. I imagine that it was not easy to encourage, accompany and govern the nascent community, with so many young people who wanted to enter. She was inexperienced, with a mission that brimmed over, without economic means, in the midst of a society hostile to religion, in hiding; facing various crises, both her own and those of the new Institute, sisters leaving or dying... and yet what comes to us is the testimony of a woman who knew all her sisters, who cared for them, who looked at the heart of each one and placed it next to the Heart of God.

Who cared for them and placed it next to the Heart of God

As we all know, the Good Mother had a series of human qualities that helped her a great deal in her service as foundress, animator and companion of her sisters, but it is obvious that these human qualities were not enough for the great mission that The Lord had entrusted to her. The secret to living her mission in fidelity was in her long hours of adoration at the foot of the tabernacle, where she allowed herself to be steeped in the immense and merciful love of God towards her and her emerging community.

The spiritual animation of the sisters was always present in her writings, in them appears a spirituality clearly based on the Gospel. Her life was based on trust, surrender and a total giving of herself to God. *“Lord, here I am, do with me what you please”. “All for God, all in God, all to God, this is the only consoling truth”. “All for God, all according to God. Everything should start, or at least end there” (GM).*

An essential characteristic of her leadership is her absolute trust in “divine providence”, a trust sustained by a deep experience of God, an experience that she transmits to her sisters and encourages them to live in total self giving to the merciful love of God. *“Go to the Good God with confidence; May his love sustain you”*. *“God knows better than we what we need; Let us abandon ourselves to his divine Providence. Absolute abandonment to God is the shortest way to obtain perfection”* (GM).

Live in total giving to the merciful love of God

Another very important characteristic of the leadership of the Good Mother is her continuous call to union and communion, she clearly feels her concern when “this” is deficient. *“I am happy to have them all. I found that each and every one seemed quite happy”*. For her, the experience of communion was fundamental in the journey of following Jesus and in evangelizing witness. *“May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me”* (Jn 17:21).

We could continue to remember other characteristics of the service of leadership of the Good Mother, her constant invitation: to abandon herself into the Heart of God, to proclaim and live a constant Fiat, to live in peace, communion... but this is not about exhausting what she said and lived, but to invite us to discover the calls made by the Good Mother today, especially in the service of leadership that we are all experiencing in one way or another.

To welcome life is what the Good Mother did and what she would ask of each of us today. In this path of reconfiguration, her advice, her words take on new life. It is a path of communion, with many questions, it asks us to leave personal preferences to welcome the life that is being born.

Welcome the life that is being born

The founders and superiors of the first communities did not have everything planned, nor did they know all the answers, but knowing that they were united to the *“Vine as the branches”* (Jn 15: 4), gave them confidence to continue the journey begun, a security that did not come from themselves but from their abandonment to divine Providence. From this assurance of the love of God holding and guarding them, *“what the Good God guards, is well guarded”* (GM), and feeling as one body, build community and proclaim the merciful love of God.

On the other hand, the Good Mother, in the face of any difficulty that the sisters had in their mission as superiors, always went back to the Gospel, to leave everything in the Heart of the Good God, to accept the cross with patience, to turn their eyes continually towards Jesus. I think this is the best manual for a superior, for a community that wants to live committed, in search. *“... the rest shall be given to you ...”* (Mt 6:33).

To leave everything in the Heart of the Good God

If today we asked the Good Mother for “advice”, she would respond to us as she did with Sister Justine Charret. *“Ask the Divine Heart of Jesus to support you. Only He can and wants everything for you. With all my soul, I desire that you be totally for Him”*.