

Gemma's Opening Address to the Chapter

Look back in truth – look forward in hope. This was the theme of the Enlarged General Council meeting that I attended in Martillac last May. It was an intense 10 days of looking back, evaluating what we have lived as an Institute in the last 6 years, re-reading our Holy Family story since the General Chapter of 2008, rejoicing in the many positive steps we have taken to move forward as a Family and also hearing the challenges to be more radical and creative in our responses to the calls to mission.

Over the past month we, in our different communities and cluster groups have been looking back at our experience as a Province over the past 6 years. I think that this has been a grace filled opportunity for us all to experience the wonder of God's spirit empowering us individually and collectively to reflect, evaluate and deepen our vocation as Sisters of the Holy Family as well as to discern our mission, i.e. what God wants of us in these changing times. When we look back we learn from our experience so that we can move forward with more awareness and greater hope.

Probably the most significant step that we have taken since the last general chapter is our awakening, as a Province, to our place in the awesome story of the Universe – a universe that has been evolving for 14 billion years and that is still evolving and changing.

We have joyfully awakened to the realisation that we are children of the earth; that we are not separate from the great web of life but that we are intimately connected to all that exists. We have come to a new awareness of who we are. We are not separate from the rest of creation but we are kin to all that exists

We know now that our earth home is not a place of exile and a vale of tears; and that we are just passing through on our way to our true home in Heaven. Remember the hymns we used to sing...

*This world is not my home, I'm just a passing thru,
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue...*

We now realise that the earth is not there simply for us to use and exploit for our own benefit. We now see the world differently. In the words of Thomas Berry we see the natural world "not as a collection of objects but a communion of subjects"

And again in the words of Thomas Berry: "We humans are born of the earth, nourished by the earth. The natural world tells us: "I feed you. I clothe you. I shelter you. I heal you. I offer you a communion with the divine... I offer you flowers whereby you can

express your reverence for the Divine and your love for one another” (Evening Thoughts 139)

We have awakened to the presence of God in every twist and turn of the Universe Story. We are now more keenly aware of what our ancestors knew and believed – that the Creator Spirit is present in all of creation, always at work, always creating, always renewing.

In the Earth Charter we read: “We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise”

Margaret, in her letter convoking the General Chapter echoes this thought: “We are at a critical moment in our journey... changes in our way of living need to follow the changes in our way of thinking if we are to live our charism in a renewed and relevant way for today” (p.3).

And she reminds us that there is “an urgent need to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” if we are to live our call with authenticity today”

As we look back she invites us to ask ourselves where are some of the gaps between our changing awareness and the necessary real life changes that still need to be made.

In her letter, Margaret asks us to think more deeply about our mission and the meaning of our vowed life. How can we develop our understanding and living of mission as an expression of Jesus’ mission of communion? How can we revitalise our living of vowed life for mission? What new responses can we give to the new era in which we live?

So we have embraced newness and change during the past 6 years and I think I can safely say that it has been life-giving for all of us. Personally and in cluster groups we have looked back in all honesty at how we have lived our commitment. Shortly we will have an opportunity to look back together as a Chapter and share with one another the fruits of those reflections.

One of the big highlights in the Province was the visit of animation by Margaret and Colleen last May. That was a moment of real conversion. We drew up 5 priorities and we called them “Choices for a New Beginning” because we felt that this was an opportunity being given to us to start afresh. Thank God there are always opportunities for starting afresh.

And we embraced these priorities with enthusiasm using the booklet “Praying our Priorities” as a means of deepening our commitment and creating more profound relationships with one another.

Another important landmark was the celebration of the anniversary of the death of our Founder. We used this anniversary to reflect together as a Family and thank God for the gift of our charism as we work together to make our Founder's dream of a new inclusive society a reality in our world today – a world that is torn apart by hatred, division and war.

And then we had the Fourth Congress of the Family – a two year journey of prayer and reflection on the gift of our Family. This culminated in the Congress Declaration calling on us to work together in creative and collaborative ways for the mission of Jesus. Although we have celebrated the official closure of the Congress, it obviously has not ended. We commit ourselves to live out the calls articulated in the Congress Declaration.

We thank God for all the blessings we have received during these past years and we pray that we continue to be faithful to the mission entrusted to us.

So where are we now?

At the beginning of this year we were asked to fill in a questionnaire for the General Administration. They were doing an audit for the General Chapter. We were asked about the contexts in which we worked; what ministries we were involved in as well as other questions about the resources we have at our disposal – houses, income etc. (...)

So, in presenting this profile of the Province, I am using the material that came from the answers to those questions.

First what did we say about the needs that we see in our different contexts – deprivation of all kinds. We don't have to travel very far to see poverty and need around us

The elderly – in Europe generally the population is growing older. People are living longer and the longer they live the greater their needs in health care, suitable housing, heating etc. In the UK we hear politicians speak of the huge strain the elderly population is putting on the health service

Poor housing is a major problem for many people especially in the big cities

The problem of *loneliness* affects all groups – young and old, rich and poor.

Poverty – many elderly people find themselves having to choose between food and heat in the winter months. They cannot afford both. In the UK one in five lives below the poverty line and it is estimated that 3.5 million children live in poverty in the UK

And then there is the huge problem of unemployment. Ireland has the fourth highest unemployment rate in Europe and in the UK there are 2 ½ million unemployed.

Abuse of all kinds – of children and the most vulnerable, abuse of power, substances

Refugees and asylum seekers. More and more people on the planet are being displaced for all sorts of reasons – war, violence, poverty, discrimination, persecution.....

Human trafficking – over 2 million people are trafficked annually over international borders. Human trafficking is modern day slavery. Victims are duped into paying to be illegally transported to Western countries and they then find themselves in the thrall of traffickers and forced into prostitution and unpaid labour

Grief and bereavement – a source of suffering for all but perhaps more especially for those who don't have the support of their families

Illiteracy: 1 in 5 adults in the UK cannot read or write and one in six Irish students has significant reading problems while 23 percent of Irish males have lower than “functional literacy”

Lack of unity, breakdown of relationships causes great suffering especially to children

Lack of faith, loss of belief. Fewer and fewer people attend Church and in our society there is the phenomenon of the new atheists – those who actively and aggressively promote atheism – people such as Richard Dawkins whose book “The God delusion” was a best seller.

More worrying is the *loss of meaning* among us here in the West. The new god is the god of consumerism and the new place of worship is the shopping mall.

Lack of respect for life. Lack of respect for all life – human as well as non human. Humans and nature are so many commodities to be used and discarded

The Gospel reminds us that when we care for those in need we are caring for Jesus who is one with all his brothers and sisters.

HOW ARE WE RESPONDING? WE ARE RESPONDING IN SO FAR AS WE CAN TO ALL THESE NEEDS

And in the survey we gave examples of the different ways that we are responding.

So in spite of the obstacles that we named we respond with generosity to all these needs.

Let us thank God for all that God inspires us to be and do.