



Prot. N°: 23/82

Rome, June 16, 2023

Dear Sisters, Friends and Partners in Mission,

COURAGE, CONFIDENCE, TRANSFORMATION
... through the power of the Spirit

These are bold words for us to proclaim and commit ourselves to publicly. And yet on this Feast of the Sacred Heart 2023, that is what we do when we renew our commitment to follow Jesus Christ forever as Religious of the Sacred Heart and begin to prepare for our next General Chapter 2024. RSCJ and our friends and partners in mission, celebrate again the invitation of Jesus to come, to walk, to remain in His immense love especially when we embrace the reality that we always walk with others and we will never be transformed by ourselves! “The Spirit dwelling within us gradually transforms us, enabling us through His power to remove whatever hinders [the Spirit’s] action” (Constitutions, par 21)

This letter for the Feast of the Sacred Heart is being written “on the way”, started in Rome with our reflection as Central Team on the readings and realities of this year. It continued during these last weeks while Marie-Jeanne, Bodo and I visited our sisters and

our people in Peru, and now here in Santo Domingo where a small group of RSCJ gathered around a candle are discerning what God is calling us to be and to do with the people of Haiti. Many images stay with me during this rich time of the liturgical year – the Women of the Dawn encountering Jesus at the tomb impelled to share the Good News, the missioning of the disciples as Jesus returns to the Father, the vision and commitment of Sophie, the fire of the Spirit at Pentecost, and soon the Feast of the pierced Heart of Jesus.



During these days I have been praying about how Jesus’ experience of the desert shaped him and the power of the Spirit guided him to proclaim his mission and how Sophie’s dependence on the power of the Spirit guided her life, kept her faithful especially in hard times, and ensured that her actions and decisions were rooted in the Heart of Jesus. As we come to the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, let’s pray together that we too may be rooted in this pierced Heart, guided by the Spirit to know and live the preferences of His Heart, remembering the challenge of the Chapter of 2016, “Who is God calling us to be

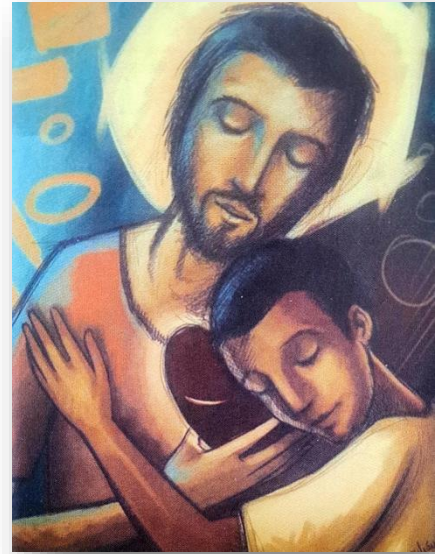


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and what is God calling us to do?”. With certitude, we are called individually and as a community to enter into the pierced Heart of Jesus through and with our brothers and sisters, to remain in that love, to commit ourselves again to discover and be God’s love for those we meet and live with along the way, especially with those who are suffering and also for each other.

I invite us to reflect together from three perspectives – journeying together in the desert, yoking ourselves together with Jesus, and living through the power of the Spirit

Since we began searching for and re-creating a 21st-century way to live our life and mission as Society of the Sacred Heart, Moses has been very present to me, leading his people through the desert in search of a way to create a new life in a new land, searching for ways to free ourselves from the things that hold us captive. I am beginning to believe that it is only in the desert that we begin to understand our need of God and each other. Maybe it is the place where the Spirit has the space to speak to us, where we are invited to live courage and have confidence in God’s faithful covenant of love. I am also beginning to believe that each of us in our countries and individually, live own unique desert experience, be it a time of war or political instability or extreme political polarization or desperate poverty or maybe isolation and disillusionment. The desert was a place of transformation not only for the people of Israel but also for Jesus himself, who lived through his own temptations in order to understand His mission in new way (Luke 4: 1-20). The desert is also a potential place of transformation for each one of us, where we can recognize what holds us captive and what calls us to open ourselves to be transformed. One of my strongest experiences in listening to our sisters and partners in mission in Peru is how these last years with the pandemic have been and continues to be a desert experience, made even more painful by political and economic uncertainty as well as the crisis in the institutional Church. We could see and hear over and over again how people were sustained by their love and support of each other and by their deep faith in God. I’m sure, like our sisters and brothers in Peru, each of us, each country and province has lived through and is living through this desert experience.



The invitation of the gospel to be intimately connected to Jesus, to be yoked with Him and with each other is echoed in our Constitutions: “Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart” (*par 8*) and is not disconnected from the experience of walking together in the deserts of life. Perhaps we are always a little bit in the desert, but these last three years have heightened our awareness of uncertainty and suffering among ourselves and in our world, not only because of the pandemic but also because of the times in which we live



and our own journey as a congregation into a somewhat unknown future. The times in which we live are also teaching us something that we may not have yet articulated and is key to our salvation history and the salvation history of our people and our world. Perhaps it is the universal experience of suffering and uncertainty that provides us with a new opportunity for *Transforming and Being Transformed* (Artisans of Hope, 2019).

WHAT HAVE I/WE LEARNED IN THE DESERT DURING THESE LAST 2-3 YEARS? WHAT IS THE CALL TO TRANSFORMATION NOW?

These are rough times, not times of sitting easily in the comfortable love of Jesus among a comfortable group of friends. We are living through a time when the world is chaotic and we recognize our own powerlessness as well as our own need for transformation. Maybe we have actually arrived at a time when we understand our need of each other, our need of people and experiences beyond our comfort zone. And most of all, perhaps this is a time when we recognize our need to see ourselves humbly as we are and connect more deeply with our Center and our strength, the pierced Heart of Jesus.

During this next year we are going to be walking closer to the edge of the desert. We need to remain and we need to walk forward *through the power of the Spirit*. Remain in that which gives us stability and strength and walk (or run) like the Women of the Dawn, called to share with our brothers and sisters that the love of God is alive. I imagine that Sophie prayed often with the words of John's letter and we might follow her lead: "No one has ever seen God. Yet. If we love another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us." God's love and fidelity and strength is not theoretical. It is alive and real and "on the ground", and we will have many opportunities to listen to the Spirit, to discern the path forward.



HOW ARE YOU AN EXPRESSION OF GOD'S FAITHFUL LOVE TODAY TO THOSE WITH WHOM YOU WALK -- OUR PARTNERS IN MISSION, OUR RSCJ SISTERS IN OUR NEW PROVINCES, WITH THE WOMEN AND MEN WHO CARE FOR US, WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE MOST EXCLUDED AND ON THE MARGINS?

I would like to end by sharing two significant experiences of listening to the Spirit during this last year. The first was with the provincials in Malaga when the provincials as a community discerned the plan for the new provinces, a decision that crossed borders, launched us into a very significant new moment and was not easy, yet for the sake of mission and life, listening to the Spirit speaking among them, the provincials made this life-changing decision that is consequential for all of us. And the second in Santo Domingo with a little group of RSCJ who gathered to discern the Society's future with the people of Haiti and decided to remain with the people of Haiti despite the very difficult and dangerous moment of the country. A significant moment for me in this discernment was



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when a young Claretian priest spoke the words of our own documents to us – the Constitutions, the Chapter of 2016, the Artisans of Hope and I heard in a new way the cry of the Haitian people and the commitments that we have made as Religious of the Sacred Heart. These two moments may seem very different but actually both of them were centered on the key question of the Chapter of 2016 – WHAT IS GOD CALLING US TO BE AND WHAT IS GOD CALLING US TO DO? And each of them required us and requires all of us to look beyond our personal preferences, to be the Women of the Dawn called to announce the Good News, to risk the unknown for the sake of the mission, to create new ways and new paths to live into the future, to trust in the God who calls each one of us and continues to accompany us.



A couple of weeks ago I asked Phil Kilroy about when Sophie used the words we often quote “courage and confidence” and Phil responded “Sophie wrote when ending some of her letters, especially to those who were facing into a tough time”. And so I would like to end this letter with the Sophie’s prayer for us as we celebrate the Feast of the Sacred Heart in “tough times” as we go forward together through the power of the Spirit.

*Be filled now with courage and trust. The Divine Heart will be with you
and his Holy Spirit will guide you. Barat*

With love and prayer,

Barbara Dawson rscj