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Prot. MG 247/20

Re: Circular letter for Advent 2020.

DEAR SISTERS,

We are going through the end of a year that, for all of us, has been -and still is- a year particularly full of experiences never thought of, never expected and never lived before, a year steeped in so much uncertainty and, I would say, so much fear and suffering.

We all certainly remember last March 27th, when Pope Francis prayed in an empty St. Peter's Square, asking for the end to the epidemic. In his message he described the moment we were living



very well: *“For some weeks now it seems that evening has fallen permanently. A dense darkness has gathered over our squares, streets and cities; they have taken over our lives, filling everything with deafening silence and a desolating emptiness, which paralyzes everything as it passes: you can feel it in the air, you can feel it in the gestures, the looks say it. We have found ourselves scared and lost. Like the disciples of the Gospel we have been caught off guard by an*

*unexpected and furious storm. We have realized that we are in the same boat, all fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and necessary, all called to row together, all in need of comforting each other”*¹.

I think that all of us, in some way, still feel identified with what the Pope described, but we also feel strongly challenged and called to look inside and around us in order to *“confront each other”* and ask ourselves: what is God saying to humanity, to us, to me... in this historical moment, apparently paralyzing and unproductive?

The Advent and Christmas seasons are the most propitious times to enter the dynamics of confrontation, purification and hope, in order to renew our trust in the God of history. They are also the propitious times to renew, personally and as a Congregation, the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ who came to *“take charge”* of the whole history, of the whole reality and of the whole events of humanity, to give them again their meaning, their dignity and their redemption.

1. THE “BEST” OR THE “WORST” OF US?

The pandemic, we have heard it many times, is bringing out many conflicting feelings and behaviours. We have found ourselves in front of *“the best of us”* and, at the same time, in front of *“the worst of us”*: individually and as groups, as nations but also as humanity. The quarantine has forced us to remain closed *“indoor”*, with more hours *“living together”*, with less possibilities of *“escaping”* to other activities, other places, other people...

Pope Francis indeed spoke, although indirectly, of this climate of ambiguity in which we are now finding ourselves: *“As I was writing this letter, the Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities. Aside from the different ways that various countries responded to the*

¹ Pope Francis, extraordinary moment of prayer in the time of epidemic, Sagrato of St. Peter's Basilica, Friday March 27th, 2020.

crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all. Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality"².

And again Pope Francis: "All too quickly, however, we forget the lessons of history, 'the teacher of life'. Once this health crisis passes, our worst response would be to plunge even more deeply into feverish consumerism and new forms of egotistic self-preservation"³

It is interesting to review our personal, communitarian and social life in the light of these words of the Pope and ask ourselves, in this time of pandemic, what are the false certainties that have come to light? How did our ability or inability to act together come to light? How has our capacity for constructive, positive, empathic "communication" with others (the near and the far) improved in this time of "separation" and "isolation"? What contribution are we making to overcome fragmentation and the temptation of "egotistic self-preservation"? What is the "worst" and what the "best" which has come to light in me, in the community, in the Congregation, in the society where we are?



I think that we all find ourselves inside these realities in its lights: "the best", but also in its shadows: "the worst".

I was struck by an article read on the internet. Here below a passage of it, which I would like to share since it seems very much in tune with our reflection:

*"The **pandemic** that has disrupted our lives, causing the deaths of many people, is offering us an opportunity that we must not miss. It is asking us to decide today **who we want to be in the present and who we want to be in the future**. Because things will inevitably change when everything is over. Yes, this will end and it will be all right if we all make it so.*

***Choose today who you want to be.** Whether you want to be part of that unscrupulous humanity, ready to take advantage of emergencies to the detriment of the community. Or whether you want to be part of that humanity that in every action brings great changes for him/herself and for others.*

*If one thing we have learned in this historical moment is that **we are not islands**. We are part of a large community that must act together for the common good. If we do not learn this lesson, all the sacrifices who have been made so far, won't have any purpose at all. And all the time we spent isolated, in quarantine, safe at home to protect ourselves and others will be a wasted time. **Choose today to be the best part**, and the good example may be more contagious than the virus!"⁴ .*

So, one last question remains: **what do you choose to be, today and tomorrow, there where you are?**

2. THE "WORDS" OF THE PANDEMIC

In recent months, suddenly, expressions and words that were not usually present in our conversations (at least for most of us) have entered our daily "language". They are: "respiratory crisis", "saturation", "intubations", "respirators", etc. There are also expressions related to people's lifestyle, such as "distancing", "isolation", "masks", "contagion", "individual protection". Then, other words related to the sensations or feelings that emerged in this time: "fear", "uncertainty", "distrust". There are also many other "words" which have been incorporated to our daily life since we have

² Pope Francis, "Fratelli tutti", 7 (FT).

³ FT, 35.

⁴ "La pandemia sta tirando fuori il meglio o il peggio di noi?", from REDAZIONE, www.i404.it, Magazine online, April 2nd 2020.

experienced (near and far) so much suffering due to an *"invisible and imperceptible"* virus, which has suddenly subdued the whole humanity with all its claims to power, self-sufficiency, mastery over life and death, and dominion over others.

I would like us to dwell on three of these *"words"* of the pandemic, inviting you to *"re-read them"* and confront ourselves, personally and as a community, with each of them.

➤ ***"Distancing"***: we must *"distance ourselves"* (or *"isolate ourselves"*) even from the closest people in the house, in the family, from our friends. It is necessary to take the necessary *"distance"* in the meetings, in public transports, in the shops, in the churches, at the table. It is necessary to avoid concrete gestures of love and friendship: a kiss, a hug, a handshake... However, we have invented other *"alternative"* and sometimes even nice gestures to greet us, to give us *"peace"*. We have opened the doors to the *"virtual"* meeting that has taken a privileged place, in order to fill the *"emptiness"* of human sociability and in order to activate, at least to a certain extent, the initiatives and activities paralyzed by the pandemic.



Everything to be *"safe"*... Everything to *"protect"* us from the *"virus"* or ... from others!

But, can we truly be *"protected"* and *"safe"* by keeping *"at a distance"* or *"isolated"* from each other?

Certainly it is not a question of not observing the regulations that come from health authorities and which aim at caring for people and controlling the pandemic. Indeed, we must be an example and follow them!

Rather, it is a question of the risk that this physical *"distancing"* may end up causing in us, or increasing, a *"real"* spiritual, fraternal, human *"distancing-individualism"*. It may end up getting us used to *"protective isolation"* and making us prefer *"virtual"* contact, which is much less demanding and more futile... It may end up weakening the true relationship with others and the commitment to communion and to a real communitarian journey.

On the other hand, this *"distancing"* could be the best condition for discovering and re-evaluating the gift of the brother and sister, the value of fraternal life in the community and of bonds with others, to feel the positive and constructive *"missing"* of a true brotherhood made up of humanity, solidarity, sensitivity and service.

• **Let us ask ourselves, then: what is the *"best"* and what is the *"worst"* that we discover in the *"distancing"* of the pandemic?**

➤ ***"Mask"***: one of the protective measures that has changed the *"landscape"* of our cities, of our groups and of ourselves.



We have all become *"masked"*! Certainly this is one of the main *"personal protective equipment"* and we must respect its use where this is mandatory or prudent to avoid contagion.

We have seen how human creativity has been immediately put into action, inventing several types of *"mask"*: from the *"official"*, *"serious"* ones to the most unimagined variety of colours, designs, shapes, in order to play down this moment, in a certain way, and make this use a little more *"elegant"*.

Everything to protect ourselves and be *"safe"*, to avoid infecting ourselves and infecting others.

With the use of the "mask" we got used to hiding a part of our face, of our expressions, to hiding our smile and softening our words, talking with our eyes and with our look.

But we also risk of hiding a part of ourselves in front of others. We are all used to carrying more than one "mask". In our life we usually feel protected behind them. We hide ourselves or hide our feelings, fears, frustrations, miseries, fragilities and we let the others see only what we want, the image we want them to see and ... believe. We all wear more than a "mask" to protect us from others, from judgment, from conditioning, from their requests.

On the other hand, we were able to discover that words are not always needed. In fact, the "look" is more important: the look of love, like that of Jesus to the rich young man, the look of a mother who always knows how to see beyond, the look of a friend who is able to understand what the eyes of the other may say. The eyes speak, they express serenity, depth, joy, goodness, understanding, but also hardness, sadness, pain, hate, indifference.

- **Let us ask ourselves: what is the "best" and what is the "worst" that we discover behind the "masks" of our personal and communitarian "life"?**

- **"Oxygen"**: in this period many of our homes have equipped with an "oximeter", an instrument that allows you to measure the saturation of "oxygen" in the blood, helping to understand the respiratory function of a person. We have heard how Covid-19 has really affected the lungs. Many people have spent endless weeks in intensive care, intubated and attached to respirators. Many, unfortunately, have not managed to survive.



This made me reflect a lot on the importance of "oxygen" for every form of life on earth: nature, animals, human beings... How much the quality of life, biologically speaking, depends on the right "saturation" of "oxygen" in order to be in good health, in order to be alive. If this "saturation" drops, life is compromised due to lack of "oxygen"!

It has therefore become important to know if the levels of "oxygen" in our blood are at the maximum, in order to be "safe"...

But even here we are faced with a risk, a very subtle risk... Too much worried about good biological health, perhaps the "saturation" of another "oxygen" may be neglected. This can put the life of the spirit at risk, together with that of the spirit, of faith, of interpersonal relationships, of apostolic life, although the life of the body is under control.

Our life can be "saturated" with the superfluous, with worldliness, with the need for gratitude, with the demands of emotion or affectivity. All this can "saturate" our day. Without realizing it, we can get sick and be "saturated" with a "polluted air" that suffocates the Spirit of God in us and "infects" fraternity. All this might make us demanding, proud, arrogant, selfish, insensitive... since we are full ("saturated") of ourselves, even under the guise of "spirituality" (spiritualism), "altruism" (protagonism), "oblativity" (self-satisfaction).

- **Let us ask ourselves: which "oxygen" is "saturating" our personal and communitarian life by bringing out "the best" or "the worst" of us?**

3. THE "WORDS" OF CHRISTMAS

It is nice to discover that, during the Advent season, there is a special "language". There are "words" that we practically hear only in this time, the "words" of Advent, or rather, the "words" of Christmas.

We know that the celebration of Christmas in this year 2020 will have a very special connotation due to the pandemic, as it has been for the Holy Week and Easter. We still don't know how we will

experience the Christmas season in some countries; at least as regards the exterior and the liturgies, but we do know that Christmas takes place in our hearts, in the hearts of communities, of families, of peoples... in the heart of humanity with all its joys and wounds.

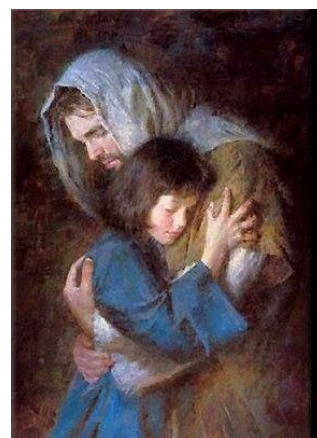
The "words" of this Advent and Christmas are bursting into this historical moment. They are full of light, hope, life, because Jesus, "coming to dwell among us" (Jn 1:14), is also coming to "dwell" in the shadow of the pandemic, in disease and in death. He is coming to "dwell" in the darkness of wars and struggles, of poverty and injustices, of exclusion and divisions that envelop the world.

Jesus is coming today to "incarnate" himself in our humanity, and to give a meaning to "nonsense", closeness to "distance", authenticity to "masking", love to the "saturation" of our life.

I would like us therefore to pause briefly on these "words", and read again the "words of the pandemic" (distancing-mask-oxygen), in the light of the "words of Christmas": "closeness", "authenticity", "love".

- **"Closeness"**: Christmas is par excellence the moment of God's deepest "closeness" to man. In Jesus, every barrier, every separation, every misunderstanding is overcome because God becomes "one" of us and with us.

Pope Francis helps us in our reflection: *"The "God who is near" speaks to us of humility. He is not a "great God", no. He is nearby. He is at home. We see this in Jesus, God made man, close to us even unto death. (...) Our God is close and asks us to be close to each other, not to distance ourselves from one another. In this moment of crisis because of the pandemic we are experiencing, this nearness begs to be manifested more, to be seen more. Perhaps we cannot draw near physically to others because of the fear of contagion, but we can reawaken in ourselves a habit of drawing near to others through prayer, through help. There are many ways of drawing near. And why must be close to each other? Because our God is near. He wished to accompany us in life. He is the God of closeness. For this reason we are not persons in isolation. We are near to each other, because the inheritance we have received from the Lord is closeness, that is, the gesture of closeness"*⁵.



Advent is the propitious time to ask "the Lord for the grace of being near to each other; not to hide ourselves from each other, not to wash our hands of others' problems as Cain did, no. Closeness. Proximity. Nearness. Indeed, "What great nation is there that has its gods so near as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call to him?"⁶

- **"Authenticity"**: the Mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus comes to reveal the truth of God but also the truth about ourselves. By incarnating our human reality, Jesus drops the "masks" behind which we wanted to hide from God, like Adam in Eden, and hide from our brother/sister, like Cain.

In the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* Pope Francis says: *"How wonderful would it be, even as we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters who orbit around us!"*⁷. And the Pope continues: *"We realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together. As I said, 'the storm has exposed our vulnerability and uncovered those false and superfluous certainties around which we constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. Amid this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our "egos", always worrying about appearances, has fallen away,*



⁵ Homily of the Holy Father, Chapel of House St. Marta, March 18th, 2020

⁶ Idem.

⁷ FT, 31.

revealing once more the ineluctable and (blessed) awareness that we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another”⁸.

Christmas "speaks" to us of openness, transparency, authenticity. In the crib, Jesus drops the "veil" that hid the image of God and shows us his true face: the God who is close, the true God, who welcomes and embraces "everyone". He has also come to "unmask" our fears, our mistrust, our meanness, our hypocrisies, bringing us back to God and bringing us back to communion and to "authentic" fraternity. Near his "crib" Jesus wants us to be "without masks", he wants us to be "true" people!

Advent is the propitious time to become more "authentic"; it is the time to abandon useless "masks" and to stop "hiding" behind the false images of ourselves and the time to welcome others, "all Brothers", without fears, discriminations, moralisms, judgments, condemnations.

- **"Love"**: without doubts, the most essential "word" of Christmas is "Love". Don Orione has strongly experienced this love: "The Child Jesus has marked and mixed this feast of his with charity, with love"⁹, in order to "mark and mix" ("saturate") our life with his charity. Jesus is not coming only to reveal the love of the Father to us, He himself became Incarnate Love in order to give the true "oxygen" to our "polluted" life, the "oxygen of charity": Jesus' "oximeter" measures the "love" that gives life to our body, to our soul, to our fraternal relationships, to our apostolate.

Advent is the propitious time to deepen and purify our life, letting Jesus "saturate" it with his Love. Pope Francis enlightens us on some characteristics of this Love:

Love "builds bridges", it is "compassion and dignity":

"... love does not care if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another. For "love shatters the chains that keep us isolated and separate; in their place, it builds bridges. Love enables us to create one great family, where all of us can feel at home... Love exudes compassion and dignity"¹⁰.



Love "invites to hope":

An invitation to hope which "speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfilment, a desire to achieve great things, things that fill our heart and lift our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love. Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile". Let us continue, then, to advance along the paths of hope"¹¹.

Love "is tenderness":

"What is tenderness? It is love that draws near and becomes real. A movement that starts from our heart and reaches the eyes, the ears and the hands. Tenderness is the path of choice for the strongest, most courageous men and women"¹².

Love, in the end, is "universal communion".

"Love also impels us towards universal communion. No one can mature or find fulfilment by withdrawing from others. By its very nature, love calls for growth in openness and the ability to accept others as part of a continuing adventure that makes every periphery converge in a greater sense of mutual belonging. As Jesus told us: "You are all brothers" (Mt 23,8)"¹³.

⁸ FT, 32.

⁹ Writings, 94, 275, from a handwriting: "Christmas! Feast of charity!"

¹⁰ FT, 62.

¹¹ Idem, 55.

¹² Idem, 194.

¹³ Idem, 95.

4. FOLLOW THE "STAR"

I would like to conclude this reflection with the Gospel image of the Magi, which is significant for us in this time of preparation for Christmas: *"Some Magi from the East came to Jerusalem and asked: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (Mt 2: 1-2).* They teach us the contemplative attitude of history. They teach us to scrutinize the signs of heaven, of earth, of the events... the signs and the presence of the *"King who is born"* between the lines of the pandemic... The attitude of research of the Magi is pushing us to ask to ourselves: what does God want to tell us in this moment of history?

The historical time we live in is marking a *"before"* and an *"after"*: the *"end"* of one style and the *"beginning"* of another way of being, the beginning of a *"new humanity"* in this world, in this Church of today... A new sense of belonging to the fragility of humanity, all present in the Child in the crib. It is marking the beginning of a new belonging to the human family, to the ecclesial family, to the religious family.

This year's Advent, which comes in full pandemic, is a providential time, an opportunity not only to purify what is *"worst"* in us. Above all, I believe it is a time to start again, by strengthening the *"best"* and, like the Magi, *"see His star rise"*, and follow it.



Pope Francis says: *"Understanding what God is saying to us at this time of pandemic also represents a challenge for the Church's mission. Illness, suffering, fear and isolation challenge us. The poverty of those who die alone, the abandoned, those who have lost their jobs and income, the homeless and those who lack food challenge us. Being forced to observe social distancing and to stay at home invites us to rediscover that we need social relationships as well as our communal relationship with God. Far from increasing mistrust and indifference, this situation should make us even more attentive to our way of relating to others. And prayer, in which God touches and moves our hearts, should make us ever more open to the need of our brothers and sisters for dignity and freedom, as well as our responsibility to care for all creation".¹⁴*

The Advent of this year 2020 is a propitious time to *"enter"* together in the heart of this reality, in order to assume and take charge of the *"shadows of a closed world"*, to wake up from sleep and from the stillness of what *"we already do"* and *"how"* we do it. May it wake us up from the illusion of being okay and may it allow ourselves to be questioned and disturbed by the many *"strangers on the road"*, who may have fallen next to us in our community, near and far.

To a certain extent, the pandemic is accelerating the *"advent"* of a new world, the time to review our lifestyles, our ways of living spirituality, fraternity, mission, review the ways of carrying out our works and services of charity, the mission and the formation.

This Advent 2020 is calling us to the courage to *"get out"* from fears and insecurities, from old certainties, from mistrusts, reinforced by the many *"anti-contagion measures"*. It is urgent, personally and together, to make a serious commitment to *"think and generate an open world"*. May it be a commitment that be the result of a journey, at personal and communitarian level, in which we may mature *"hearts open to the whole world"*, capable of acceptance, integration, listening, *"dialogue and social friendship"*, starting with the local and communitarian experience. *"In the depths of every heart, love creates bonds and expands existence, for it draws people out of themselves and towards others"*¹⁵.

Let's *"go out"*, then, like the Magi, looking for and following the *"star"* that will lead us to the encounter with Jesus, in the weakness and fragility of the other. May the star introduce us with joy into the bosom of the human Family: *"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother*

¹⁴ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Mission Day 2020.

¹⁵ FT, 88.

Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him” (Mt 2:11). May it make us more responsible, more empathetic, more solidary and closer to the life of the other.

Dear Sisters, I wish you all a serious and fruitful Advent season. May it lead us all to grow in "closeness", "authenticity" and "love", starting from each one of us, because the change starts from each one. It depends from the little daily choices, which make a "positive difference" and which have the strength to transform the most difficult and most incomprehensible realities, in order to ensure that the Incarnation of Jesus is renewed in every moment: **“It is the actions that count. Our thoughts, however good they may be, are false pearls as long as they are not transformed into actions. Be the change you want to see in the world”**(Gandhi).

Then it will be Christmas!

I embrace you fraternally and we are always united in prayer and common commitment so that "the best" of us may "make a difference" this Christmas, and in the New Year

Merry Christmas to you all!



Sr. Mabel Spagnolo
Sr M. Mabel Spagnolo
Superior general

Rome, Generalate House, October 21st 2020.

POSSIBLE SUGGESTIONS FOR 2020 ADVENT SEASON



Together with the Circular Letter for this Advent season which is rather a shared reflection than a “letter” as such, I am now offering you an outline, as a suggestion for deepening its content. You can make all the changes you may consider useful and adapt it to your reality with creativity. The Circular Letter has got 4 points of reflection that help accompany the 4 weeks of Advent. I wish you a good journey and I greet you fraternally in the Lord.

Deepening chart

Liturgical calendar	Content of the circular letter	Date	How	Character or symbol
Before Nov 29th	Delivery of a photocopy of the circular letter to each Sister Communitarian reading of the <u>whole</u> Letter.		Communitarian encounter: 1. Reading together 2. Organization	(during each encounter a “character/symbol” is chosen in tune with the reflected theme, which is then put in the Advent Wreath)
Ist Advent Sunday (Nov 29th)	Introduction and Point 1: The “best” or the “worst” of us?		Communitarian encounter: 1. Reading of Point 1. 2. Dialogue and reflection. 3. Choice of the character/symbol.	Nearby the first candle:
IInd Advent Sunday (Dec 6th)	Point 2: The “words” of the pandemic.		Penitential celebration: 1. Reading of Point 2. 2. According to the creativity of the Community. 3. Choice of the character/symbol.	Nearby the second candle:
IIIrd Advent Sunday (Dec 13th)	Point 3: The “words” of Christmas.		Communitarian encounter: 1. Reading of Point 3. 2. Dialogue and reflection. 3. Prayer of thanksgiving according to your creativity. 4. Choice of the character/symbol.	Nearby the third candle:
IVth Advent Sunday (Dec 20th)	Point 4: Follow the “star”.		Commitment celebration: 1. Reading of Point 4. 2. Dialogue and reflection. 3. Prayer of commitment according to your creativity. 4. Choice of the character/symbol.	Nearby the fourth candle:
CHRISTMAS	(On Christmas Eve, all the characters/symbols are placed in the Community crib)			



Merry Christmas to all!