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Prot. 7/23

Re: Circular letter for Lent

Dear Sisters!

We are about to enter this Lenten journey, which, this year, is finding us engaged in the preparation for the XIIIth General Chapter.

This is a time of particular grace, which is calling us to take up our life and to consider it once again in the light of Jesus' life. He is calling us to walk in his footsteps retracing our *Via Crucis* towards the greatest and deepest Mystery of our faith: the death and resurrection of the Lord, the triumph of life over death, the passage from sin to salvation, given to us by God's infinite love for us, who has wanted "*all men to be saved*"!



The motto of our XIIIth General Chapter is an invitation and a program of life, in order to live this Lent, and enter into a journey of conversion and holiness that may make our consecrated life, our mission and the whole life of our Congregation more beautiful and stronger. It may also dispose us to accept what the Chapter will present us, with an open and available heart.

Through this letter, I would like to invite you to live this time together, putting ourselves under Mary's mantle at the foot of the Cross. Together with Her, let us look, adore, contemplate and love her Son who is looking at us from the Cross with love and compassion, inviting us to look at each other with love and compassion, too.

To look at the Crucified...

Mary has always looked at Jesus with contemplative eyes, with the eyes of love... from the crib to the Cross, her maternal gaze has always been able to discover the mystery of her Son deeper and deeper; an ever new and renewed gaze: the gaze of true love.

We, as religious, can run the risk of getting used to it. Often we are so "*accustomed*" to the "*things of God*" that we can "*see without looking*". We can get used to having the tabernacle at home, to "*saying*" our prayers, to "*collecting ourselves*" in the adoration; we can get used to wearing a Cross on our chest or to having it in our rooms or houses. We can get used to Mass and listening to the Word; we can get used to talking about Don Orione and being "*orionines*"... We can get used to everything!

But habit is the enemy of amazement! Habit is the enemy of holiness!

Habit also makes us indifferent, heartless, insensitive... Habit makes us harsh, rigid, superficial...

Habit makes us lose the ability of being surprised in the face of beauty and goodness, in the face of a brother, or of a sister who is living with us. Habit can make us lose the ability of being moved by a child, by a sick person, by the tears of the other. It can make us lose the ability of rejoicing for little things of daily life, for the successes of a sister, for the gifts of others, for the freshness and creativity of the young...

Habit can make us lose the ability of seeing the need of those next to us at home, of welcoming the new, of being delicate, creative, generous, altruistic and helpful in the community...

Habit can make us experience liturgical seasons as something on the calendar, as something that *"is done"* and not *"lived and lived again"*, as something ritual to be observed, and not as a time of renewed fruitfulness of the Mystery we are celebrating...

Habit can make us insensitive spectators in the face of the sufferings of the world, of the atrocities of war, of the catastrophes or injustices suffered by peoples, by families, by the poor, and it closes us off in our little worlds, in our little affairs and everyday situations.

Habit can make us *"look"* at the Crucified as an object of devotion or liturgical *"setting"*, and not as the memory of God's greatest act of love, which is renewed in every Eucharist and lived again in every Easter, inviting us to a permanent conversion in love.

Habit makes no room for the contemplation of the Mystery that embraces us and re-creates us.

To look at the Crucified with Mary's eyes means to look at Him with the eyes of love, contemplating Love and letting ourselves be embraced each time, and to live each time again our amazement, our gratitude, our desire, our thirst for Him, weeping with love, repentance, emotion in the face of such a great and free Love...

To look at the Crucified with Mary's eyes means to look at him with the eyes of a wife, of a sister and of a mother, every time, every day, today, tomorrow... like the first time, but with more intense love.

We're starting Lent once again... a new opportunity to *"wake up from the sleep of habit"*, to get out of the lethargy that doesn't allow us to contemplate, and let ourselves be transformed. During this Lent, let us take the Crucified in our hands every day, place Him on our hearts, kiss Him, talk to Him, tell Him about our habits; let us enter His heart, listen to Him and allow ourselves to be purified by His love.

I think this is the best way to start this time of Lent: beside Mary, looking at the Crucified, recovering the capacity for surprise, unmasking our sterile habits and looking at the world and at others with the eyes of Crucified.



The heart and the arms...

Jesus has died with open arms and heart, this is how we are contemplating him on the Cross... this is how we have contemplated him in the crib... The whole life of Jesus has been a permanent *"embrace of mercy"* which has reached the maximum of gift and love on the Cross; in the impotence of the Cross, Jesus continues to embrace us and to open His Heart to us without measure and without sparing Himself.

The beginning of this month of February has been full of events that have filled us with joy, gratitude and hope: first vows, renewals, perpetual vows, jubilees of consecrated life...

Many of us have recalled our *"first yes"* with emotion and we have lived the gift of many of our young people throughout the world with gratitude... So much grace! So much availability and trust in the Lord who is calling us and supporting in our vocation! Lots of enthusiasm, joy and availability!

At the same time, these events are a call for us to reflect and review our lives, our faithfulness in responding and our perseverance in the undertaken commitments.

For God it is not *"time"* that counts, but *"intensity"* of love and of the permanently renewed gift. We usually count the years, God counts the fidelity of a *"yes"* which is a permanent *"present"*.

Why am I telling you these things? Because in this period I have reflected on the danger of letting ourselves be carried away, even in this aspect, by habit. I have reflected on the danger of abandoning the enthusiasm of the *"first love"*, of forgetting the words spoken in the Formula of Vows

and entering, slowly and perhaps without realizing it, on a journey of "*descent*" instead of "*ascent*", of "*regression*" instead of "*growth*", of lethal "*closing*" instead of "*opening*".

Jesus has not "*closed*" his arms! Jesus has not "*closed*" his heart! On the contrary, he has opened them up wider and wider, to show us that to follow Him means to open ourselves more and more, to consume ourselves more and more, to get rid of our egoism more and more in order to "*Live Him and make the whole world live of Him!*"

A religious life with "*closed arms and closed heart*" is destined to die in sterility, comfort, bitterness, pettiness, discontent... Dear sisters, it is not matter of the years that we usually "*count*" (and are proud to celebrate) those who can guarantee a fruitful and holy life, but perseverance in love and giving, young or old, healthy or sick... the most important aspect is the testimony of a persevering love that is able to love deeper and deeper!



Lent is inviting us to look at the "*open arms and heart*" of the Crucified, and to make a serious and sincere review of our consecrated life, just in the time we are living, with our age, with the health we have, in the community that we have, with the superiors and sisters that we have...

Our Congregation may weaken with our lack of availability and serious commitment, with our closure in the face of difficulties in the community, and with our mediocrity in living our Vows.

Sisters, our Vows have not gone out of fashion or, as it is heard, "*they are outdated*". Fraternal life, the life of poverty and filial obedience have not gone out of fashion, they are not "*outdated*"; purity of heart, decorum and sobriety have not gone out of fashion, they are not "*outdated*"; the ability to welcome people without prejudice and respect among us have not gone out of fashion, they are not "*outdated*". Generosity and gratuitousness in service, the ability to work together and to help each other, empathy and understanding between us, the use of loving and kind words, the ability to dialogue and forgive each other are not "*outdated*". The choice of avoiding criticism, irony, provoking gestures and words, of being available to the needs we are asked of, of building positive relationships... and many, many other examples... they have not gone out of fashion, they are not "*outdated*", Sisters!

The renewal of Religious Life requested by the Church and which has been undertaken very seriously in our Congregation for years now, is not a synonymous of "*liberalism*" without common rules, without order, without structures... If we want a Congregation "*at the head of the times*", renewed in the Spirit and in the mission, we will have to begin again to "*obey the Spirit*", which is manifesting Himself in the unity of the Body and not in division, in individualism, in personal protagonism separated from the community and, perhaps, also from obedience.

Jesus on the Cross has his "*arms and heart open*" as the most sublime sign of "*obedience*" to the Father, and of welcoming those whom the Father has given him. Jesus' "*open arms and heart*" show us the way: Jesus on the Cross is our model.

We are starting Lent once again... a new opportunity to confront ourselves with the open "*arms and heart*" of Jesus on the Cross. A new opportunity to ask ourselves about our closures. Jesus on the Cross is questioning us about our obedience, our poverty and our chastity, he questions us about the authenticity of our charity... Today, His cry "*I am thirsty!*" from the Cross is addressed to us, to me, to you... Jesus thirsts for our coherence, authenticity and holiness!

I think this is the best way to start this time of Lent: next to Mary, may we enter in the open arms of Jesus Crucified and let ourselves be remodeled and purified by his Blood.

The wounds of the body of Jesus...

If we look at the "*sacred wounds*" of Jesus' body with Mary's eyes and feelings, we will find all the sufferings and pains of humanity, of the world, of the Church, of the Congregation; the wounds of our community and our own wounds...

We all feel saddened when we read or hear news of death, abuse, injustice in the world or in different countries; even more when these things happen in the Church, caused by consecrated people, priests or bishops... These are actions that make the crucifixion and the wounds of the body of Jesus alive today.

I am wondering, though: how many times do we cause other wounds to our Congregation, to our Communities, to our Sisters, to the staff who works in our houses...? Normally we complain because we feel "wounded" by others... but let us think: how many times do we become the ones to cause "*wounds*" to the Congregation? Maybe someone thinks I'm saying things that don't concern us... But, dear sisters, we are not exempt from "*injuring*"... what are the wounds we can cause and inflict among ourselves and thus "*wound*" Jesus' Body again?

We are wounding Jesus' body when negative and destructive criticism establishes itself as a "*style*" within our communities...

We are wounding Jesus' body when we engage in hypocritical behaviours dressed in false holiness and observance...

We are wounding Jesus' body when irony, stinging words, disrespect come out of our mouth...

We are wounding Jesus' body when we become self-referential, demanding, discontent with everything and everyone...

We are wounding Jesus' body when we look at each other with jealousy, rivalry or indifference and distrust...

We are wounding Jesus' body when we close the doors to the sister who is most in need, who is coming to our house from afar, who is in pain...

We are wounding Jesus' body when we disrespect people or staff, when we don't take charge of the expressions we use, when we provoke others with rude attitudes...

We are wounding Jesus' body when we engage in worldly behaviours, when we fail to set a good example, when we confuse openness with lack of education and attitudes that contradict our being consecrated, when we scandalize others without respecting their culture...

We are wounding Jesus' body when we don't want to collaborate with those in the service of authority, when we allow ourselves to say or send condemning and judging whatsapp messages, messages of discontent, of contempt, or when we concretely "*ignore*" those in the service of authority...

We are wounding Jesus' body when we install ourselves in our comfort and do not accept a transfer, a service, a mission, denying our identity and what we have embraced with the IV Vow...

Dearest sisters, let us be sincere with ourselves, we all carry "*wounds*" with us, but we can also inflict "*wounds*" on Jesus' body and on the life of the Congregation... I tell you this with pain: the excessive use of alcoholic drinks it is not always a good testimony (alcohol cannot be considered "*a medicine*"); the use of time, several hours spent on social media or on television, long siestas or shutting ourselves in our rooms are not a good testimony of missionary activity. The independent and non-transparent use of money or one's pension, the lack of care for the house, the waste of light, water, useless expenses, poorly built buildings, etc., the irresponsible use of things are neither freedom nor evangelical poverty... and I won't go on...



I know that at this point you might think that I am exaggerating... each one will take into consideration what she feels she has to take. I believe that in the General Chapter the Congregation will seek new horizons of life and mission for the charism: we will not have "*new horizons*" if we do not become "*new people*" first.

We are starting Lent once again... a new opportunity for everyone, starting with me, to place ourselves before the wounds of the Crucified and confront ourselves with Him. We can ask Him to open our eyes to be able to see, with truth, what our personal responsibility is in the face of the wounds of Jesus and of the Congregation. It is a new opportunity to ask that from His wounds we can be healed and saved, too.

I think this is the best way to begin this time of Lent, next to Mary and with Mary: to enter the wounds of the Crucified and allow Him to purify us and wash us with His boundless mercy.

To pray with Mary at Jesus' feet

To look at Jesus with Mary and pray, adore, contemplate...



In all the Communities, you will certainly organize yourselves to live this time of Lent following the indications of the Church and of our Constitutions.

Once a priest, during his sermon at the beginning of Lent, questioned the faithful by saying: "*What is the most important thing about Lent?*"

So let us ask ourselves: what is the most important thing about Lent? To prepare our heart, to purify ourselves from sins, to fast, to keep silence, to avoid eating meat, to do the Via Crucis, to say penitential prayers, to give alms, to confess ourselves...

Of course! All of this is done more accurately in the season of Lent... But what is the most important thing about Lent? "*The most important thing about Lent, concluded the priest, is Easter!*"

Nothing we can do would be important, useful and would make sense if it is not directed towards arriving as "*new people*" at Easter, if it is not directed towards the great mystery of Jesus' Easter, and Easter is a Mystery of extreme Love.

Therefore, sisters, we will certainly organize ourselves in order to pray, fast and renounce... and all this is very necessary. However, in the light of this reflection, perhaps a little strong, that I have just shared with you in this letter, let us ask ourselves: which fasting, silences and penances are pleasing to God?

The prophet Isaiah helps us: "*Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?*"

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear" (Is 58: 4-8).

With Mary let us organize our Lent in the light of the prophet Isaiah: to *loose, untie, free, break...* Our "*material*" renunciations will make sense if they are accompanied by concrete gestures of conversion, by words of love, by attitudes of goodness, by behaviours of welcome and delicacy, by everything that helps us to "*build*"...

In this way, Lent will certainly be an anticipation, day after day, of the joy of Easter and we will arrive more "*resurrected*" in the Risen One! We will offer thus our best contribution to the XIIIth General Chapter of our Congregation: our life qualified in love!

I propose therefore that you take, during this time, this famous and ancient prayer that I am copying here below for you, and which belongs to the tradition of the Church. Let us stop at each sentence, at each word, let us reflect on the deep, beautiful and present content it contains. Let us ask Mary to pray it with us at the feet of her Crucified Son, so that what it says may be realized in us:

*Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O Good Jesus, hear me.
Within your Wounds hide me.
Permit me not to be separated from you.
From the wicked foe, defend me.
At the hour of my death, call me
and bid me come to you
That with your saints I may praise you
For ever and ever. Amen.*



Together with the General Councillors, I greet you with affection in the Lord, I wish you all an "*Easter Lent*"; let us keep ourselves united in the daily Eucharist.

Faternally,



Sr. Mabel Spagnuolo
Sr M. Mabel Spagnuolo
Superior general

Buenos Aires, February 11th 2023.
Memory of Our Lady of Lourdes.