

WELCOME/OPENING WORDS

A very warm welcome to this Enlarged Institute Leadership Council meeting, our first since the 2019 General Chapter, and the first ever online. On behalf of the Institute Leadership Team, welcome to all our Area Leaders, and to our facilitator, Sr. Brid Long – Brid is a St. Louis Sister and already known to us from our Chapter. We welcome Rosemary from the novitiate, who will be with us during this meeting, Veronica, our zoom host and Maria do Rosario, Mary Jo and Veronica, our translators.

A very special welcome to our Sisters from around the Institute, who are present for this opening reflection and prayer– coming from Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Timor, Brazil, Mexico, the United States, Portugal, France, England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Italy. Thanks to technology, we can all meet in what is this *sacred space of listening and encounter, dialogue, prayer and discernment*.

Over a year ago, at our 2019 General Chapter, we made the decision to go forward with restructuring for the sake of our Institute's mission. Since then, much has been happening and continues to happen, in our world: we've been facing huge and unforeseen challenges, most notably Covid-19. We've been through, and are still going through fear and uncertainty, and many people continue to experience grief and loss – but we have also been moved to gratitude and wonder over and over again at the human kindness, generosity and self-sacrifice of people around us and on our television screens. There will be time a little later to share more on how this time has been for each of us.

I think we would agree that Covid 19 made us STOP, and many, many people have said that the stopping has enabled them to 're-order' their lives according to a different pattern, a slower, more reflective one. This second wave of the pandemic is perhaps an opportunity to further reflect and try to understand what it's all saying to us, what are the inklings we are getting, the invitations to a better future for our world - what God might be saying to us.

Our reflecting may lead us to see in this 'in-between' or 'not-normal' time, that we are sharing with others globally, a gift to us as Institute, at a time when our Chapter call is to reorder and reshape our structures, to find a 'new normal' in terms of how we organise ourselves. We don't know what the future, the 'new normal' will be for our countries, for our world or even for ourselves. There is as yet no shape to it. Whatever the future shape of our Institute, whatever the future of our world, one thing seems clear: in this shifting and changing global situation, we RSHM need to go on deepening and strengthening the bonds that unite us as communities and Institute and we need to continue building solidarity with the people around us, lending our hands and our minds and hearts to the shaping of a better future together, working with others in building a more equal and sustainable world.

Structures are changing, new ways of being and acting together are emerging in our world and in our Institute - as this online meeting shows. The restructuring that we are currently embarked upon, as Institute, is part of our long journey in faith and time, a journey in which we have continuously created and adapted our structures in order to carry out our mission effectively. Think back to all the changes and adaptations we made in the post-Vatican II years. We trust that God's Spirit continues to guide us today as we 'discern our way forward' (2019 G. Ch. Doc. p.3).

In reordering our governance structures, to make them 'fit for purpose' what is essential, what is central to our mission will not be lost but enabled to continue and to grow. The opportunity that we are being offered, then, is the grace of renewal, the grace of letting go what no longer facilitates mission, in order to live our charism 'with resilience', as our Chapter states. Smaller in number and lighter in structure, we are freed to walk humbly with the people around us, to listen to the longings of their hearts, to create bonds, build bridges, form networks, join with others to form communities who care for one another and for the Earth, 'our common home'. Our presence may be small and discreet, even hidden, like the seed in the earth that acts in hiding, hidden as the silent prayer of a Sister or

simple as the act of adding our voices to those advocating for justice for the poor and displaced people of our world. But it is of precious value: it makes a difference. As Fr. Gailhac reminds us: *‘in the practice of the good, nothing is small or indifferent’*. And our 2019 Chapter document affirms that this is who we are and what we are about: women of faith who *‘reach out to those on the margins and the Earth’* (G.Ch.Doc. p.3).

Addressing the Leadership Conference of Women Religious earlier this year, the contemporary poet, David Whyte, remarked: *“There is a feeling that, at our present crossroads, we might not arrive at something better, unless we become better ourselves.”* [D. Whyte LCWR Occasional Papers, Summer 2020] It depends on each of us individually and all of us together.

We come to our meeting, then, with openness and trust in one another and full confidence in our God, who gives us all that we need- wisdom and insight, strength and courage for the task, and *whose Spirit in us can [and will] do infinitely more than we can ask or even imagine* (Ephes. 3:20). The symbol we chose – a symbol of our faith and hope – is the seed sown during our General Chapter. The seed sprouted and in the short span of three weeks emerged above ground. Faith and hope are like that, a small seed that withers and dies in the earth, to emerge, bursting with life. May the symbol strengthen our faith, hope and trust, as we share our stories and discern the way forward together.

Margaret Fielding RSHM
Enlarged Institute Leadership Council meeting
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