

“I am leaving you to go and do God’s will” (J.A.) ¹

Rome, 23 May 2020

*“She set off on her journey and ... on the eve of the Ascension,
at daybreak, she went and knelt at the door of a church.
... That door seemed firmly shut”²*

Dearest sisters!

A truly stunning figure! The figure of a tried and tired woman, kneeling at daybreak in front of a Church, whose entrance door seemed firmly closed; but in reality it was only ajar. She had covered a long distance and she simply desired to hear Mass. She never neglected the Eucharist when that was possible for her.

Unfortunately, this time it wasn’t possible. The void of that church, the internal darkness and the semi-closed door didn’t surely give signs of an imminent liturgy, although it was the eve of the Ascension. The road had in store for her many snares. It would have had even more further ahead, in the midst of forests and cliffs; hardly marked paths; sudden and unexpected dangers. Besides, utter solitude!

That eve to which Sr. Rosalie Thouret refers in her Manuscript, was the 24th May 1797. A Wednesday. Precisely 39 days after Easter, which in that year, as we usually say “fell” on 16th April. Over a month before, Jeanne Antide had abandoned the caravan of the Solitaries of Father Receveur. She set off all alone on Monday 24th April, “*eight days after Easter*”, after a long and enduring adoration of the Sacrament. On that morning, before she left, she had written a note: “*I am leaving you to go and do God’s will*”³. She had the sole certitude that: “*The service of God and love of Him are inseparable from service and love to one’s neighbour*”⁴. All the rest is fog. “*Lord, I do not know where I am going or what You want of me*”⁵.

For at least ten years, this “Franche-Comté daughter”, had been constantly on a journey. Both physically and spiritually. Since that lethal “virus” of the revolution had put her on the road for the first time, after spending 7 years serving among the daughters of charity, she was in a continuous search of God’s Will. She made in time to become a true “*daughter of the fields*” according to the Vincentian spirit and style, when the revolution closed down convents, religious houses and places of worship.

¹ MSR (Manuscript of Sr. Rosalie), in “LD”, p. 61

² Idem, p. 62

³ Idem, 61

⁴ Idem, 59

⁵ Idem, 66

And she, who had remained religious in her heart and not in her habit, urged by the deep desire of a life of service in a community and supported by her deep Christian convictions, she had left her native land to join the caravan of the Solitaries of Father Receveur, away from her country, in exile and journeying on the road. Her two years with them, were a human and spiritual strong experience which she lived to the full amid big difficulties.

She ended once more on the road, in solitude, with the only certitude that God's Will wanted her elsewhere, even though she didn't know neither where nor how ... And it is at this point that we find her again in front of the door of this empty, silent and apparently closed Church ... in a setting of perfect contrast with the imminent solemnity of the Ascension.

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We too, dearest sisters ...

We are getting prepared to live the solemnity of the Ascension in a completely unprecedented social and spiritual climate. We are coming from over two months of total lockdown. Our societies have been struck by a lethal virus: not that of war or the revolution as the one experienced by Jeanne Antide, but a highly more subtle virus, because it's invisible, unknown and biological.

Our churches, like all the places of worship and of every other form of social space, remained for over two months wrapped up in a sort of surreal silence, in the amazement of the closed or half-closed doors, the empty benches and the deserted aisles. Absence of rites, voices and sounds.

We couldn't participate physically in any celebration, *including the paschal one*. Only the TV or the computer, the tablet or the Smartphone enabled us to participate visually in those rites to which we were surely accustomed. By its nature, the liturgy is the sacramental "house" of the assembly, the convocation of people and God's family. Therefore, community, group, presence.

And yet, in this time, many Catholics (and not only!), like many others among us - *entire local communities on the four continents* - we managed to discover a special dimension of this utterly new experience: that of being part of a "multitude without boundaries", of a "universal ecclesia", virtually attracted by that splendid "*mass on the world*", which during these two months, every morning (or evening or night, according to the connection latitude), Pope Francis celebrated in worldwide broadcast, having around him "*the people scattered over the four corners of the earth*", mystically united in the small-big Chapel of Saint Martha.

Every connected screen, almost resembling a modern altar, permitted us to address our look and our heart towards that altar, from where, besides the Eucharistic bread distributed under the form of spiritual communion, we received also the broken "*bread of the word*", which we had never loved and enjoyed so much like the "*other bread*", as in this experience ... alongside the last ten minutes of collective adoration of the Sacrament, crowned by a solemn blessing which symbolically reached the ends of the world.

Thank you Pope Francis, for these moments of eternity which you made us live, for these two months together... *Thank you too, sister connection!* You somehow resembled the miraculous space - *of the miracle of the five loaves and the two fishes* - because you enabled us to be also a living part of this immense crowd of people, hungry of God's Word.

And now, we come out timidly!

Like Jeanne Antide on that occasion, we too, today, get ready to celebrate the Ascension in a difficult moment of the world's life. Like her, we find ourselves in front of the doors of our parish churches which remained semi-closed up to a few days ago. They are now gradually being uplifted with the presence of people and the liturgy.

Sure, we aren't coming like her from physical and moral difficulties of an arduous and complicated journey, in a foreign country after having experienced the exile and the revolution; however, it wasn't easy for us to find ourselves, all of a sudden, in front of the unknown, from one day to the other.

Like her, in those bloody days of terror, we too carry in our heart the wounds of many people, who have left this world in solitude, without the comfort of a friendly smile or a fraternal hand to caress their face.

In this difficult war between "*us-worldwide*", and this slight "*invisible-crook*" – we must not forget it – the soldiers on the front line, who unfortunately passed away, have been the eldest generations. At least when the pandemic broke out! These were the facts in our small reality and even within our Congregation. I recall concretely in this moment, some of our sisters who have left us. *Both from this side and the other of the ocean.*

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"The mass on the world has ended ... Go in peace"

During last Sunday's Angelus, after thanking us for participating in his "mass on the world", Pope Francis said "goodbye" to us and sent us back to the celebrations of our local churches. He even recommended us to respect the rules of the new manner of living together.

And we, step by step, almost similar to those children who are coming in contact with life for the first time, will return progressively to the days of the so-called "normal life", where - *we are aware* –that the virus has not disappeared, but that a strong desire to live has re-emerged.

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Am I perhaps my brother's custodian?

Humanity is called to write again its code of living together, starting afresh – *and why not?* – from its primordial intuition: "*Yes, you are your brother's custodian*" (cf. Gen 4,9).

Every man (or woman) is called to rediscover that he/she is the *custodian* of the other, of the others. Today, more than yesterday! We all know that each one of us, without wanting it, can be a springboard for the virus and a powerfully contagious carrier. We also know that a thorough hygiene, especially of the hands, a face-mask kept always handy during moments of socialisation, social distancing among the persons ⁶ ... give social concreteness to that moral and religious command which comes from afar: *remember that you are your brother's custodian and protector ... along the roads, in the house, in the church, everywhere.*

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⁶ At least one and a half metre!

And therefore, with the celebration of the Ascension, that unnatural silence of the days of the so called lockdown⁷, seems to leave space to the feast. The liturgy is a feast! Sure, we have many norms to respect and much fear to overcome ... but we have likewise a big desire to come out, to participate and to celebrate.

No longer in solitude and in front of a screen, which we have deeply appreciated, but as people who are once more around the altar of the Lord and of his Word. No longer virtually and from a distance, but concretely, visually, emotionally. At the same time paying always attention to safeguard each other, respecting the new norms of social living together, which are valid even in a church's aisle.

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Called to a "new charity"

Dearest sisters, this pandemic isn't leaving only deaths and diseases, but even a great economic precariousness. Those who became poor due to the corona virus, can be added to the already existing poor people. Of course, the churches open up again, while charity is requested to be all the more creative: in the peripheries as in the historical centres, in the small villages as in the big cities. It is said that in the coming years the poverties will multiply: in number and categories. Many poor people. New poor people.

Yes, we know that we will be called to a "new charity" ... And the charisms of charity to a new vocation. *Here we are Lord!* Almost shouldering the burden of the utter poverty which is traversing our societies, today as yesterday, and more than yesterday, Jeanne Antide, whose solemn liturgical feast we are about to celebrate on the eve of this "pandemic" Ascension, presents herself to us in the beggar's clothes⁸, who along the roads of Bavaria doesn't only try to find the way, but even the necessary bread for that day's journey. Like the poor people of our times. The usual poor people. Of course, even tomorrow's poor people. Let's pray the Lord for light and promptness of heart. But also for courage in our personal and Congregational choices.

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And now, a word about the preparatory document

Dearest sisters, before ending my letter, I would like update you regarding the work that the preparatory committee has carried out in view of the General Chapter. Through the use of *connection*, the group managed to elaborate the document which I had already mentioned in my circular letter N. 89, dated 11th April last, (page 7).

Taking up all the contributions of the local communities as well as those of the territorial chapter assemblies, in the form of the so-called postulates, the group has outlined a preparatory-document, which will be forwarded in its totality to the chapter assembly when it will be summoned.

We believed to finish the text by the end of May, given that the corona-virus had impeded the summoning of the committee at the end of March, as foreseen in the chapter agenda. But working online is not the same as working "in front of each other". Sure, the connection is an opportunity;

⁷ Total closure, confinement

⁸ MPT, p.61

but it lacks that participative sensitivity which renders the work more creative and lively, and in a certain sense even quicker.

The sisters forming the committee, did their part to re-elaborate the syntheses according to common criteria. And they did it properly. We are grateful for that. It wasn't easy because we had to take in consideration the differences of the time zone for the connection. Now, the entire synthesis is in the hands of the general council. We ask you to be a bit patient as we have to postpone the work by some weeks. We are hoping to be able to hand over the text to the communities around mid-June (more or less). We beg your pardon. Everything is getting slower.

And what will the communities do? Keep calm! No homework! You won't have to give any new answers. We ask you to be kind and joyful in finding out in the text (at least hopefully) the small inlay of thought and participation offered by each one of you ... Of course, not the same words, but perhaps the ideas, the suggestions and the expectations, yes ...

Eventually, if someone will feel the need to give further contributions, she can always address them directly to the Chapter. The actual general council will see to maintain these eventual contributions, until they are brought to the chapter assembly.

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The Word of God: "best part" of the community dynamic

Before concluding, please permit me to anticipate a reflection regarding the impact that Worksheet 1, (Bethany-Dossier) has had on the work as a whole.

Most of the local communities and chapter assemblies, have **chosen** this topic **in the first place**, both as an occasion of reflection in the community and as proposal of unitary itinerary - *spiritual and formative* - for the whole Congregation. However, it will somehow be repeated in the successive work-sheets ... Sometimes, as foundation and cornerstone of the local community (Work-sheet 2). Sometimes, as light that enlightens our relationships and our life contexts (Work-sheet 3). Sometimes as a criterion before an apostolic discernment (Work-sheet 4). Sometimes, as pastoral orientation both for us and for youths, in view of a good vocational dynamic (Work-sheet 5). Sometimes, as a source (archè) that gives roots and sustenance to an integral and lasting ecology (Work-sheet 6).

Sure, the Word, understood not as devotional, moralistic or still worse, superficial reading, but as existential "key" that guides every discernment and heals every wound. The Word that is demanding and at the same time produces a moderate life, a simple look, a merciful heart, tenderness towards the vulnerable and the poor, solidarity towards the last ... Not the Word that remains an abstract reading of a book which is thousands of years distant from our civilizations, but which is already engraved within the natural law of the peoples, within the human heart's aspirations of the infinite, within the cry of the poor ... A Word written in nature. Revealed Word. And for us christians, Word made Flesh.

Hence, the importance of a relationship with the Word! A daily, meditative and non-ephemeral relationship which is well collocated during the day ... A personal and collective relationship, under

the form of lectio, but even of resonance, dialogue and prayer, etc. ... while leaving space to a spiritual and biblical formation, both at a personal and community level; this must be a serious and continuous activity which demands preparation.

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Dearest sisters, so far I have given you a brief summary, some ideas, gleaned from various parts of the document in preparation ... I will leave the rest to the work (text) in progress which will reach you soon: hopefully in a light and flowing style, but not excessively heavy.

Now, I will stop here. Happy feast of St. Jeanne Antide. And also happy vigil of the Ascension to you all. I repeat, to each and every one of you!

Together with the sisters of the Council and those of the general house.

Sc Nuzia
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