

What do you see Jeremiah?

I see the branch of an almond tree (cf. Jer. 1,11)

Rome, 11th April 2020

To all the sisters of charity.

To each one of them, wherever she is in this moment.

Dearest sisters,

Like Jeremiah, we too are seeing an almond branch, cropping up in the “frozen winter” of this pandemic, which is pushing itself aggressively and persistently, into this very pleasant spring 2020, of which the 11th April really marks the symbolic-day.

Notwithstanding the “blow”, that the world is experiencing, the weather is justifying a spring that keeps blooming increasingly in all its beauty and in all its power. *If I only stop in these days, to look at the meadows of the General House ...!*

That symbolic almond tree which Jeremiah saw flourishing and turning green in his garden, while everything around him was freezing, resembled the evocative dream of a perhaps distant but sensational spring, exactly in the place where at that moment everything was ringing with bleeding swords and smelling of a devouring and destroying fire.

The Word of God, that watches over the history of that people as the almond tree watches over that orchard, filled the prophet’s heart and soul not only with the hope of ransom after the days of slavery and deportations, but even and especially with the strength of the expectation and the certitude of their return to their homeland, to the Rock of Zion. In turn, this evocative return consisted of a thoroughly deeper return to that God, whose Word always maintains its promises because of its saving and liberating power. A Word that endows you with new eyes in order to be able to seize God’s passing in the world’s dramatic events. And God’s passing is always marked with purification, mercy, salvation novelty, conversion, future.

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Dearest sisters, this is what is happening precisely today. Not only in nature, but even in our life and in the history of the world.

When winter still ravages with its storms, rain and wind, behold the almond tree! In one way or another you see it coming forth. In the valley as along the hill. In the small garden behind the house as in the vast field. In the primarily dry lands and then in the green ones of the rainy regions; in the small or big oasis as in the middle of the desert. And if it fails to appear, most of the times the reason is only because the good farmer forgot to plant it, while totally ignoring that the flowering of the almond tree signs precisely the sowing time.

Scripture would say, that the almond tree is the sentinel-tree. The vigilant! The forerunner, the precursor. For this reason it is highly present in the history of the people of Israel. For example, its branches decorated the big candelabra (cf. Ez. 25,33; 37,19-20) in the tent of the Witnessing; which was in itself, a symbol evoking freedom when everything was still shrouded in slavery.

And it was precisely from the almond tree that was made the leafy stick of the priest Aaron (cf. Num 17,23), a leader alongside his brother Moses, who in the midst of cliffs, drought and all kinds of trial, headed to the land of the promises.

That always flowering stick was a safe guide, an almost symbolic reminder that a leader has always the task of seeing far and in advance, even when the desert dunes disorientate the eyesight and obscure the path.

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11th April 1799: our small almond branch

Dearest sisters, this 11th April, which is so dear to us, because it marks the memory of our origins, falls on the most silent day of the liturgical year. Holy Saturday. The Golgotha drama has been accomplished. The opening of the tomb has been sealed. Life is henceforth locked up in the depths of the earth. The world is gripped by silence.

Yes, everything is silent, but not the human heart. Surely, not the heart of Mary of Magdala, who in the middle of that Saturday night, similar to the woman of “The Song of Songs”, wanders silently alone in search of her Lord. ... Perhaps, in that garden where she goes the following morning, when it’s still dark, she glimpses a flowered almond tree in an almost hidden corner ... *Considering the context and the place, I bet that it is indeed an almond tree ...*

According to Scriptures, Palestine was the land of almond trees. Every orchard, garden or farm had one or two or even more almond trees ... A sort of vigilant sentinel, to indicate sowing time. A sort of ornamental tree for the house, the synagogue or the temple. A sort of memorial of the ancient sufferings not to disperse its souvenir and its significance. A sort of symbol marking the pride of a people who never downgraded himself, not even when the curve of his present obstructed the vision of his future.

The almond tree is the tree of hope! Especially, as the same Jeremiah said, during the times “*of the boiling pot*” and of “*the pot tilting toward us from the north*” (cf. Jer. 1,13). *Dearest sisters*, on this 11th April 2020, we too, sisters of charity, plant a symbolic almond tree in memory of our past, to decorate our present and to watch over our future.

(According to the modern calendar), that historic 11th April 1799, fell on a Thursday. On that day, Jeanne Antide located the beginning of our Congregation. On the Majestic trunk of a Church, (who was recovering from the deep and still bleeding wounds of a revolution that had gradually “infected” the entire European continent), in rue des Martelots, emerged this small almond flower; the blooming of a charism, rendered slightly visible through the concrete sign of a small school, a marmite, some improvised medicines and loads of dedication. A small bud amongst many others, namely, those numerous charisms, which in those days, in those months and in those years were decorating the big candelabra of charity in France and elsewhere.

The times when our congregation emerged, weren’t easy times. Not due to the pandemic of a virus but through the armaments’ pandemic. And as it always happens, not even in that moment did the people abandon their faith, nor did they close their heart to hope or their arms to charity. The charisms are precisely these “branches of the almond tree” which bloom and flourish

especially in times of trial, precisely to sustain the faith of the peoples, to rekindle the hope of their hearts and to launch the creativity of charity.

Even our time is a time of trial, of sorrow, of a new chain of sufferings that connects itself to the already long chain of other trials and sufferings that fill the world. It's the time of a pandemic. And what a pandemic! As he did with the prophet, God also asks his Church: *"Church of the 21st and even of the 22nd century, tell me, what do you see from your garden, where you have been locked up by the pandemic?"*

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My sisters, may this 11th April 2020, be the occasion to ask ourselves, myself in the first place, what do we see in the future of humanity, of the Church and of the poor. Consequently, what do we glimpse in the future of this charism which the Spirit entrusted to Jeanne Antide 221 years ago, and through her, from generation to generation, He entrusts it also to us today, not to bury it through fear of dispersing it, like the man of the Gospel who had hidden his talent, but to be "lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by the disciples, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth." (M.R. 11)¹.

Our 21st General chapter is round the corner ... We hope so at least. The pandemic is spreading. So does our hope! The almond branch of our charism is there!. Fully blooming and awaiting ... It's not the "boiling pot" of this almost unknown virus which could lockdown life! The prophet instructed us about it. So did Jeanne Antide.

Dearest sisters, best wishes for the 11th April 2020 to everybody! In this paschal journey, unique in our recent history, this is the Saturday preceding the Hallelujah. Let's try to be ready, like Mary of Magdala ... not far away from the garden of the resurrection! The gardener Jesus is there calling us. Let us be filled with surprise by the novelty of his call. Happy Easter to everybody!

Let's ask the Lord to give us the grace to come out soon from this pandemic. With a new heart, new spirit, with our body and soul already on the path that leads us from Bethany, down to the valley ... through the paths of the world.

The poor await us. The Church sends us. Jeanne Antide and all our saints are with us. Especially Agostina. Our nurse on the front line, in the infective wards.

The information which you find attached to this letter are an integral part of this same letter. Kindly read it with attention, trust and great hope.

With sisterly love, together with Sr. Christine, Sr. M. Rosa, Sr. M. Silvia, Sr. Mary. and all the sisters of the General house.

Sr Nunzia
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¹ "Mutuae Relationes" 1978; n. 11

Information

1. A NEW FUSION REQUEST

Dearest sisters, I am glad to start this informative part of the letter by announcing that a new Congregation has knocked at our door through its Superior General Sr. Rose-Marie Prongué, in view of a possible fusion. We are referring to the sisters of the **“Retraite Chretienne”**, a Congregation of French origin who initially started as a Spiritual Movement (1789), assembled priests, sisters and lay people around the House called “les Fontenelles”, in the Diocese of Besançon, while **Father Antoine-Sylvestre Receveur** was its prophetic founder.

Having remained a Movement throughout the XIX century, at the dawn of the 20th Century, the Christian Retreat became an exclusively female Congregation, approved by the Holy See on the (12th March 1929) and who in those years experienced a big development especially in England. Currently, they count 31 religious in all and are present in France, England, Ireland and Benin.

Well, after our first contact held last August in Sancey with Sr. Rose-Marie, our mutual correspondence was strengthened, thanks to Sr. Noëlle, our Provincial Superior of “Besançon-Savoie”. In fact, between the 9th and the 10th of last February, an encounter between the two General Councils took place here in Rome.

Dearest sisters, our always growing and fraternal relationship with the sisters of the Retraite Chretienne, especially with Sr. Rose Marie Prongué, has given us the opportunity to resume and to deepen that phase of our foundress’ life, which she personally recalls and narrates when she was a member of the “association” of the Christian Retreat, roaming at that time between Switzerland and Bavaria, due to the ravaging revolution.

We chose to mention it in our answer of last 6th November at the moment of the official request on behalf of Sr. Rose-Marie that reached us on the 25th October 2019. I willingly share with you some of that letter’s excerpts as a souvenir :

«... A Congregation who decides to ask for a fusion is always a courageous Congregation, who isn’t only aware of her “glorious” past, but who even desires to have a future. Maybe, the Congregations come to an end some time or another. But the charisms remain, because they are gifts of the Spirit. And the Spirit doesn’t go back on his gifts. He gives them forever for the sake of humanity.

We, sisters of charity, owe a lot to your founder, that “holy priest”, as Jeanne Antide dared to identify him. In very difficult times which were almost prohibitive, Father Receveur gave to this 30 year old woman, who was already a religious with the Society of the Daughters of Charity, that was dissolved by the revolution, the opportunity to resume and to live that Religious life in community, which apparently vanished completely.

He encouraged her to leave France, to set out on the Swiss paths; he welcomed her with his “Association”: this big caravan containing men and women, male and female religious, was journeying towards Jerusalem. Humanly speaking the Holy City wasn’t a possible goal, but it

was surely a spiritual horizon that gave courage, resistance, significance ... as it had been for the children of Israel, during the centuries of deportations and wars.

Dearest Sr. Rose-Marie, I don't know whether Father Receveur had really planned to reach Jerusalem. But I am sure that with his spiritual strength, with his pedagogy of a good Superior, he knew how to lead that "caravan of peace", through roads and regions in turmoil and messed up by the revolution and by uncertainty. He continued to foster the hope of that numerous group of "people of God", who was the "Retraite". And here, Jeanne Antide lived some years which were marked by charity, spirituality, research and even by difficulties. The Retraite wasn't her final goal. But it was surely a decisive phase in her life. An experience which she will narrate and remember in her future years, while expressing always "great devotion" towards that "holy priest full of fervour for the salvation of souls". After the Retraite, God's will wanted her to become herself a "foundress".

And now, dearest Sr. Rose Marie, after over two centuries, the paths meet again. The Congregation who had that "holy priest" as her founder, is knocking at the door of the religious Family of Mother Thouret. History could be reconnected. The fusion is an instrument. The charisms are linked and tied to each other, at the service of the Church and of humanity, especially for the most suffering part ... »

So, *dearest sisters*, we are at this point. Since our Congregation should live a General chapter, it would be the authoritative place to decide, through voting, the welcoming of this new group of religious. They are experiencing the fragility of the historical moment but they bear a strong spiritual basis and look at the future with enthusiasm.

In the meantime, one will try to weave relationships of mutual acquaintance and fraternity on the territory, between the communities concerned. We will reserve a special journey to the community of Benin. With Sr. Paola Neloumta, the Superior provincial of our African Province, we find out together possible modalities of mutual acquaintance, bearing in mind the considerable distances between Benin and the rest of the Province.

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2. THE PANDEMIC AND THE NURSING HOMES

▪ A word for those who are in charge

First of all, please allow me to turn my benevolent and fraternal look at our nursing homes, where they are living today, the consequences of this pandemic with particular sensitivity.

We all know how much this virus can be easily and strongly transmitted and diffused. It harms in an unrestrained manner vulnerable people, especially those big groups of people living together. Our houses which host a significant number of elderly sisters, are a part of those who are mostly exposed.

And therefore, please allow me *dearest sisters*, first and foremost, to extend my personal **thanks**, to all the Councils (general and territorial) of the whole Congregation, *to the sister servants, to the administration and to all the depending and collaborating personnel*

who operate in these structures. Thanks not only for the competence and skill with which they accomplish their service, but also for the dedication, the courage, the vigilance and the humaneness with which they serve the others.

I extend my special gratitude, to you, in particular, *sister servants*, who are in charge of the elderly sisters, especially in the nursing homes and not only (!). You accomplish your mission with great love and a deep sense of responsibility. Remember that we are close to you, and if by chance you have to be somewhat “strict” in order to implement some norms indicated to you by the governmental protocols or by your Councils, you have all our approval. The life of our dear elderly sisters is precious both to you and to us! And even the safety of our collaborators.

▪ **A word to the elderly sisters**

I would like to address the second word directly to our dear elderly sisters. *Dear sisters*, do you know in how many Welfare Health Residences, Nursing Homes, governmental and territorial, public and private residential structures has the virus been diffused? They are many! Especially on the Italian territory.

Luckily, in our houses, the vigilance of those who are responsible of the decisions and even your gentle and conscious collaboration, are bearing good fruit, while limiting the transmittance. Sure, we aren't fully exempted from this pandemic, for so far the contagions seem to be very limited and above all circumscribed.

My sisters, but I would like to attract your attention about some advice which seems important to repeat to you, even if you are already informed:

1st Collaborate strongly with those who indicate to you what to do and how to do it. Your sister servants in the first place. Gatherings must be absolutely avoided and social distancing must be respected. Nowadays, the room has almost become a chapel and sometimes even a dining room. If you are requested, you must be capable to accept this isolation, together with other restrictions and indications if these are imposed on you from time to time.

2nd Be a light of hope for your own sake and for those who are at your service and for the whole world. We must live this moment with optimism, with the joy of living and with the strength of those who have already been victorious over many past wars. *We should always wear a smile on our faces.*

3rd The Lord hears your prayer! Therefore pray persistently, as the Gospel recommends you, together with Pope Francis. *My sisters*, you are inhabited by an inner strength and by the spiritual secret to stop this virus! Especially because the world is conquered by the faith of the most vulnerable. It's the hope of the elderly persons which will help the youngest part of humanity to overcome this trial.

Finally, please allow me to recommend you: nobody must go out without any reason. If there are valid or health reasons, the sister servants and/or the management will try to find the most adequate solutions.

Dearest sisters, remember that we love you and that the Congregation needs you, especially now!

3. THE UPCOMING CONGREGATIONAL APPOINTMENTS

▪ A “Virtual General Conference”

“Materially speaking” the world has stopped. Since we aren’t permitted neither to celebrate a short term General chapter, nor to plan voyages or other Congregational initiatives, as General Council we have considered to organize shortly a mini and virtual **“General conference”**. We have provided a programme that will (hopefully) permit us to be connected “online”, with all the Provincial/Regional superiors and Delegates, for the first time on **Friday 17 April**, after Easter, **at 12.00** (Italian time).

We have put on the agenda of this encounter, some reflections regarding Initial Formation in this pandemic time: the welcoming of the postulants, the entrance in the novitiate, the First Profession, the Renewal of the Vows and the Final Vows, in the light of the indications that we have received from the International Organisation of the Superiors General (IOSG).

▪ The Chapter Commission and the communities’ contribution

In view of the General chapter, the majority of the local communities, as well as the territorial chapter assemblies, have sent their contribution containing reflections and suggestions. The general secretariat has organised and sent all this precious “material” to the sisters of the Central Commission for a first hand reading according to some indications.

If we fail to realise a concrete meeting as already foreseen, the General council has considered a first virtual meeting with the sisters of the above mentioned Commission on **Monday 20 April, at 14.00** (Italian time), to take stock of the already accomplished work and to take new directions together about the collection and the elaboration of the data in order to arrive to a definitive Preparatory-Document.

As soon as it is ready, this document will be sent to the local communities accompanied by a guiding form to help in the reading. We are hoping to send it by the month of May.

▪ The track of the new Rule of Life (Constitutions and Regulations)

Regarding our General chapter, which as you know has been postponed to next September/October (21 Sept.-19 Oct.), we are awaiting a clarifying word on behalf of the Congregation for Consecrated Life because our doubts are many.

For example, will the pandemic be over by summer in a way that one can travel easily ? Will the flights and visas be assured? And the travelling costs, will they be affordable after the enormous crisis of the airlines? And the new rules already looming in the horizon regarding the risk of transmittance by healthy carriers, will they permit intercontinental

travelling as they were before? ... Or even simply our chapter hall, will it permit us to have assembly meetings according to the requested social distancing?

We have numerous doubts, but we also hope that somehow or other we will be able to find a solution. In the meantime, we retain that some of the contents of the chapter schedule could be anticipated, involving the local communities.

For example, once we finish deepening the Preparatory-Document, we could send in the communities – *a section at a time* - the new text of the Rule of life, together with the norms that make up the Regulations, in the light of the text that has been revised by the last Commission, who met in Rome in November (11-16 November) 2019².

This would permit us to anticipate, at least partially, the work that would have been done by the Chapter. However, it will be under the responsibility of the Chapter (when it will be celebrated) to approve the two texts definitively.

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4. REMEMBERING AFFECTIONATELY SR. ELISABETTA FLICK

Dearest sisters, at the end of this part of the letter, dedicated to Information, allow me please to recall affectionately Sr. Elisabetta Flick, who passed away some days ago, unfortunately due to the corona virus.

Sr. Elisabetta Flick would have accompanied our General chapter *together with her co-Sister, Sr. Elisabeth Oberson*. Our last meeting with her as General Council dates back to last 15th February and it was entirely dedicated to draft the chapter planning. After that day, we continued to contact each other especially by phone, even because in the meantime she was transferred to Turin where she was supposed to contribute as sister servant of her own group, to animate and to enhance the harmony within an inter-congregational community of elderly sisters.

In 2002, Sr. Elisabetta had accompanied the unification journey of our three Provinces of Northern Italy. During the last years she had worked a lot at the IOSG (international organization of superiors general), for the Migrants' project in Sicily. She had also been the Superior General of her Congregation "le Ausiliatrici del Purgatorio".

Last year she even participated in our last General conference. Her simple and efficient report had highly touched our assembly.

A friend has left us! We have a new protector in heaven. Those who wish to know her better, can visit the website of our Congregation, the webpage dedicated to her: <http://www.suoreausiliatrici.it/saluto-a-sr-elisabetta-flick/> .

² The commission was made up of Sr. M. Jacqueline Munnier, Sr. Pascale Khoury, Sr. Stella Maris Montalbano, Sr. Paola Neloumta, Sr. Paola Arosio



Post-Scriptum

Rome, 14 April 2010

Dearest sisters, while we are about to send this letter to the communities, Easter, as a liturgical solemnity, is already over. In two thousand years, it never happened that all the believers have celebrated it closed up in their own homes.

Luckily, the new means of social communication which almost resemble a new altar, have enabled us to feel less lonely, both by living the liturgical celebrations of our local Church and by participating with Pope Francis in the Rites of the universal Church.

Happy Easter, *dear sisters*! To you, to all your families and to all those who collaborate with you. On behalf of all of us: General council and the General house.

Christ is risen. He is truly risen!