



The Assumption Way, Restructuring, and Collaboration

**“It is folly not to be what one is [RA] as fully as possible”
Saint Marie Eugenie**

OPENING MESSAGE

Very dear Sisters,

Good morning, and a warm welcome to one and all. After almost two years of lockdowns and online meetings, it is wonderful for us to be here in person for the CGP 2022. We thank God for this special gift of real presence.

In continuity with the decisions of the CGP 2020, we have chosen the theme for our deliberations this month: The Assumption Way, Restructuring, and Collaboration. We have been reflecting on these important topics personally, communally and as Provinces/Region. We are here to gather the fruits of our discussions in our respective Provinces/Region and to discern together new pathways for the Congregation. In this context, the words of Saint Marie Eugenie are very significant: “It is folly not to be what one is [Religious of the Assumption] as fully as possible.”

In this opening message, I would like to highlight a few things in order to provide us with a “window” through which together we can reread our experiences. I begin by highlighting four elements of the global context in which we live our religious life today: the Covid-19 pandemic, the specific context of the synod on Synodality in the Church, the fragility of our interior life and the political unrest as a threat to persons and ecosystems. I shall then talk about the Assumption Way to explore new pathways for the Congregation.

A. The Global Context

1. The Covid-19 Pandemic as a *Kairos* Moment¹

We have lived through this difficult time of the pandemic and, if the current trends of less infections and fewer hospitalizations continue, there is light at the end of the tunnel. The pandemic has profoundly affected our lives: our way of thinking, planning, doing, and living. It is very fundamental to our human nature that we want to predict things, get everything organized for our lives, and want our lives to be under control. So, we create structures and routines, make plans and schedules, and develop goals and means. While this feeling of security and predictability is important for us to a certain extent, the truth is that our lives cannot be fully under control. This is one of the lessons that we learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic as it caught us off-guard. We had an experience of being “thrown out of the nest” to use an expression of Pema Chödrön, an American Tibetan Buddhist nun. According to her, it is this experience that makes us fully alive and human.² This experience of having “no solid ground under our feet” is sometimes necessary as it impels us to make paradigm shifts in our lives. Saint Marie Eugenie had a similar experience when she lost her mother. We can also recall the Damascus experience of Saint Paul (Acts, 9, 22, and 26), which transformed him completely. In the Biblical world, we call it a “*kairos* moment” or “God’s favourable moment”. The

¹ See also my article on “The Corona and 7 Invitations for a better world” (2020).

² This expression appears in her famous book, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (1996).

pandemic can be seen as one such experience. It has also made us aware of the “God-alone” experience that Marie Eugenie talked about, of the fact that we are deeply interconnected to one another, and that we are capable of making radical changes overnight. The pandemic context makes the CGP 2022 a *kairos* moment for the Congregation to explore new pathways. As Saint Paul announces in today’s second reading of the Eucharist: “Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6: 2).

2. The Synod on Synodality as an Incentive

We need to situate the synod on Synodality in its present context. The Preparatory Document (PD) presents a long list of contextual elements which includes the covid 19 pandemic and the greater awareness that we are a global community, the explosion of the inequalities and inequities in societies, the double process of globalization and fragmentation, the precarious situations of migrants all over the world, the cry of the poor and of the earth.³ The document also highlights the particular context of the Church that includes sexual abuse, abuse of power, and clericalism. Further, the document refers to the socio-religious context: a secularized mentality that tends to disregard religions on the one hand, and on the other, a fundamentalistic attitude towards religion without respect for diversity which leads to intolerance and violence (No. 6). Moreover, the daily experiences “of the divisions caused by reasons of ethnicity, race, caste or other forms of social stratification, or cultural and structural violence” (No. 8). It is in this context that Pope Francis initiated a synodal process for the entire Church and invited all of us to listen to the voice of God's Holy Spirit, and to listen to one another.⁴ Hopefully it will lead to a synodal way of being a Church at the service of God’s mission in the world.

3. The Fragility of our Interior Life as a Wake-up Call

I feel that some of the above-mentioned worldly realities, values, and attitudes are also finding a nest in our hearts and communities. One of the reasons for this seems the fragility of our interior lives. The apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, to the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons, and the lay faithful on the proclamation of the Gospel in today’s world, identified the fragility of our interior life as one of the dangers of today’s world.

Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger even for believers. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry or lifeless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God’s will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ.⁵

One of my serious concerns after having visited almost all the Provinces/Region in the Congregation, is that we are becoming more and more individualistic; and sometimes to the point of neglecting what is most important. We seem deaf to the promptings of God’s voice even when we make important discernments and decisions. Our individualism is leading us to embrace and integrate more and more the world's values. And I am reminded of the saying: “It is easy to remove the monk from the world, but it is far more difficult to remove the world from the monk.” How do we grow in a deeper awareness of our inner life? How do we recognize and change our self-centred ways, and become more and more other-centred and God-centred? In this context, it is providential that we begin our CGP on an Ash Wednesday and the liturgy reminds us of human mortality and invites us to “return to the Lord our God” (Joel 2).

³ Preparatory Document – *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission* (2021), No. 5.

⁴ Later, I will reflect more on Synodality (10 March 2022).

⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), No. 2

Another fragility of the present generation is what the Polish Sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, called, “liquid modernity.”⁶ It refers to a mentality that always keeps all options open or does not want to stick with something for a long time or does not want to have a long-term commitment. We are on an infinite browsing mode without dedicating ourselves to anything. Are we not also sometimes influenced by this liquid modernity? How do we inspire a counterculture of lasting and wholehearted commitment? How do we develop and foster healthy, holy, and happy interior lives which enable us to remain totally committed to the consecrated life that we have chosen for ourselves?

4. The Political Unrest as a Threat to People and Ecosystems

Human suffering, fear, and insecurity feelings are multiplied by the present political unrest and escalating violence in several countries. Since the last CGP, we have witnessed several military takeovers in the continent of Africa. Similarly, in several countries on the continents of Asia and America, populist leaders are remaining or regaining political power with an absolute majority. Here in Europe, as I write this message, we have received the dreadful news of Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, declaring war on Ukraine, which inevitably brings loss of life, displacements, and human suffering of various kinds. We know how wars and militarism harm the environment with implications for our ecosystems. This political unrest will have significant economic and social consequences for the present and future generations. As fear and defiance grip our people, how do we respond to these situations, exercising our duties and shared responsibility? Loving our times as daughters of Saint Marie Eugenie, how do we situate our religious life and redefine our prophetic mission in this context?

B. The Assumption Way and New Pathways

We have the mission of redefining the identity and mission of the Congregation in response to the challenges and needs created by the new situations in which we find ourselves today. As we discern together the will of God for our Congregation, we have to ask ourselves: what is God saying to us in and through this global pandemic? What new paths are opening up for our Congregation in the experiences of the interior fragility and external forces of division and marginalization? How do we appropriate the calls from the Church for a synodal path? What is God’s dream for our Congregation today? How would Saint Marie Eugenie redefine the Assumption Way? How do we perceive the new forms of RA presence for our times? What kind of restructuring and what mode of collaboration and partnership will ensure the sustainability of these new pathways?

When I think of the Assumption Way of Life, what comes to my mind is the fact that our actions reveal who we are. Our identity and mission are intimately connected and they are constantly evolving. Our today’s choices determine who we are becoming (identity) and what we will be doing (mission). I would like to focus on the RA Way of Life emerging from the Prologue: Who is an RA according to the Prologue to the Rule of Life?

In the paradigm of the RA way of life emerging from the Prologue, the Incarnation is the foundation, the Gospel-love (the Trinitarian-love) is the heartbeat, and the Paschal Mystery is the power and the source of hope in the Assumption Way of life.

- A journey of faith lived in austerity, joyful detachment, zeal, and a spirit of freedom;
- A covenant consecrated by the Vows, committed to the extension of God’s Kingdom through the mission of education, and gathered into community by God’s presence in an international family;
- A path of love modelled after Mary’s faith and life and placed at the heart of the Church;
- A way of life empowered by the Paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Oxford: Polity Press: 2000, 2017).

In short, the RA way of life is rooted in an experience of God which gives us the gift of inner freedom. It is learned by living in communities, inter-cultural/generational and national, and is realized in and through a prophetic commitment to the extension of God's Kingdom by loving our times and proclaiming Good News to the poor. It inevitably brings difficulties and suffering, but at the same time finds joy and hope in the resurrection of Jesus.

If we agree on this, how do we discern the new forms of the RA presence for our times? The words of Saint Marie Eugenie, "My gaze is fixed on Jesus Christ and the extension of his Kingdom" gives us the first direction. The theme chosen by Pope Francis on the World Day of Migrants last year, *Towards an Ever Wider We*, gives us the second orientation as to how to discern.⁷ The life and mission of Jesus in the Gospels show us that no one is excluded from God's project for humanity. Jesus abided in God's love and accomplished God's mission (John 15). Jesus' mission had the dimensions of teaching, healing, and prophecy (Matthew 5-8). It has both comforting and confronting functions. To comfort the afflicted and to confront unjust and unbecoming attitudes, words and deeds. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to participate in Jesus' mission of bringing good news to the poor (Luke 4). The poor addressed by Jesus would include ourselves and the fragilities of our inner life, invisible persons in our communities and places of ministry, unwanted children and abandoned mothers, migrants and refugees, displaced persons, victims of wars, just to mention a few.

May I invite you to recall an experience of being "thrown out of the nest" in your religious life? Let this experience be the starting point of our reflections on new pathways. I believe that the new forms of RA presence begin with our personal renewal that is both human and spiritual. The newness depends on (i) how we heal the fragility of our inner world and strengthen our interiority and inner freedom; (ii) how we deepen our communion with God; (iii) how we listen to one another – learning from and teaching one another, and improve the quality of our community living; (iv) how we give prophetic witness to the RA charism in and through our commitment to the people who are on the margins.

With deep sentiments of joy and hope, immense gratitude to my Council and to each one of you, and in communion with each and every sister in the Congregation, I open the General Plenary Council 2022. May our deliberations and reflections help us journey forward with increasing optimism and communion at the service of God's mission in the world. As we listen to one another, may our hearts beat together in the heart of God.



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⁷ Published on 3 May 2021.