

Dear Sisters and Friends,

What is in store for us this year 2021? What unexpected realities will we welcome and experience? What surprises awaits us?

In the recent United States presidential inauguration of Joe Biden, we heard Amanda Gorman deliver a poem entitled: “The Hill We Climb”. It is about the journey of hope amidst trying times. Quoting the last verses: “*For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it.*” These are challenging and encouraging powerful lines as the whole world continues to experience the crisis of the pandemic.

We have been through almost a whole year of being in situations beyond our grasps and plans. These experiences could have led us to breakdowns or breakthroughs! We believe that true to our Assumption spirit and grace, we were and are able to see the good in every situation and allow this to blossom and shed its radiance.

Allow us to share with you our experiences of breakthroughs that gave birth to possibilities and creativity.

We are continuing to explore new ways to enable canonical visitations and, increasingly, we are becoming aware of the possibilities offered to us by this time of confinement. We hope that communication technologies can help us to deepen still more our desire for communion with the Congregation and solidarity with our world.

The visit of Sisters Rekha, Isabelle and Sandra to **Mexico** took place from 3 to 22 November 2020. This was our third virtual visit. Thanks to ZOOM we could be close to our sisters and the lay people of the 5 communities that make up the Province: Querétaro, Carrasco, Puebla, León and Águilas. Their warm welcome and openness to the Spirit enabled us to welcome together the grace of God's presence. The visit was very well prepared, with technology allowing personal contact. We could sense the apostolic vitality of the province, the openness to the international, a creative vocations ministry, as well as the commitment of the laity imbued with the charisma and impassioned by transformative education.

We, the whole General Community, visited the Province of Europe which, since the General Chapter, continues its journey in faith. Their openness of mind and heart has allowed the sisters to try new ways of becoming one province of four countries with different languages, historical backgrounds, and structures. The journey of communion they have made is a precious witness in today's society for which differences can be a source of division.

Our gratitude to our sisters of the Province of Europe for allowing us to touch our tradition as Religious of the Assumption through the apostolate of presence and the evangelical companionship of our elder sisters.

Collaboration with the laity brings an apostolic energy shown in new ways of being educators and in taking care of our Common Home. Our charisma of educational transformation is answering, creatively and boldly, the needs of the times and the appeals of the Church today.

Let us journey together on this path of communion which seeks to unite three former provinces, each with its own history, culture, and tradition.

The path of communion extends beyond the Provinces to the Continents. The lockdown and distance brought about by the COVID-19 crisis did not stop the **Continental Journeys** for mutual support, accompaniment, and restructuration processes. We continue “to strive to forge a union with purpose” (Amanda G.). We admire the commitment of our Provincials and Provincial Councils to greater communion as a Body – Congregation. We, the General Council, are grateful for the opportunity to journey with the different continents.

This interconnection experience is also carried out through **commissions, ad hoc teams, and secretariats**. These organize, each in their own way, meetings with the referent persons sometimes accompanied by their teams, either all together with a translation system, or by language groups. These meetings allow them to get to know each other better and to organize formation moments.

Virtual connections are creative and helpful, but actual experiences of connecting with nature, and with our communities of sisters are irreplaceable.

As a General Community, we have had several **escapades**: we had the opportunity to visit the communities of Orleans and Bondy on two Sundays. The visit, the mass with the people of the neighbourhood, a community meal followed by a walk (Germiny des Près and Saint Benoît sur Loire in Orléans and the Canal de l'Ourcq in Bondy) did us a lot of good! The day after Christmas we shared a snack with the sisters of the Rue des Plantes. They were still camping in a poorly heated building while waiting for the work on their new home to be finished. Covid had slowed down the building work a lot. Now each one has her own room, and the common areas are still being completed. Congratulations to our sisters for their tenacity and courage and to all the willing people who came to lend a hand!

Advent gave us a deep sense of Hope: we had witnessed then the signs of Life through our visit to the Province of Europe and the liturgy gave us a taste of this dimension of hope and of Christian watchfulness.

This year, the retreat in preparation for **Christmas** was led by Sisters Sandra and Véronique and, as is the tradition, in this atmosphere of prayer together we welcomed Sister Rekha's Christmas Chapter, which prepared us for the renewal of our vows in communion with the whole Congregation. The Christmas celebration was festive, simple, with a great family spirit. Due to health restrictions, we were not able to share the Christmas table this year with our sisters in the neighbouring communities and our friends, but we experienced communion in a different way.

These months of lockdown have allowed us to focus on our **ongoing formation**.

We had a time of formation, via Zoom and in the presence of Cécile Franquin, organized by two organizations: Global Catholic Climate Movement and Catholic Impact Investing. The topic was on the **disinvestment of fossil fuels and the importance of impact investing**, in the context of climate justice and ecological transition.

As a Congregation, we also have our share of responsibility and are seeking ethical criteria in line with the approach of Pope Francis' Magisterium on this issue (Laudato Si, other recent documents) regarding investment policy. In addition to the commitment approach (in favour of companies that are committed to sustainable ecology, renewable energy, human rights, social investments) and the exclusion approach (exclusion of companies with controversial activities eg. tobacco, alcohol, weapons, or child labour...), we learned about the *impact approach*, which selects companies that stand out for their (measurable) intention to positively impact the environment and society through their practices (integration of young people into their workforce, gender parity, inclusion of disadvantaged groups...) as well as through their activities (renewable energy supplier, waste treatment, medicines...).

Another formation session was on **Appreciative Inquiry**. This is a change management method, introduced in the 1980s in the United States by Professor David Cooperrider, which differs from the more traditional problem solving method.

Appreciative Inquiry looks at what works well, what brings a person or group or situation to life. It starts from the premise that every person / group / situation has something good that we can understand and value. In practical terms, language, and the art of asking appropriate questions are important. More than a theory, it is an experience.

We invited **Sr Véronique Margron**, French Provincial of the Dominican Sisters of Charity of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin, moral theologian and president of the Conference of Religious in France, to speak to us about the **challenges of religious life** in France today. She identified five of them:

-The need as a Congregation for self-reform, especially in the context of the very low credibility of the Church today. It is an invisible internal work that questions our habit of infantilising in certain areas, at odds with a thirst for freedom and personal responsibility.

-The ability to work with others, to live with debate, to see paradox, because this is the cost of the search for truth. We have a heritage to share: our founders showed inventiveness, determination in the face of adversity, wisdom and risk-taking!

-The issue of freedom. As religious, we come from the charismatic and prophetic dimensions, not the hierarchical dimension. We have no hierarchical place in society. We must defend this and have a clear vision of our identity. We are at the service of dialogue and we are offering in this a place to lay people.

-Formation at every level is essential in these times in which we live, not only for us but to transmit to others.

-To hold together communion and diversity. Our international congregations are a special place because they embrace different cultures. This permanent tension between unity and singularity is a richness. To promote each culture, each sister in her individuality and at the same time to weave the common good.

Sr Véronique Margron sees clearly that Religious Life in Europe will have an ever-lower profile. More and more, the religious will come from other continents. This is a call to redesign Religious Life. It is both a huge opportunity and a great challenge of inculturation!

Our dear sisters and lay partners, we continue to climb “hills”. We acknowledge the difficulties, but we are determined because our undying faith and hope in God who journeys with us, gives us the grace to embrace the light and become light for one another.

In deep communion with each other,

Rekha, Sandra, Isabelle, Marthe, and Irene
General Community

Le temps des épreuves... un temps de renouvellement...