

# Sisters and Lay Associates

## "Companions on the journey"

*At the service of the Proclamation of Compassion and Mercy. Significant moments on a path begun some years ago, but only now being fully recognised. Chapter documents that speak of this. Presences in the world. The full participation of two representatives at the 2009 General Chapter. The welcome to be given to the unexpected and to those brought by God's Providence into our daily lives.*

Utopia?...a dream?... or very simply, a path which has been walked together for many years and which led quite naturally to the decisions taken at the Congregation's Second General Chapter? Before arriving at any conclusions, let us see what ground has been covered so far, so that we can understand where we find ourselves at this new stage. Looking back will help us to discover how this "companionship" is enriching the mission entrusted to the heirs of Mother Gérine.

### From first contacts...

While the new Congregation was engaging in its process of Union, (generating much work, but also bringing hope and prompting shared exploration), a breeze was blowing the windows open wider and inviting us to look further into the distance. We have some promising signs to prove it:

In her Christmas 2006 Letter to the Lay associates, Sr M. Viviana Ballarin, then Prioress General wrote: "In Mother Gérine's garden we have been used to seeing one type of flowers, the sisters; one kind of life, the reli-

gious life; one way of creating fraternity, through community life and mission..." And she added: "You are a GIFT for our Religious Family".

It was then noted that Sr M. Elvira Bonacorsi, after her election as the new Prioress General, addressed her circular letter to "All the sisters and the lay associates..." Were you also surprised to find, at the end of the Chapter's final message, the names of the two lay associates who helped to draw it up? Though the lay associate movement already existed in the two ex-congregations before the Union, we have seen it strengthen and grow during the three so-called "years of transition".

- In the heart of the new Province of Latin America, we have seen shared study and exchanges between the lay associates of Peru and Argentina, regular annual meetings, and a group co-ordinator accompanied by a sister of the Provincial Council.

- In the Province of Italy, the animating group has encountered difficulties because of the unexpected death of Sr M. Grazia

*In the pages of this article, lay associates and sisters are seen sharing prayer, study and work*



Maestroni, but the Spirit has continued to make the sown seed fruitful, and there have been many well-attended meetings. Family events have been supported, and they are always good opportunities to show the fraternity that has been created.

- Another encouraging sign is that there are new lay associates in Guadeloupe and France who are attracted by our charism and spirituality, and want to know them in order to live them and "live in them".

- These different groups are in contact with the Generalate through the two Assistants General appointed to coordinate their activities at a general and international level.

These new "risings of sap" have not yet ceased to astonish us.

Seeing that there are all these signs of life, the presence of two lay associates at the General Chapter, representing their communities, should not surprise us.... Was that not the ideal place to take time to get to know each other and to compare our common spirit and the inspiration within us?

### **...to mutual recognition**

This is how Livia CHESTI, an Italian, and Dorila CORAL-GIRALDO, from Peru, came to share our work-sessions for about a week, giving their impressions or their points of view on occasion. Livia's husband, Gabriel, and their children were present, and gave a 'different' note to the times of relaxation, and the smiles and cuddles given and received by the baby 'refreshed' us after our labours... Dorila made present for us that colourful and simple friendliness typical of the people of Peru.

The whole day of 3 July (2009) had been kept for them: it was a powerful time. I can confidently say that, seen in the context of the journey up to now, this day was a turning-point. Why was this?

Here were two WITNESSES, who, quite freely and each in her own way, were giving an account of the FOUNDATION of their personal lives and their personal choices as members of the communities they were representing. Here are some excerpts from their presentations:

*"We laity have been attracted by Mercy that is experienced as a gift*



*given and received. We are struck by the fact that before the mystery of a God who is Mercy and who has made himself known to us through our meeting with communities or with particular sisters, we have felt ourselves called to share the vision of the same face, the face of God who is Father, and who has the heart and hands of a Mother.*

*We have recognised in ourselves the charism of COMPASSION experienced in daily living; and through listening to the proclamation of the Word we discover that we too are called to be a "word of Compassion" for the hearts of the people we meet.*

*In the deep experience of Mother G rine's charism, and discovering the persons of St Dominic and St Catherine of Siena, we have recognised, little by little, our own Dominican identity and our call to be light and salt in a world that ignores God, and excludes and marginalises those who have no voice. Knowledge of our Dominican foundations has given shape to our lives and continues to mark out a pathway for us, where at every turning we meet this God incarnated in our daily living.*

*Immersed in a world that is more broken and divided every day, we are trying to live there as witnesses to the Father's compassion, opening out spaces where the most marginalised are recognised, and listened to and their rights respected.*





Prayer is an important part of our Dominican identity: it is the space in which we feel ourselves to be beloved sons and daughters of the Father, who invites us to drink the living water. We are trying to build our lives on the Word, and to have lengthier times for being listeners and intercessors.

In a world that is changing and so full of meaning, we give priority to community life (in its lay dimension) as a place where we form each other, where we experience that it is not easy to live as brothers and sisters, and learn to look with different eyes at our own challenging worlds. Study is the fruit of our deep desire to recognise and know the foundational Roots of our Dominican identity, so that today we can be a community which proclaims the Good News and the Love of the Father.

In a world where languages are continually multiplying, we believe that it was not by chance that the Holy Spirit has widened the tent space of our Family, and has given us laity, too, the same vocabulary to speak to this world in many languages. Together we can go farther and deeper, because the communion of our vocations is becoming a force to be reckoned with".

After having listened to these testimonies, and taken time to consider them deeply, and to share the feelings aroused by the power of what was said, the capitulars had no difficulty, when the moment came, in a-

greeting to recognise the oneness of the charism and the plurality of its expression. In the Fundamental Constitution we read, "Mother Gérine's gift of compassion finds expression today in different vocations which are grafted onto the common grace of Baptism. We, who are sisters through our religious consecration, profess public vows of obedience, chastity and poverty, in the joy of belonging to God for the salvation of our brothers and sisters. The lay associates, and those who in other ways are joined to, or close to, our Family, express the one charism through the specificity of their own vocation."

**To give birth, together, to a word which speaks of life and generates life**

This charism of Compassion given to the lay associates is written into our Fundamental Constitution and is therefore officially recognised and offered to each one of us: it becomes a "constituent" of our lives. Let us welcome it and joyfully recognise that it has been placed in our hands in all freedom and confidence. How could we refuse it, and let ourselves be invaded by doubt, mistrust and fear? If the Lord knew how to give it to us so bountifully, he will be ever more attentive as he accompanies us on the new stage which he is calling us to live together. A faith-view is essential for renewing our agility and enthusiasm as travellers: because we are looking towards the summit of our journey, we are never brought to a halt by the inevitable hazards that come along – on the contrary, it makes each of them a source of creativity.

It is also an invitation to make

our different vocations, now identified and authenticated, a source of riches for the particular Proclamation which is entrusted to us.

Is this not a new way of showing in practical terms that Salvation belongs to everyone and is for everyone? In a world that is in search of signposts, how shall we show that the Word is re-creating if we remain inert?

This initiative needs people who are convinced that this new Call will form part of our priorities on our personal, community and governmental levels from now on. Like all new enterprises, it demands from us all the qualities of listening and respect, so that we can discern together

- what the Lord wants
- what the lay associates hope to accomplish
- what the Congregation itself is ready to suggest to them, seeing that they are neither auxiliaries nor replacements, but fellow-workers conscious of their responsibility regarding the charism.

Let us make that "Allez, allez petites" so dear to Mother Gérine heard once again, and welcome it in the unexpected hope that LIFE itself has given us...

**Sr. Suzanne Caizergues**

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