



## SCHOOL SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME Generalate

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Palm Sunday

### Jubilee Letter – 2017

## The Paschal Mystery: Changes . . . Reversals . . . Coming Home

**Dear Sister Jubilarians of 2017,**

With heartfelt congratulations and affection I greet you on the anniversary of your first profession of vows some 25, 40, 50, 60, 70, 75, or 80 years ago! May you experience in abundance God's ever-renewing love as you celebrate this occasion.

Your jubilee is a source of joy and renewal for the whole congregation. We are filled with gratitude for the gift of your entire lives, and we pray that God will bless you with peace and joy as you look back on all that the years have held for you and as you look forward in hope to God's continuing surprises and graces.

For the past several weeks of Lent I have been thinking and praying about this letter to you. Finally, I come now on Palm Sunday to try to write something that I hope will be helpful for your prayer and reflection in this significant year of your vowed life. This morning I prayed with the list of all 268 Jubilarians of our international congregation! I am imagining all of you, in various parts of the world, entering into this holy week of solemn remembrance of our Lord's Paschal Mystery, his passion, death and resurrection. This letter invites you, dear Jubilarians, to reflect on this Mystery and how it has been lived out in *your* life as you have followed in the footsteps of Jesus and given your life to God all these many years.

I offer three points of reference for your prayer and reflection on the Paschal Mystery in your life:

- 1) Changes: Let us consider all the changes you have experienced during your years in religious life and how *you* yourself have changed in the process of living through them.

- 2) Reversals: I invite you to consider the many “reversals” of values to which the Gospel calls us, and how, over the course of your years of vowed life, your relationship with Jesus, with God, has developed and perhaps changed direction in ways you did not expect when you first took your vows.
- 3) Coming Home: I invite you to see with new eyes where your life’s journey has led you. I ask you to recognize how at home you are in God, how God brings you back again and again to his loving embrace.

I offer a passage from *You Are Sent* to accompany each of these points of reference. I hope you are able to take some hours and days, at different times during the year, to ponder the love God has for you and to delight in the goodness of your life. Rejoice, dear Sisters, in all that has been and open your heart to all that will be.

## Changes

Christian conversion requires new thinking and new living, a continual change of mind and heart as individuals and as community. (YAS, GD 51)

This is a wonderful passage from *You Are Sent*. In fact, I encourage you to look at the entire paragraph 51 of the General Directory. It is much longer than what I have quoted here. It contains a longer list of specific points than any other paragraph in the constitution or general directory. It lists 21 ways in which the call to conversion, to change of mind and heart, can come to us in religious life and require a response from us. This paragraph alone would be enough for you for the year! It ends with the touching statement: “We struggle to live by the conviction that love is, indeed, the fulfillment of the law” (YAS, GD 51 b).

Dear Jubilarians, your years of profession range from 1937 to 1992. One thing you all have in common is the depth and constancy of *change* that you have experienced in religious life, in the church, and in the world during your lifetime. The vast majority of you were formed in the old Rule of 1924. Almost all of you were part of the long process of re-writing our rule of life. You have lived through the time of renewal to which the church called us at the Second Vatican Council, when we were asked to re-think every aspect of our religious life in the light of the Gospel, the spirit of our founders, and the signs of the times. You participated in the dialogue that led, eventually, to the approval of *You Are Sent*. Finally, *all* of you have experienced life in a congregation which, in the past two decades, has undertaken major governmental restructuring and reconfiguration of provinces, regions, and districts. Today, numerically speaking, most of the sisters in the congregation are members of a province that is different from the one in which they entered.

I invite you to pray with your experiences of all these changes. Reflect on how they have called you to conversion – to “new thinking and new living” – over and over again. Whether you realize it or not, these changes have been part of your experience of the Paschal Mystery. They are a big part of the dying and rising that has been the ebb and flow of your life. How would *you* describe your experience?

I often find it interesting to ask sisters: Are you the same person at the age of 40 that you were when you were 20 years old? Are you the same person at 50 that you were at 30? Are you the same person at 70 that you were at 50? (and so on . . . !)

The question almost always causes sisters to pause before they answer. One realizes that, of course, I am the same person. It is I who lived my experiences at all of these ages. Yet, on the other hand, many sisters experience the impulse to say “No, I am not the same person.” That is because, in the intervening years, so much happened that changed your sense of yourself and formed who you were becoming. It can feel like you are a different person because of all that happened and how you responded. Perhaps you might review what happened in each of the decades of your life: What happened to you? Where were you missioned? How did that form you? What were your decisions about relationships? What happened in your family? How was your health? What were the joys? the difficulties?

It is very likely that this reflection will lead you also to consider the concrete ways in which the evolving realities in the church and in the world were an intimate part of how you have experienced religious life. You might enjoy talking to your novitiate classmates or others about this. This also can lead to deeper insights and appreciation of the many graces, as well as challenges, that have come to you over the years.

In the face of all the changes you have experienced, how did you respond? What excited you? What changes did you welcome? What did you resist? What did you try to hide from? What made you feel vulnerable or threatened? What gave you renewed life? When did you feel helpless, that things were beyond your control? When did you seek to control all that was happening? When did you feel whole and free? When did you let go into God’s hands?

Our experiences, and the ways in which we respond to them, form who we are. The theologian Karl Rahner offers a helpful thought about all this. He once wrote that we are all born human beings, but we *become* persons. I think this is another way of saying what *You Are Sent* tells us: “We are all in a lifelong process of development, of being and yet becoming” (YAS, C 45). So, I do not think that there is a more appropriate question for prayerful reflection in a jubilee year than this: Who are you becoming?

Please, dear Sisters, make sure you do this reflection in *prayer*, asking God to show you who you are in God’s eyes, how God looks on you with love. Of course, you will discover that you are not perfect. However, if you *pray* this reflection, I know that God will let you see the profound richness of your life and reveal to you once again what God has tried to show you over and over: It is never too late to give yourself over completely in trust and gratitude to God’s love – because, at the heart of the matter, who you are is the beloved of God.

## Reversals

As we identify more deeply with Christ, the very pattern of his life becomes ours. We experience, as individuals and as community, now one aspect and now another of Christ’s paschal mystery, of his life, death, and resurrection. Moving toward the fullness of personhood in Christ, we become more integrated, freer to proclaim the good news. (YAS, C 46)

I suggest for your reflection one particular and *central* aspect of the pattern of Christ's life. Many interpreters give it the name "the great reversal." It refers to the profound change from what usually happens in our world to an opposite direction which God is bringing about through Jesus and through those who pattern their lives after his. Jesus proclaims in his preaching, in his life, in his very being, that the "kingdom of God" is all about turning everything upside down – (or, seen from God's eyes, it is all about turning everything right-side up!).

Examples of the reversals of values that come along with the Reign of God abound in all four Gospels. Take, for example, the *Magnificat* in Luke's Gospel. Mary, who represents the most powerless and insignificant people in her society (those who are young, female, and poor), proclaims: "The Mighty God has done great things for me!" (Luke 1: 49). Every day at Vespers, the church joins Mary in praise of God for this *reversal* of what we ordinarily expect to happen in our world:

God's mercy is from age to age  
to those who fear him.  
He has shown might with his arm,  
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.  
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly.  
The hungry he has filled with good things;  
the rich he has sent away empty. (Luke 1: 50-53)

How often in your lifetime, dear Sisters, have you prayed this prayer of reversals! What has it meant to you? How has it seeped down into your heart?

Is there something wrong with being a ruler or being rich? No. The point is that those positions in life can blind people and make them deaf to the needs of others. The point is that those who hope in themselves will be disappointed, but those who hunger for God will be filled.

How have you experienced this in your own life? If you go to the Gospels to meditate on this question, you will find example after example where Jesus expresses the paradox of the reversals that come with accepting the Reign of God:

- Many who are first will be last and those who are last will be first; (Matthew 19: 30; Mark 10: 31; Luke 13:30);
- The greatest among you must serve the rest (Matthew, Chapter 23; Mark 10: 43; Luke 22: 24-30);
- Everyone who exalts herself will be humbled and the one who humbles herself will be exalted (Matthew, Chapter 23; Luke 14: 11 and 18: 14);
- Whoever clings to her life will lose it, but whoever gives her life away for Jesus' sake will find it (Matthew 10: 34-39; Mark 8: 35; Luke 9: 24; John 12: 25);

- Whoever makes herself lowly, becoming like a child, is of greatest importance in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18: 1- 4; Mark 10: 15; Luke 18: 15-17).

We could go on and on with many more examples, Sisters, because, with this theme of reversals, we are touching the very heart of the Gospel. This is so because the greatest reversal of all is Jesus Christ himself. He who is God, the Word, the only Son of the Father, took the form of a servant and was born as a human being into our world, into our flesh, into our history. He became obedient to the point of death, keeping faith in God's love for him.

Nowhere is this reversal more profoundly expressed than in the Gospel of John, where the hour of Jesus' glory is precisely the hour of his death on the cross.

How have *you* experienced the reversals in your life, Sisters? I know that, in my own life, the lessons I have learned about these reversals came to me in ways I did not expect and most often in ways I did not like. But hard lessons are the ones that stay with us. We learn and re-learn them in the course of a lifetime, as the Holy Spirit works to conform our life to the very pattern of the life of Christ.

*This has happened to each of you, Sisters.* Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how. I have this confidence because bringing about the great reversals is the work of God. God is the one who acts to set things right, to heal and liberate and redeem the world. We cannot do this on our own, but only by openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in and through us. In the end, God will fulfill God's plan for *Shalom*, when "justice and peace shall kiss" finally and forever.

In the meantime, the most we know is that this is the depth of the meaning of our faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So often we can lose hope because it seems that humanity takes one step forward and three steps back on the journey toward new life, toward peace and justice, toward setting things right. This is a time when we must cling to our belief that the reversals are working. Let us not abandon our faith in that. The so-called reversals are the true path forward for all humanity and all of creation. God is at work and so are we. Dear Sisters, cling to faith in the power of God and in all the tiny miracles you see in the everyday life around you. Praise God for all the ways you have experienced the reversals working to bring freedom, joy and peace to you and to those you have served.

## Coming Home

In the light of God's radical love, we experience our own failure to love, our need to be reunited with God and with one another. We learn little by little that we are all engaged in the same lifelong process of conversion of heart, of return to love. (YAS, C 36)

In this final reflection on the mystery of your life with God, I invite you to recognize how very much at home you are in God. You have become, if I may say it, old friends. When we start out in religious life we are very generous and proclaim to God in many ways that we belong to Him. “I give you my heart,” we say to God with wonderful openness and sincerity. Life happens and we experience again and again our need to return to love, to be forgiven, to be reunited with God. This is natural, as *You Are Sent* reassures us in the paragraph quoted above.

Let us stay with this for a moment. I want to suggest to you that something quite remarkable has taken place in the course of your lifetime of returning to love. If you have not noticed it already, I ask you to reflect on it. At some point along the way, God said to you, “What is really going on is that I give you *my* heart.” God has taken your generous self-gift and returned it with the gift of God’s own self. God is at home in you. God has given you God’s heart. Perhaps this is the ultimate and most deeply personal reversal that God makes happen.

I think also that this personal reversal is the key to understanding the exchange between Jesus and Peter at the Last Supper when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. Peter initially refuses the reversal of roles: “Lord, you will never wash my feet!” Jesus must explain to Peter that, unless he receives Jesus as his servant, he will never understand who Jesus is nor what Jesus has been trying to teach him. Even more, unless Peter receives Jesus as his servant, Peter cannot have the intimate relationship of love to which Jesus is calling him. Remember what Jesus says: “I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know what his master is doing. I call you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father” (John 15: 15). Receiving this intimate relationship is what it means to participate in the coming of the reign of God, in the great reversals God is working in history through all those who will follow this path.

Dear Sisters, in the same way, I ask you to take special notice of that moment during the Eucharist when, before communion, the priest presents the host, the Lamb of God, to the Assembly. At that moment, we do not pray, “Lord, make me worthy.” Rather, we declare, “Lord, I am not worthy.” And we also say: But, at Your word, O Lord, with Your touch, I can be made whole. Come live in me as I long to live in You.

You have prayed this prayer all your life, Sisters. Trust that God is answering it. We will never be worthy. That is not the point. The point is that God loves you and gives you His heart and dwells in you always. There is no need to fear growing older. Changes will continue to come into your life. Your faith in the power of humility and love to change the world will still be tested. But you know to Whom you belong. And what is more wonderful, the One to Whom you belong knows you and takes you into His heart.

This is cause for great celebration. May heaven and earth rejoice at your Jubilee of vows!

From my heart, I celebrate, cherish, and give God praise for each of you! I bless you and assure you of the prayers and love of the entire congregation,

*Sister Mary Maher, SSND*

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*General Superior*