

to bring fuller life to others



*Congregation of the Sisters
of the Sorrowful Mother
Third Order Regular of Saint Francis of Assisi*

March 2014 #4

Dear Readers,

“... **Bring the fullness of life to others**” continues to be the title of the generalate newsletter, which this year, in continuity with the directions of the 21st General Assembly of the congregation develops the theme of **FRANCISCAN WITNESS FOR EVANGELIZATION**.

Our reflection and sharing with you starts with a particular aspect: “*Sense of belonging to the church and to the civic community*”. This is the prerequisite for an authentic, responsible, humble and contagious Christian witness, because love of the church is one with the love of Christ.

In the general audience of September 11, 2013, in his greetings in various languages, Pope Francis stressed the invitation to “*strengthen the sense of belonging to the Church*”. Several times he repeated that a Christian has a “*vital link to the church, like that which he/she has with his/her own mother*”. For this, we have to pardon the defects of the Church, liken them to those of a mother, and help her to improve.

Even though the aspect of belonging to the church was very dear to Francis of Assisi and to Mother Frances, in this issue we want to offer the witness of Catherine of Siena and of Oscar Romero, who were not members of the Franciscan family. Catherine of Siena and Oscar Romero were tenaciously rooted in the Gospel of their times, served Christ and the people of the Church with love.

Both were well aware of the degradation, misery, conflicts, unrest, and poverty of their times. They knew well what religious, political and diplomatic compromises would lead to; for this reason they fought against every kind of corruption wherever it lurked. Their belonging to a people and to the Church was not a simple affiliation manifested only on some occasions. Their efforts were expressed as a continuous responsibility towards the civil and ecclesial community. In different times and circumstances, they were able to denounce the “defects” that put the authenticity of the message of the Gospel at risk within the Church and within society.

“*Exactly in this time, ...the disciples of the Lord are called to live as community, which is the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They are called to be an evangelising witness in a way that is always new. Let us not rob the community!*” (Evangelii Gaudium, 92). What does this mean for us today?

*Sr. M. Teresina Marra, SSM
General Superior*

Reflection

The Church is both a divine and human reality at the same time. To feel part of the Church, and of another group at the same time, we need to nourish our sense of belonging.

Faithful Witness of Yesterday

St. Catherine of Siena was a powerful witness for evangelization in her time. She offers us a model of faithfulness to the Church and society.

Faithful Witness of Today

Oscar Romero witnessed his love to Christ, Church and poor, through his life and his death, as he struggled to further human rights, freedom and dignity.

M. Frances Streitel

M. Frances becomes an instrument in the mission of the Church: her determination and commitment can be a model for faithful Christians today.

**Sense of
belonging to
the Church
and Civic
Community**

Publication by:
SSM Generalate
Casa Generalizia
Via Paolo III, 7-9
00165 Rome, Italy
www.ssmgen.org



Reflection

The Church, human and divine reality

In liturgical celebrations and in theology texts, various images taken from the Bible are used to describe the Church: flock or field of God; building or house of God where his family lives; the body of Christ in which he is the head and we are the members; beloved spouse of Christ; our mother; the choice vineyard in which Christ is the true vine, who gives life and fruitfulness to the branches that are us, the people of God.

The council document “*Lumen Gentium*” speaks of the Church as a mystery, a reality that is both divine and human, a visible assembly and a spiritual community (#8). We also read that “*the mystery of the holy Church is manifest in its very foundation. The Lord Jesus, in fact, set it on its course by preaching the good news*” (#5).

Some of these images are more familiar, others perhaps less, but it is important to note that all of them refer in some way to communion and relationships. All of us—priests, laity and consecrated persons united in the same baptismal consecration—are members of the Church; we are one people in the Church, and in our journey we are in the company of the Lord and guided by Him. As Church we share the mission to make known to everyone the merciful and loving face of God, that is, to *preach the good news*.

But *to be* members of the Church and *to feel like* members of the Church are not the same thing. I think that all of us have a certain perception of the difference between these two expressions. To be a *member* of a group means that, in fact, I am a member of that group, while *to feel I am a member* of the group also implies the experience of feeling in relationship with the other members, to feel at ease, to feel involved. If we truly want *to feel like* members of the Church we also have to cultivate our *sense of belonging* and this requires two aspects which are related: a reciprocal relationship and co-operation, and pursuit of your own place.



Mutuality and cooperation characterize the healthy life and development of every group while recognizing the different types of groups. This applies to the family, religious community, groups that are active in the school, the parish, at work or in other areas. In a group, I cannot expect only to receive - affection, care, support, help, recognition, esteem – but I am also responsible to give and offer my personal and particular contribution. Without my contribution, the group will miss something.

Some time ago, I read an interview with a niece of J.F. Kennedy, assassinated in 1963, in which the woman recalled a famous phrase from her uncle to the Americans: “*Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country*”. This is a strong invitation that is valid also for us today and that affects our lives as Christians and our sense of belonging to the Church. It is especially true in the current environment in which we have to face many wounds and weaknesses of the Church. It spurs us to ask ourselves: in what way are we contributing to the development of the Church with our lives and our efforts? How are we cooperating with her mission of evangelization?

The second characteristic of a sense of belonging to a group is the search for and discovery of one’s place. Finding one’s place is not simply having a role; it means something more, it means to find my special place. Saint Peter writes that we are living stones, a spiritual structure: next to the living stone which is Christ, each stone has its own place. If a stone does not take its place, there is a hole, an emptiness. When I take my place, then the whole building benefits and is embellished (1Pt 2:4-5). So, in the Church there are different vocations and ministries. A married person has duties and responsibilities that are different from those of a bishop; a mother cannot dedicate herself to prayer in the same way a religious does; and the Pope is not expected to function as a parish priest. Each of us has different gifts and talents to offer. We all share the gift of God’s love. As members of the Church we all have the responsibility of making this love visible though in different ways.

In her autobiography, Saint Teresa of Lisieux wrote: “*I have found my place in the Church and you, O my God, have given me this place. In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love*”.

And we can also ask ourselves: do I know “my place” in the Church? How do I live it?

Sr. Samuela Maria Rigon, SSM



Fidelity to man requires *fidelity to the truth*, which alone is the *guarantee of freedom* (cf. Jn 8:32) and of *the possibility of integral human development*. For this reason the Church searches for truth, proclaims it tirelessly and recognizes it wherever it is manifested. This mission of truth is something that the Church can never renounce.

Caritas in Veritate 9

Faithful Witness
of Yesterday

Saint Catherine of Siena (1347 - 1380)

Evangelization is and continues to be a priority for our congregation, and this year our newsletter will portray some faithful witnesses for evangelization of both yesterday and today. In her time, Catherine of Siena was a very powerful witness for evangelization. She responded wholeheartedly to Jesus' invitation to become a model of Christian discipleship. Having read and reflected on her life one cannot help but feel evangelized, inspired and challenged by this most remarkable woman, a doctor of the church.



This article will focus on her faithfulness to the Church and the civic community. At the age of sixteen, Catherine became a tertiary (lay follower) of the Dominican rule embracing a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. She had a deep passion for the poor and devoted herself to great acts of charity by assisting the sick who had been rejected by others because of their repulsive symptoms. She stood firm in her support for all of human life including the prisoners. In her prison ministry she loved to work with the prisoners especially the ones who were scheduled for execution. She lived a life of integrity and was strong and staunch in her commitment to what she thought God was asking her to do. Due to her great holiness, she was sought out as a spiritual guide for many including Pope Gregory XI, nobles, politicians, artists, ordinary people, consecrated men and women religious.

Saint Catherine was endowed with many virtues. She was a: reconciler, reformer, unifier, and discerner to name a few. Her world in Europe was very similar to our world of today: marked by violence, and an uncertain future. Both the Church leaders and the civic leaders of the 14th century were greedy and struggled for power. They received benefits from both their social arrangements and the status quo. I believe that this applies in many instances to our situation today. Our Church leaders and civil leaders are undergoing many trials and difficulties and have lost much credibility. In our modern world there appears to be an absence of a spiritual life, loss of community and

loss of a sense of belonging to the Church. *“Catherine’s greatest political success was also a spiritual triumph—convincing Pope Gregory XI to return the papacy to Rome. Seven popes resided in Avignon from 1309 to 1378 instead of Rome because of the conflict between the papacy and the French monarchy which resulted in the subordination of church power to the monarchy.”* (Diacon Keith Fournier, Catholic Online, May 21, 2011). *“Catherine left us with about 400 letters which included several strong ones to popes, fairly warning them to use their power and authority wisely. At no time ever in her correspondence with Gregory, which is indeed direct, does she question his authority. On the contrary she tells him “Esto vir!” You are the man. Use your authority.”* (The First Catholic Feminist? Christopher Chech, Crisis Magazine, April 25, 2013).

She devoted her life to the cause of peace and unity in Church and state and to the reform of the church. She refused to allow hardship, schism, war or persecution to detain her from doing the Lord's work. Through her deep faith, she was led by the Spirit to be an agent of change in the tumultuous events of her lifetime. I believe her motive for doing this was based on her awareness of our *God who is crazy in love with us.* (Catherine of Siena)

Our Church has just officially closed a year of Faith. Pope Francis in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *“The Joy of the Gospels”*, calls us to evangelization (proclaims God's love for each of us, and calls all followers of Christ forth to show God's mercy to the poor and vulnerable). St. Catherine of Siena is an extraordinary model for us.

Sr. Catherine Marie Hanegan, SSM

Faithful Witness
of Today

Oscar Romero

Oscar Romero was born in El Salvador, on August 15, 1917. His father apprenticed him to a carpenter when he was 13, but the young Romero felt a vocation for the Catholic priesthood and left home the following year to enter the seminary. He studied in El Salvador and in Rome and was ordained in 1942.

At first he had a quite conservative reputation showing himself skeptical of the Vatican II reforms and the Medellín meeting where local implementations of the recommendations of the Council were discussed. There the region's bishops had resolved to abandon the hierarchy's traditional role as defender of the status quo and to side with the poor in their struggle for social justice. This radical departure divided both the faithful and the clergy. Oscar Romero learned from the socially committed clergy, and after witnessing numerous violations of human rights, he began to speak out on behalf of the poor and the victims of repression and injustice. The assassination of his long-time friend Jesuit Father Rutilio Grande elicited a stinging denunciation from Romero, who suspended Masses in the capital's churches the following Sunday and demanded the punishment of the responsible parties. He felt what he had stated: *"There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried."*



This led to numerous conflicts, both with the government and within the Catholic Church. He became a prophet in the church, sharing the fate of a prophet. In the selection of his homilies in *"The violence of Love"* he states clearly: *"When we struggle for human rights, for freedom, for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the church to concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God's promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the church knows that sin's consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The church knows it is saving the world when it undertakes to speak also of such things."* And in another homily: *"The church must suffer for speaking the truth, for pointing out sin, for uprooting sin. No one wants to have a sore spot touched, and therefore a society with so many sores twitches when someone has the courage to touch it and say: 'You have to treat that. You have to get rid of that. Believe in Christ. Be converted.'"*

After speaking out against U.S. military support for the government of El Salvador (*"we are fed up with weapons and bullets"*), and calling for soldiers to disobey orders to fire on innocent civilians, Archbishop Romero was shot dead on March 24, 1980, while celebrating Mass at the small chapel of the cancer hospital where he lived.

The archbishop had foreseen the danger of assassination and had spoken of it often, declaring his willingness to accept martyrdom if his blood might contribute to the solution of the nation's problems. *"As a Christian,"* he remarked on one such occasion, *"I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people."*

Sr. Gudrun Maria Schellner, SSM



M. Frances
Streitel



Recently, when I thought about Mother Frances, I was struck by her determination and strong character, in particular with respect to her will, confirmed many times by God of being an instrument for the mission of the church. In particular, I think about some episodes in her life, where she embodied the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: *“By faith Abraham.... went out, not knowing where he was to go”* (Heb 11:8).

I am a happy forty-one year old married woman, mother of two children, and I wonder if I would be able to have the same determination and readiness to begin a journey to an unknown destination? People who know me also know the answer! But Mother Frances departed from Germany to Rome without any navigator, cellular or other instruments, and later together with her first companion sisters she departed from Rome to America, trusting only in God, her only certainty and true Navigator.

I also think that these episodes, like others in her life, may communicate to us how strong her sense was of belonging to the Church, the body of Christ: for her it was possible to begin and continue her journey crossing the ocean, (with all the problems connected with the crossing of the ocean in 1888!). Her only support was her sense of total belonging to her Bridegroom, who, through the Church, supported Mother Frances and bestowed on her many blessings. I too received many blessings, and I am most grateful for what I received from and through Mother Frances.

Ester
Italy

„The Lord demands much from those whom He has chosen as His special instruments... They shall be like a lighthouse, whose rays penetrate far into the surf of human misery, so that many may find the way back to the haven of salvation“ (Mother Frances)

