



Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary
Rue Saint-Bernard 25
B - 1060 Brussels

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My dear Sisters,

During this Advent season we are eagerly waiting to listen again to the angels repeating the song of that beautiful night, namely *'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to people who enjoy his favour'*. That was the powerful message of the incarnation. Today we are called to be bearers of this message for the human family where we are placed. At this time of Advent, reflecting on the mystery of incarnation that brought peace, hope and love to humanity, my thoughts go back to the efforts made in our Congregation in the past and also during the last two Enlarged General Councils to bring these Kingdom values to today's context within us and around us. I am sure that each of you is involved in the chapter preparation based on the theme *"SCJM, as a woman, listen and dare to be prophetic. Do whatever He tells you" (John 2, 5)*.

'Do whatever He tells you' - these are the last words or the only words that Mary, our Mother and Mother of all beings, has addressed to us. This presupposes an attentive listening.

Our theme is based on the background of the wedding at Cana. According to Paul Maskers this wedding refers to or is symbolic of the eternal covenant of God with humanity. Jesus' mission was to be the mediator in realizing this covenant of love. The evangelist indicates that the Mother of Jesus was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited. This is to show the involvement of not only Jesus but also of Mary, the disciples and all in the Cana event being a part of this salvific action of God. Mary sees and listens to the situation and in her capacity as a woman listens with her total being. She contemplates the reality that is before her and that evokes love and compassion within her. She is urged

to respond to this and she initiates a dialogue with her son. Jesus' reply was, "*Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come*". In fact, He is asking her what her and His role in the salvation history is. He says "My hour has not come". In John chapter 17, Jesus says in His farewell discourse, "Father, the hour has come, glorify your son". So the hour he was referring to was the hour of His glory on the cross where he was able to embrace the whole world in love and forgiveness. We too share in that same glory every moment we are able to love unconditionally. The manifestation of His glory begins in the humble kitchen of the wedding house and it continues in the humility of washing the feet, culminating in the glory of the Cross and Resurrection. This opens vast possibilities to each of us as to what can be achieved by love. Mary has been constantly present in His life, continuously listening not only to His word but to His entire life and that is why she says with such trust 'Do whatever He tells you'. She has the right to tell each of us to listen and do whatever he tells us as she has shown us by her own example how to listen and give an appropriate response when faced with concrete situations. For us SCJM, listening to Christ and doing whatever He tells us is our spirituality of contemplation in action.

I would like to dwell a little more during this Advent on the first part of the theme of our Chapter namely "SCJM as a woman, listen..." This particular theme is addressed to each SCJM personally and the invitation is to listen as an SCJM and as a woman. There were many courageous women in the Bible who brought about changes in their contemporary society because they were able to listen to the voice of the Lord deep within their hearts. For example, we have Miriam, Esther, Ruth, Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan Woman and of course Mary, our Mother. We are also invited to listen with our identity as SCJM. This concretely means that in our listening to God, speaking to us through events, through people, through the context and most of all in the silence of our hearts, we are always focused on the Mission that is entrusted to us. At the same time, we are aware of the grace that has been given to each of us for fulfilling this particular Mission of love (*Deus Caritas Est*). As SCJM, we

uphold the values that we are called to live, in deepening the charism to respond to the changing realities around us. Our listening is also influenced by the fact that each of us experiences deep within, this irresistible love of Christ that urges us to be loving and compassionate in reaching out to the others (*Caritas Christi Urget Nos*). In our Mission oriented approach of living together, there is a daily learning of total dependence on God (*Deus Providebit*) and an experience of the *Cor Unum Anima Una*. In trying to share the love that we have experienced from God and in our effort to give ourselves especially to the poor and the abandoned in merciful love (*Beati misericordes*), we ourselves feel enriched by them (*Pauperes evangelizantur*). In our listening thus, with our identity as SCJM, and as women, Mary is our Mother and she is our Model. It was her way of listening which enabled her to say yes that made the incarnation possible and from then on, it was a continuous listening and simultaneous response in her role throughout the salvation history. With Mary we recognize that the source of our being and of all that we do is the mystery of the Love of God that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Art 2 Const.).

Today at a time when human beings are so broken, listening seems to be very necessary. In a world that is filled with noise, listening has become most difficult. God is constantly communicating, continuously whispering His wisdom, telling us something of our history with Him and His plan for the world. So we need to listen as to understand. We listen to the Word of God spoken to us through the Scriptures, we listen to the realities around us, and we listen to the Spirit speaking in the depth of our being. Listening to another is a privilege. As you listen you discover the face of Christ unfolding before you and you are marvelled at how God has been actively present in his/her life. When you listen to someone attentively and you feel one with that person, you experience sometimes tears of joy or of compassion well up within you. This is attentive listening or listening with your whole being. In other words, it is a listening for the sake of the other that the other may grow. Do we have the time, the willingness to listen to the other? Robin Sharma in his book on

“Leadership Wisdom” says that one of the greatest gifts you can give to anyone is your hundred percent attention. He also adds that listening is the highest compliment. We listen with an intent to understand the other person. To be an aggressive listener is to be passionate about understanding people. The prophets of our time like Mother Teresa, Pope John Paul II, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Brother Roger of Taizé listened to the realities around them and the inner voice of God speaking deep within their being. Thus they were able to give an appropriate response that would build the human family which is God’s plan of love for us. This is what our beloved founder Fr. Triest did in his time.

Listening to the changing context, we learn that after Vatican II, there are a lot of changes that have come both in religious life and in the secular world. We live in an era of globalization and its impact affects all the continents differently. The world is changing so rapidly and the speed is so fast that we can’t withstand it. We are drawn into its current even before we have discerned sufficiently. Today, everything seems to be unstable, everything has become provisional and quite often today’s world is incapable of deep and lasting commitments. In a consumerist society everything becomes disposable after use. This attitude penetrates even relationships and hence there is instability in relationships and family life. People give more importance to self-fulfillment as an idea of happiness than to relationship. There is social disconnectedness and identity crisis and we religious are affected, influenced and often submerged in this reality. The greed of a few people has dragged the whole world into a financial crisis and there are new forms of poverty added to our world. In all the countries it is the poor who are losing even their little opportunity for survival. While globalization is a search for unification and interconnectedness at international level, simultaneously there is also a search for identity, sometimes leading to the extreme of fanaticism and fundamentalism as seen in Afghanistan, in India, in Pakistan and many other countries. There is a struggle to balance the

two aspects, i.e. globalization and a sense of identity. People today are looking for a sense of belonging.

Communication explosion and technical advancement are characteristics of our times and with all the facilities for communication, the population still suffers from loneliness, yet is not mature enough to enjoy solitude. Time is money in today's business world; migration has become a global phenomenon today with its consequences both in the society from where a person leaves his/her land and the country that welcomes him/her. Traditionally Christian countries are becoming more and more secularized even to the extent of going for de-baptism. Many of the Asian and African countries are affected by violence and war. There is glaring poverty with ethnic and communal fights affecting many parts of these continents. These are new situations bringing new pockets of poverty in the world for which we the human beings are responsible. A few have accumulated the riches of the earth to the detriment of the majority. These are some of the pressing challenges to religious life today.

In our context there is also some ray of hope. Recently on the 9th of November many political leaders of Western countries came together to celebrate the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall which was symbolic of breaking down the barriers that separated the people of East and West Germany/Europe. This was a challenge for the rich nations to share their resources with the less privileged ones in the East, in solidarity. The recent African Bishops' Synod in Rome based on the theme, "Open the way of reconciliation, justice and peace in the continent" is an initiative taken by the Church. In the context of Africa that is wounded by ethnic conflicts, this brings a lot of hope for the future.

There is also a thirst and quest for spirituality among the people of today, a desire to find meaning in life beyond materialism and consumerism. There is greater international solidarity. People are also becoming more

and more aware and concerned about the destruction of the earth and the inter-connectedness and inter-dependence in creation and our responsibility in this stewardship of the earth.

We need to listen to these realities of the context, listen to the Good News brought by Jesus, listen to the turbulence, listen to the inner resources of people and listen to the innermost self where the Spirit of God is whispering like the gentle stream that flows unceasingly in the silence of our heart. When we learn to listen even to silence, we find what we are looking for is deep within us. Listening is an essential aspect of our Mission today and a response to the signs of the times. Those who are called to a life of solitude due to failing physical energy or ill health are also participants in this Mission. Only when we listen in quietness and silence we understand that the power of Christ that lives within us prompts us to be like Him. In a world of constant noise, silence and contemplation provide quietness and space to listen to the promptings of the Spirit and that is our call. We surely need time set apart to listen to the Lord, to listen to His Word in the Scriptures and then only we will be able to continue listening to the realities around us and among us and give an appropriate response in love. This is how our spirituality of contemplation in action will become a concrete reality in our every day life. Does my listening daily to the Word of God affect and change the context around me? We are invited to listen attentively and deeply enough to understand beyond words and events. Does my listening help me to break down walls that separate people on the basis of race, culture, language and religion in this multi-cultural context whether at global or local level? Do I feel called to participate in the efforts that build bridges, putting an end to hatred and violence and division in my own locality?

In listening to the Church documents, all the Encyclicals written by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI stress the need for genuine love in today's context. In the recent Encyclical named "*Caritas in Veritate*" (Charity in Truth) he underlines the values of solidarity, love and brotherhood which

are necessary to build a human family. In the face of recent global economic break down, he emphasizes the need for ethical economic principles and transparency in the search of providing good economic results. According to him, today's deepest poverty is loneliness arising from self-sufficiency. In a world where there is absolutization of technology to the extent of slavery, he is urging us to bring spiritual values to our relationship with God and with human beings.

After Vatican II, with all the changes that came into religious life at such incredible speed, vocations began to diminish unexpectedly. And now, according to a survey done by NRVC (National Religious Vocation Conference) in the USA, young people who seek to enter religious life marked qualities that were essential or very important for them to enter. Those were: praying with members of a community, devotional prayers, doing ministry with other members of the community, living in a community and involve themselves in justice and peace outreach issues. The disappointment of young people all over the world, in the early years of their religious life, who join apostolic religious life now is: an absence or infrequency of communal prayers, lack of healthy mission oriented communities in which they can love and grow, accusation of being traditional regarding their wish to attend daily Eucharist and limited opportunities for shared ministries. This does not mean that they want to go back to traditions as they were in the past but surely they value the spirit behind these traditions and are generously open to new expressions of such practices relating to integrating the needs and realities of today. The newcomers are looking for more – more of God experience, more of simplicity in life style, more according to the model of the early Christian community. So we are constantly challenged to be adaptable and flexible in living creatively the spirit of religious life and its traditions. Are we able to offer communities that live communion and are Mission oriented or do the young people who come to us find our communities as simply settled and comfortable living arrangements? In today's multicultural society there are prejudices based on race, religion, and language. Can we, by our inter-cultural living, be a witness of

transcending barriers and finding a new culture that is the Gospel culture?

When we listen, we hear these multiple challenges of the 21st century. This is calling us to a renewal – a renewal with essential aspects of apostolic religious living of the original charism of our founders adapted to today's realities. The coming year is the 250th anniversary of the birth of our beloved founder Fr. Triest. Can we listen and deepen within ourselves that spiritual force and energy which saw the birth of our Congregation? Can we take up the challenges of today; moving forward prayerfully, listening to God intensely and listening to one another and to the context respectfully for a future hope? We are called to listen and live today. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow is not yet. Let us begin our renewal by listening to today. Today's context needs SCJM presence more than ever before. Shall we begin consciously, deeply listening to one another so that the other may grow and then we will be heralds of the Good News of peace, love and joy that Jesus announced by His coming. I wish you peace in your hearts. May peace and love vibrate from the inner being of each of us to those close at hand and far away and to the entire world. May it fill the universe with the tranquility and the energy it needs today. I wish you a Merry Christmas and abundant blessings for the year about to dawn.

God bless you.

Affectionately,

Sr. Valsala George Chennakadan
Superior General