



SCHOOL SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME Generalate

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Jubilee Letter – 2013

A Reflection on the “Landscapes” of Our Religious Life

*“After bearing the heat and burden of the day,
enjoying the fresh air and walking in the garden
are as urgently necessary as our daily bread . . .”*

(Mother Theresa, letter 1093)

Dear Sister Jubilarians of 2013,

With heartfelt congratulations and affection I greet you on the anniversary of your first profession of vows some 25, 40, 50, 60, 70, 75, 80, or 85 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.

In recent years we have become very aware of the intimate connection between care for all of creation and care for our brothers and sisters in the human family. In the first days of his papacy, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, spoke several times about this connection.

We have grown in our knowledge of the universe as well as of our planet Earth. The more we learn, the deeper is our awe and worship of the loving Creator who fashioned the universe through violent bursts of light and gave us such beauty, with vast spaces and rich diversity. At the same time, our sense of responsibility for creation is enhanced. More and more we are

trying to do our part “to live more simply, responsibly, and sustainably with one another and with all creation” (*Love Cannot Wait*, Directional Statement from the 23rd General Chapter).

Dear Sisters, as you celebrate your jubilee this year, no doubt you will find yourselves reflecting on all you have experienced in the unfolding of your life to this point and on how, all along the way, God has been guiding, directing, saving, and loving you.

I would like to offer some suggestions for your reflection, based on the graces that can come to us when we spend time contemplating the exquisite beauty of creation. If we take the time to look deeply and recognize their irreplaceable value, we can see more appreciatively the glories of the natural world. In this way we draw closer to our loving Creator, to the One who is above, behind, within, beyond, and around all of it, that is, the dear Lord to whom we have given our entire lives in love.

The inspiration for what follows came from my reflections on a book entitled *Landscapes of Prayer* by Margaret Silf.* Margaret lives in England and is a renowned author and spiritual director in the Jesuit tradition. In this book, she writes about nine different kinds of landscapes – such as gardens, mountains, seacoasts, rivers, and so forth. She suggests that these are places of powerful inspiration for finding God in our world and in our hearts.

I want to expand her work in relation to five of these landscapes and suggest points of reflection that you might find helpful as you ponder your religious life during this special year of celebration.

GARDENS

We are familiar with Mother Theresa’s insistence on the importance of a garden. What does that word mean to you? You may have grown up with the daily work involved in helping things to grow, or you may have been raised in a city, with not more than a flower box or two in the window. What does “garden” mean to you?

We have a great variety of gardens in the congregation. When you reflect on your years of community and ministry, perhaps in different places and with various companions, do any gardens hold a special place in your heart? We can learn so much from even the smallest one, if we allow it to become part of us. If we linger there with attention, something takes root in our soul and holds us there. We can be drawn deeper into the mystery of life that surrounds us. We can be drawn into the mystery of God. Yes, even in the smallest of gardens this can happen.

Have you met the Lord of your life somewhere in flowers, trees, bushes, pathways, sunlight, insects, and murmuring birds? Probably sometimes there were weeds and thickly intertwined thornbushes that crowded out your openness to life, until the Gardener was allowed to free you from them. Or maybe they are still there in the garden of your life and you have found a way to see their beauty. Perhaps you recognize that, often, it is the very things that need pruning in our lives that bring us closest to God, that help us to be simple and humble in our appreciation of one another and of ourselves. Is this not the grace toward which our whole vowed life tends?

You might take a period of reflection to sit in the garden and pray with your desires. When in your life were your desires like enormous sunflowers? When were they like tiny violets? Each has its beauty. How are your desires with you now? What do you say to the Gardener? What does the Gardener say to you?

MOUNTAINS

Mountains are a striking feature of our planet. Created from upheavals eons ago, they still fascinate us, drawing our gaze upward to the heavens. Mountains and their valleys are good metaphors for the life of prayer and fidelity to your vows that you have tried to live.

Have you ever had your heart thrown open by a mountain vista with a seemingly endless view? Have you had “mountain peak” experiences in your life of prayer or in your relationships in community and ministry? Where and when were these experiences? Spend time remembering and savoring these experiences and how they influenced your life for years and years afterward.

Were there retreats, or days, or years, when you found yourself reaching for the stars, for consolation such as the saints experienced, only to find yourself stumbling around in dryness or desolation? Were you exhausted at times by the rocky climb up Mt. Tabor, like Peter, James and John before the moments of Transfiguration? Were you confused and disoriented like they were by the inevitable descent into the valley of everyday life and its stark demands?

Real mountains are unpredictable and sometimes frightening places. The weather can change suddenly and we can feel lost, tempted to despair of our strength or our ability to go on climbing or to find our way home. They are places where we are drawn to see our smallness, to contemplate the greatness of God, and to open up to new perspectives on our lives and on the world.

Dear Sisters, sometime during this year of jubilee, take a day of prayer and lift your eyes to the mountains! Remember how your help has come from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. Ponder how the Lord has guarded your comings and your goings. And believe deep in your heart that He will continue to do this both now and forever! (Psalm 121)

OCEANS

In the past two years, our sisters in Japan and the United States have experienced the destructive force of an ocean when it is whipped up by powerful earthquakes or storms. It is terrifying and devastating. The ocean has always been a symbol of the unknown, beckoning explorers to venture forth with no assurances of what they would find on the journey. Imagine what it was like for Peter to step out of the boat on the stormy Sea of Galilee with no more than the hope that Jesus would sustain him. After only a few moments, Jesus had to rescue him with the words, “Oh, you of little faith.”

Have you had an experience of venturing out into the unknown? Have you ever stepped out of the boat? What happened? What do you remember? For what are you grateful? What do you regret?

This year, if you cannot get to a seashore, spend some time praying with John 21: 1-14. Have a quiet breakfast of fish and bread on the shore with the Risen Jesus and talk it all over with Him.

THE NIGHT SKY

For millennia people have looked up at our own small Milky Way Galaxy and have been amazed at the beauty of the night sky. Now, in our time, the Hubble telescope and the telescopes of the European Southern Observatory based in southern Chile, have revealed to us billions of galaxies beyond our own. We now have pictures that are quite literally overwhelming. We stand in awe at their breath-taking colors, shapes, sizes, and energy. Their images are more than our minds and hearts can grasp. We wonder . . . in this immeasurably vast expanse of beauty, mixed with violence and randomness, is our Creator trying to show us the immensity of his love, the tender mystery of his providence?

What memories do you have of night skies, moons, or, perhaps, shooting stars that you saw somewhere, sometime? What are these memories saying to you?

Do you find that gazing at the night sky is an experience of the infinite that is, at the same time, also, an experience of quiet intimacy? It is quite extraordinary.

I hope that once or twice during your jubilee year, you will see a splendid night sky and have time to enjoy it. Imagine what it must have been like for Abraham, when God took him outside and made the promise: “Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so, shall your descendants be” (Genesis 15: 5). What promise has God made to you? How has it come true?

RIVERS

Rivers play an important role in the history of our congregation. One thinks immediately of the Danube or the Mississippi, but there are many others we could name. Rivers are a part of life for many of us and we have loved the waters that flow near our homes and convents. They bring life and, sometimes, destruction. When they become powerful surges they can sweep everything away. Often, however, they appear as placid streams that can meander around all obstacles.

We do not usually see the place in the highlands, far away, where our beloved rivers spring up. But we do watch them flow along to the sea, inexorably seeking their destiny. They just keep rolling along.

Perhaps sometime in this jubilee year, you can stand on a riverbank and see the flow. It may call you to meditate on the passage of time. Who traveled this river before us? Who will come after us? Can you see yourself as part of that flow of life?

You might make this experience a period of prayer in which you reflect on the course of your religious life as a river. What were the moments when you changed course? How do you feel now about those times, those events, those decisions? Did you meander around some obstacles? Were you ever swept away by a raging storm? How did you find yourself again?

Be grateful for the ebb and flow of the rivers of your life. See all the people whose lives have flowed into yours. See yourself as part of the inexorable movement of all things toward the immense sea of God's love. This image can be a consoling way for us to anticipate our end, our transformation into eternity, our inevitable journey into the arms of God.

Above all, dear Sisters, celebrate God's goodness to you and your fidelity over the years.

In the name of Mother Theresa and of the entire congregation, I bless you and assure you of the support of our prayers and love. Thank you for all you have been and for all you will become in God's grace. *Jubilate Deo!* Blessed Jubilee!

May the Lord of heaven and earth be with you always,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sister Mary Maher". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sister Mary Maher, SSND
General Superior

* Oxford, England: Lion Hudson, plc: 2011.