

## Invitation to an open-eyed mysticism .

### Introduction.

Dear Sisters,

I am very glad that many of you have received the Message of the General Congregation so positively, and taken it as a pointer to show us the direction for the coming years. But honestly, reading the text of the message, I asked myself something with uneasiness. Haven't we boasted too much in this text? Haven't we set the bar too high, if the introduction says:

*'In a world wounded by the scandal of injustice we affirm that God's creation belongs to everyone. ... Mary Ward calls us to be rooted in God, passionate for Christ, courageous prophets ready to take risks. She invites us to go beyond our limits to where the need is greater, living the Just soul virtues of freedom, justice and sincerity.'*

If we want to be women like Mary Ward, turning ourselves into **courageous prophets passionate for Christ**, aiming to **denounce the scandal of a world wounded by injustice**; women who set out to **cross frontiers**, and ready to **take risks**, we are really demanding a lot of ourselves. Knowing that this ought not to remain mere rhetoric, we have dedicated this day to trying to relate the inspiration of the General Congregation to our real situation. We have asked 'Where might we experience misery in our practical daily life? And how can we respond to these cries?

### **'See the circuit of all the earth' (Exx.102)**

In front of us is the globe. It symbolizes our world as a whole –or, as St. Ignatius says in his 'Contemplation on the Incarnation', 'the great extent of the surface of the earth,, inhabited by so many different peoples'(Exx.103) You probably know 'Google Earth.' With this information-programme it is possible to bring the earth as seen from a satellite onto the computer-screen. With the optic zoom it is possible to see a specific country, a specific place, a specific street. In this way, through Internet and satellite, we can bring to the screen,

for example, our own house where we were born. Ignatius goes through a similar exercise with his reflection on the Incarnation. From the perception of the whole world he allows us to 'focus 'on the province of Galilee, the town of Nazareth, the Virgin Mary's little room. We have done the same thing ourselves, this morning. From the circuit of the whole earth we have 'focussed' on the reality of our communities and the specific misery of the people we meet every day.

Now I want to invite you in the opposite way to widen our gaze and to look beyond the limited horizon. It is said of St. Ignatius that he was a man on the threshold between the Middle Ages and the modern age which was about to dawn. And this is certain.

As 'globalization' is the word supposed to have characterized our age since the 1990s, often we don't realise that the 'first globalization' happened at the time when Ignatius of Loyola was born. When Columbus reached Central America in 1492, thinking that he had reached India, the earth turned round for the first time, literally made itself into the globe. The period in which Europeans thought that the world came to an end at the west coast of Spain, at 'finis terrae', was definitely over. A new age began.

One can see in Ignatius his fascination by a new, global vision of the world. His brothers and relatives belonged to the generation of mariners who set out towards new shores – and in this respect he himself is a profoundly 'modern' man. Only from this fact can his enthusiasm for 'universal mission' be understood. But Ignatius is not simply another 'conquistador', another one who wanted to extend the European and Christian dominion over the world at others' cost. He perceives the 'others' in a different way. He calls our attention to 'the great extent of the surface of the earth, 'inhabited by so many different peoples', 'in such great diversity in dress and manner of acting. Some are white, some black' (Exx.103, 106).

Evidently Ignatius was fascinated by the rich and colourful diversity of skin and cultures. But what he lets us see in his reflection on the incarnation is everything but the ordinariness of the surface of the earth. Let me explain what I want to say with an image which shows the opposite. Some years ago a prizewinning photographic poster from Benetton was to be seen all over

Europe: happy, chubby babies from different continents smiled out at us from the poster, and the different colours of their skin made the shirts in Benetton colours shine out even more brightly. This image conveyed to us the variety of peaceful living together, in a world where all live together in harmony and where all have the same opportunities. That is an absolute lie. A new-born German baby has resources forty times greater than a baby born in present-day south-east Africa.

Ignatius does not hand on platitudes to us, but insists that we open our eyes to the truth – and do not look away when it starts to hurt. This world is not a harmonious universe, but contradictory and heart-breaking: ‘some at peace and some at war, some weeping, some laughing; some well, some sick; some coming into the world, and some dying, etc.’ (Exx.106) This gaze which penetrates the depths and is capable of seeing reality as it is, is in fact the gaze of the Trinity. ‘I have seen the oppression of my people in Egypt ... And I am concerned about their suffering.’ (Ex.3:7) What moves God’s heart is seeing humanity ‘in great blindness, going down to death and descending into hell.’ (Exx.106) – and this gaze draws from his inmost being the reaction of the Redemption, the incarnation of his beloved Son.

The ‘Contemplation on the Incarnation’ happens in three steps – ‘see-speak-act.’ The first thing that we are called to do is to let ourselves be freed from our ‘visual disorder’, our limited vision, and to widen our gaze to see the world as God sees it. ‘Contemplation’ comes from ‘contemplate’ – which means ‘gaze’ Doesn’t it seem strange that very often we think that we shall achieve contemplation better if we close our eyes? Ignatius invites us to open our eyes – to wake up and look with complete attention! A little while ago a book was published by Johann Baptist Metz – ‘Mysticism with open eyes. When spirituality breaks down and sends out.’ We do not meet the mystery of God in bland superficiality, still less in the depths of our own soul, but where we expose ourselves to reality, where we bear his contradictory and destructive being and allow ourselves to be hurt by his misery.

In times when our opportunities for seeing and perceiving are directed towards the global by the new technologies, this seems an excessive demand. Human beings of previous generations were not permanently confronted with catastrophes beyond their local horizon. Modern means of communication

enable us to follow in real time what is happening at this moment on the other side of the world. The way we are inundated every day through the screen is unbearable – victims destroyed by terrorists, the misery of refugees, natural disasters. We see everything – but at the same time we see nothing. The news is squashed between ‘Who wants to be a millionaire?’ and the last episode of the soap. Everything is relativized – and at the same time the apparent omnipresence of the communications-media is extremely selective. For a few weeks the catastrophe of famine in the Horn of Africa was in the headlines – to give way to other subjects the moment the public got bored, and disappear from our conscience with amazing speed. But death went on, silent and unnoticed. In the whole world 100,000 people die each day from hunger and the immediate consequences of hunger. And Jean Ziegler<sup>1</sup> affirms that ‘Anyone who dies of hunger today is victim of an assassination.’

If the first step in the reflection on the incarnation is ‘to see the persons’, the second step is to ‘hear what the persons are saying to each other.’ (EXX.107) What God sees flows into the Trinitarian conversation, the conversation of the three divine persons among themselves. ‘Love consists in communication’ says the Contemplation for obtaining love.’ (Exx.231). If we enter into conversation among ourselves, if we share about what we see, where we see misery, and seek ways to be able to respond to this misery- then we shall do the same thing as the divine persons. In a somewhat daring theological formulation: our communities are called to bring about in themselves the Trinitarian conversation of love – places of apostolic discernment in community: let us encourage one another to see the truth, share about what we see and what we experience – and seek together how we can respond to the reality we have seen.

For the third step, finally, is ‘to see what the persons **do**’: seeing and talking are not enough. ‘Look and you will see what has to be done’, says the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas. If anyone really agrees to open his eyes, if anyone gives up his defence-mechanisms and lets himself be hurt by reality – his contemplation will inevitably turn into action. It is not just any way of acting – it is collaboration in God’s redemptive action, and following Jesus. We are called to risk ourselves with Jesus to respond to the misery that cries to

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<sup>1</sup> Special reporter to the UNO for the Right to Food,, 2000-2008

heaven, to 'bring the Good News to the poor, to 'set captives free', and to 'proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Lk.4:18). This calls for our unconditional commitment as persons and as communities.'

### **From the perspective of El Salvador**

I would like to share with you in a few words from my particular perspective, the world seen from El Salvador. Since my youth I have been moved by the desire to 'see the world from the other side', even in the geographical sense. But I could never have imagined that it would cost so much. Inside myself there was a clash of totally different points of view. Much of what I had taken until then as 'the' reality has come deeply into question.

El Salvador belongs to the regions of the world which live in danger of earthquakes. Geologists say that earthquakes are produced because the surface of the earth is not simply firm, but the continental plates float above the burning magma – and from time to time clash in some place well below the ocean. This produces earthquakes – or at least 'tremors', as the Salvadoreans say. This is exactly what has become a metaphor for what is happening in my consciousness. The European point of view and the Latin American clashed in the depths of my subconscious – and that has brought down much of what until then had seemed unshakeable and secure. I want to invite you to expose yourselves a little to this tremor.

### **Brief summary of the history of El Salvador**

In 1492 Columbus reached, America, which he took to be India – more precisely, the Bahamas, which are level with Mexico. The Spanish conquest of Latin America began in Central America – present-day Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. At the beginning of the conquest about 4 million people lived in this region. In not even 50 years this number was reduced to half a million by cruel subjection, hard labour by slaves, and the 'flu virus introduced by the Europeans, to which the immune system of the indigenous people could put up no defence. The Christianization of Latin America was always to be tragically correlated with this slaughter of entire peoples.

Thank God there were also among the missionaries some who recognized and denounced the injustice. The best-known among these is Bartolomé de Las Casas. One of his brethren, Antoni de Montesinos, preached in Advent 1511:

*'This voice, he said, says that you are all in mortal sin, and you will live and die in it through the cruelty and tyranny which you use with these innocent people. Tell me, by what right and what justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude? By what authority have you made such detestable wars against these peoples who were living quietly and peacefully in their lands, where you have consumed such infinite numbers of them with unheard-of deaths and devastations? How can you keep them so oppressed and worn out, without giving them food or healing them of their illnesses, which they incur from the excessive work you give them, putting them to death, or rather slaughtering them, to dig and acquire gold each day? And what care do you take of those whom you teach, who know their God and Creator, are baptised, hear Mass, keep the feasts and Sundays? Are they not men? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not obliged to love them as yourselves? Do you not understand this? How are you in such depths of sleep, sleeping so lethargically? Hold it for certain that in the state which you are in, you cannot be saved any more than the Moors and Turks, who lack or do not want faith in Christ.'*

When in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the struggle for Central American independence was completed, the liberation of the native population from the Spaniards was not discussed in any way, but only that of the oligarchy with Spanish roots in Latin America – 'the Creoles'- which was struggling not to pay tribute to the Spanish crown, and to make itself politically independent of the mother country. This made the situation of the Indians still worse, because until then the laws of the Spanish crown had guaranteed them a certain protection, while from that time forward they were exposed completely to the mercy of the new masters.

The year 1932 marked a national trauma for El Salvador. At that time coffee was the most important product for export and the national economy. 90% of the cultivable land was in the hands of the landlords, and the field workers had to live on a miserable wage which was paid to them for picking the coffee. Above all, this work was seasonal. After the famous collapse of the New York stock-exchange in 1929 and the crisis for the global economy related to this event the coffee prices fell. The miserable wages which until then had not

been enough for the survival of the families was cut still more. In this desperate situation there was an uprising of the day-labourers in the fields, the majority of whom were indigenous. And then the dictator General Martinez repressed this uprising in a cruel and bloody way. In a few days about 30,000 labourers died. This meant at the same time the end of the indigenous culture of El Salvador. The survivors fled to the mountains, buried their indigenous clothes, stopped speaking their language in public - and denied their identity, to avoid being the target of more attacks.

Over the centuries El Salvador maintained a fatal symbiosis between the oligarchy (the famous 'fourteen families' in whose hands were the means of production, the military who governed the country and held the population in check in the most cruel way, and the Catholic Church which helped to establish this inhuman and unjust system). Only after the General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 did a change come in the Church's attitude. The bishops united together at this time sought to follow the lines of Vatican II and open themselves to the world. But the world which burst into the Church was not that of enlightened modernity, but the world of the poor who saw themselves exposed to an injustice crying to heaven. So the bishops formulated: 'The Latin American Church 'cannot remain indifferent, faced with the tremendous social injustices existing in Latin America, which keep the majority of our peoples in a painful poverty close in many cases to inhuman misery.'<sup>2</sup>

### **The Salvadorean prophets and martyrs.**

In El Salvador the impulse from Medellin was received only in a vacillating way. One of the first to realize the new ecclesiastical direction was Rutilio Grande, who at that time was one of the first Salvadoreans to have entered the Society of Jesus. In the 1970s the field-workers began to organize themselves afresh in El Salvador because their situation had changed unbearably again because of the economic crisis. The landlords reacted as always with brutal repression and with the formation of paramilitary organizations which terrified the people. In this context Rutilio Grande developed a conscientising and liberating model of pastoral work. The Church really changed front. Its actions now were not

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<sup>2</sup> General Episcopal Conference of Latin America, Medellin, 1968, 14/1/1 and 2

merely charity and assistance for the poor, but the Church was converted into a real 'Church of the poor', where the poor had a voice and a vote. The first generations of catechists were trained and base-communities began to flourish. In 1977 Rutilio Grande was assassinated, together with an old sacristan and a young member of the community, when they met on the way to celebrate the Eucharist in the little town of El Paisnal. They fell as victims on the open street before the firing of military rifles from the 'death-squads', the landlords' paramilitaries.

Oscar Romero, the recently-appointed archbishop of El Salvador, had until then been one of the sharpest critics of Medellin. His conservative thinking and his friendship with the influential families seemed to the government a guarantee against the new ecclesiastical trend which was threatening to dissolve the Church's pact with the oligarchy. But in spite of the gulfs which separated Oscar Romero from Rutilio Grande's vision, they had been friends from the time of their formation. His friend's death was a key-experience for Romero and provoked a profound conversion in him. Just as Jesus began his public work with John's imprisonment (Mk.1:14), so Romero, timid and committed to a traditional theology, woke from his sleep when they killed Rutilio. In his three years as archbishop of El Salvador he raised a strong and loving voice for the poor. He also paid with his life; on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1980 they killed him with bullets at the altar.

With the assassination of Oscar Romero civil war broke out. At the attempts of the workers, day-labourers and field-workers to organize into unions, and to achieve agricultural reform through peaceful protests, there was a new response with brutality on the part of the military police, and terror from the death-squads. So the people saw no way out but to take up arms and to form themselves in ever-greater numbers into guerrillas. The first years of war were the most cruel, with terrifying massacres among the civil population by the military (El Mozote, Rio Sumpul, etc.) By the end of the war in 1992 the civil war had claimed about 75,000 human lives. The military were financed by thousands of millions of dollars from the United States. Following the logic of the Cold War they fought the phantom of Communism in this tiny country (about as big as Upper Bavaria) at the expense of the defenceless population.



The élite unit 'Atlacatl', one of those most responsible for the cruel attacks on the civil population, had been trained in the United States.

Ignacio Ellacuría, another key figure in the recent history of El Salvador, of Basque origin, and a Jesuit, had been sent by the Society of Jesus aged 18, as a novice, to El Salvador. From 1967 he belonged to the recently-established Central American José Simeón Canas University (the university in which I am working today). Later on he became rector of it. Ellacuría was one of Romero's most intimate collaborators. When the civil war broke out in 1980 he came to the conclusion that the armed struggle was justified in face of the barbaric reprisals. But in February 1981, a short time after the failure of the 'final offensive' of the guerrillas, Ellacuría spoke from exile in Nicaragua, communicating his evaluation that nobody could win the war and that the only solution would be negotiation between the two parties in conflict. He defended the guerillas' intention, but noted clearly that it would be the poor who would suffer most in the struggle.

Ellacuría was profoundly Jesuit and a man profoundly political. He expressed this in his interpretation of the Spiritual Exercises, in the colloquy with the crucified (Exx.53).

'All I want is two things: that you should set your eyes and your heart on those peoples who are suffering so much – some from misery and hunger, others from oppression and repression – and, since I am a Jesuit, that before this crucified people you should make St. Ignatius' colloquy from the First Week of the Exercises, asking yourselves 'What have I done to crucify them? What am I doing to stop them from being crucified? And what ought I to do that this people may rise again?''<sup>3</sup>

For Ellacuría the criteria for decision should never be either an abstract doctrine or a political ideology. The one criterion for what should guide political action is rather 'What helps the 'crucified people'? In it Ellacuría recognised the presence of Christ crucified.

His valiant commitment to dialogue and negotiations between the parties in the conflict to end the war finally cost Ellacuría's life. To eliminate witnesses of

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<sup>3</sup>Ellacuría, The Latin American churches question the Church of Spain, in *Sal Terrae* 3 (1982), 230

the crime his whole community, five more Jesuits, as well as the community cook and her daughter, had to die as well. In 1989, after about ten years of a struggle in David-Goliath style – between an army equipped with high technology and guerrillas acting with peasant shrewdness – the guerrillas still had the force for an offensive which succeeded in spreading as far as the capital. At that moment Ellacuría was in Spain where he received an award for human rights. Despite the danger that threatened he returned to El Salvador a few days before his death – we might say that he ‘went up to Jerusalem.’ The military were obsessed with the idea of ‘cutting off the head’ of the Left, which meant eliminating the intellectuals. On 16<sup>th</sup> November 1989 a death-squad entered the Jesuit house on the university campus and did its dirty work.

For me, Ellacuría’s death became a symbol of our faith that death on the cross, so cruel and evidently so senseless, has redemptive force. What Ellacuría could not do with his brilliant intelligence and his tireless commitment, was achieved by his death and the death of his brothers and sisters. The outcry of international indignation at this barbarous attack was so massive that the United States could not continue with its fatal politics. And finally the drying up of the stream of money forced the Salvadorean military to accept the guerrillas as a partner in negotiations – and not only as terrorists to eliminate.

In 1992 the war ended officially with the Peace Accord. At the beginning, this provoked a wave of hope. The guerrilla disarmed and the army was purged, the agrarian reform was maintained, a civil police was founded. The former guerrilla saw itself accepted as a political party, democratic structures were established, and a Truth Commission established by the UNO published its final report ‘From Madness to Hope.’ But it is significant for the deep ambivalence of Salvadorean post-war history that, immediately after the publication of the Truth Commission’s report, the Salvadorean Legislative Assembly decreed general amnesty and all the war-criminals went unpunished.

### **El Salvador today.**

Where is El Salvador today? It is certain that the situation of El Salvador has changed dramatically in the last decades – and nevertheless since the civil war in a certain sense ‘everything goes on as before.’ The history of violence never recognised and overcome makes itself notable today like an irrationally- and

incalculably-shaped boomerang. Gangs, used by the drug-mafia and for any kind of political interest, tear each other apart and terrorize the majority of the population who don't have the resources to pay a private security-army. According to a UNO statistic, El Salvador belongs to the countries with the highest assassination-index on the world scale, 71 persons per 100,000 inhabitants per year. In comparison with this index, Austria has 0.9.. In 2011 a sad climax was reached, with more than 4.300 victims that year.

In the context of globalisation El Salvador can be understood as a microcosm revealing the state of the whole world. On an extremely small scale the drama is occurring which is destroying the whole world and which is pushing it towards the abyss: between the few who dispose of the greater part of disposable resources and the many who have not enough to survive on. But precisely the irreversible interconnection of the microcosm with the macrocosm makes the situation so desperately confused. In the 1970s it was obvious that there had to be a struggle for a more just distribution of the land and against the military dictatorship. Today, how to apply the lever to turn the situation effectively in favour of the 'crucified people' remains in a mist.

However, the Salvadorean 'prophets and martyrs' continue to inspire and to awaken hope. Just as they accepted their historic moment with courage, creativity and surrender of their lives, in the same way the present moment is entrusted to today's Christians - especially to the religious, men and women. Today the challenge is our conversion – and that means breaking the deadly spiral of 'growth' without equity, and seeking closeness and commitment with the poor. Further, it challenges us not only to live this as an individual programme, subject to escapism, but to translate it into political dimensions. The disposition to make visible to heaven the perverse and what poisons without letting oneself be paralysed by fear of doing something ridiculous by seeming naïve - and the effort to mobilise all intellectual resources at our disposal to develop effective strategies to decrease the number of victims of hunger and of the violence of their cross – might be one description of the following of Jesus today. And this has to be brought about every day in El Salvador – equally in Central Europe and all over the world – with fidelity, stubbornness and creativity, which is to say step by step each day.