

Marta Zechmeister's response to Gemma Simmond's address

Mary Ward's address to her companions and friends

My dear friends!

You've come here to Rome from every continent on earth to celebrate together the fruits of my life. Your trust both scares and excites me. In their eloquent words Gemma and Mary have convinced me that I really do have something worth saying to you even today – something that might point out the way to you, something to renew and inspire your life and service.

What God had in store for me way back then is totally beyond our grasp and pure grace; how he took me, painfully shy as I was, and gently but firmly freed me from all that was holding me back, interiorly and exteriorly. From the outset, what drove me on was a great longing for God. That longing gave me the strength to cut myself off from those I loved and leave my homeland. The fact that I sought God initially within the safe and secure environment of a convent is totally understandable. You remember how earnest I was about it all. And yet I couldn't fool myself, I had made a mistake! God drew me inexorably onwards into an unimaginable adventure, an endless pilgrim journey.

Dear friends, wherever home is for you, whether you are numbered among the old or the young, whether you are sisters with vows or attached to me and my congregation as companions and friends: let your longing draw you towards God. Let that longing be the lodestone of your life and do not let yourself be choked by the need for security or the fear of loss. Right up to my death my life was a constant setting out, there was no such thing as settling down and putting down roots. How many thousands of kilometres did I cover without the comfort of modern means of transport? How many frontiers did I cross, sometimes as civil war raged around us? In how many languages did I strive to make myself understood - with varying degrees of success? In spite of forced inactivity, my pilgrimage towards God did not even come to a halt when I was arrested by the Inquisition or laid low by illness. It is touching how lovingly you have held on to my shabby shoes and my pilgrim hat right to this very day. However, to hold on to them merely as souvenirs to be admired would be all too facile. Do not spare yourselves – set out on the happy adventure of your life and your vocation!

To your ears it must sound old-fashioned. Yet what is written in the inscriptions on the Painted Life is quite true: God showed me clearly that “to help souls attain salvation is a far more excellent gift than monastic life.” Those whom God calls to be apostles – be they male or female – are promised no “resting place in the things of this world”, yet God gives them a great and joyful freedom. No security or success can equal this – and there is no greater closeness to God than to co-operate as companions with Jesus in his work of redemption. Your longing to seek and find him will be fulfilled to the extent that you are prepared to become people for others. Do not make yourselves or even your ministries and communities the hub of your universe, rather open your eyes, ears and heart to those who were Jesus' priority then as now. God has sent you “to bring the good news to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and set the downtrodden free.”

Gemma reminded us that the glory of God is the human person fully alive. Granted it takes great courage – and humility – to look in the mirror in this way. This redeemed and liberated view of oneself, going beyond vanity and self-deception, is the fruit of a long interior journey – and is pure grace. Set out on this journey, wake up and become fully alive and awaken others to life. The glory of God shines forth from every human face, the face of every man, woman and child. Only those who are able to bear the sight of this glory will also be able to feel the unspeakable pain of lives threatened and destroyed. Come down from the ivory tower of your comfort zones, your personal worries and routines. Engage with people, become involved, find out what is oppressing people and driving them to despair. Let God use you as instruments of healing and liberation, as messengers of his tender and life-giving nearness.

Oscar Romero loved that saying of St Irenaus and expanded on it: “The glory of God is a poor person fully alive”. Your world that is apparently so round and globalised is actually torn asunder and full of deadly tensions. Your world is full of people, especially women and children, driven from their homeland by violence, hunger and poverty. There is a yawning chasm between the few who stand to gain and the many lacking the basic necessities of life, such as clean water, basic nourishment, education and health care. These excluded and superfluous people of your day are today the beloved of God. Draw close to them and take them to your heart. Your life will be transformed, it will become simpler and pared down to its very essentials – and you will find God.

Have the courage to be at the service of those who are at the bottom of the pile, who are trodden underfoot. And have the courage to obey: in doing so, don't think that the world revolves around you and don't quibble at allowing yourselves to be used, if necessary. But never forget that service and obedience have nothing to do with servility and obsequiousness. To serve does not mean to cringe and obedience does not signify subjection or childish dependency. It is an essential part of service to defy those who lord it over others. The truly obedient are interiorly free and are capable of listening attentively to God's will. They are bold enough to face up decisively and firmly to the powerful and strong who distort and disfigure the image of God. Don't be under any illusion: this will inevitably lead to conflict. The person who acts like this will pay the price. Those you considered your friends will turn against you. However, don't be afraid of conflict; be afraid, rather, of peace at any price. Such a peace turns us into accomplices and collaborators because we look the other way and say nothing, or, because it is easier, remain ignorant or plead helplessness, or we are simply taken up with concerns about our own personal advancement and reputation or that of the community or the Church.

To this very day I fail to understand what gave me the courage to go against the opinion of the learned theologians of my day, to stand up and say calmly and clearly: No, you are wrong! Women are not innately weak in understanding, hysterical and morally unreliable. No, in the search for God and truth women and men are equal. We are capable of great deeds and we are called to active service in the Kingdom of God as teachers of the faith, filled with the Spirit, as prophetesses of God's justice: women through whom God's tenderness and compassion are made present in this world. With respect, it is a lie to say that our womanly nature or God-given limitations would prevent that.

It would be all too easy if all of this had only been a problem for my era and had been resolved long ago. No, Gemma made it abundantly clear that there is still a great deal for you to do. Your world too is determined by relationships built on the premise that some are above and others are below, that some wield power and others are in subjection. Such relationships are joyless and barren, and what is more, they stifle life. At the same time, do not be led to believe that women by their very nature are better human beings and that they are not also prone to fall victim to a lust for power. Break free from the straitjacket of predetermined roles. Believe in your capabilities; be creative and inventive as architects of a new way of being together in solidarity; do not diminish, control or exploit, but allow others their rightful stature and allow life to flourish and bloom at every level. It may well be that men's initial reaction is shock or even aggression, when you no longer seek them out as your strong protectors and wise counsellors, but behave as equal partners on equal footing. Just relax and don't forget that you are rendering them an important service. Only on the basis of equality can men and women cooperate to make our world a more human place – and counter the lust for power and profit which daily claims countless human victims. Be whole women, and don't be afraid to enter into areas of activity that were once considered the prerogative of men, such as politics, economics and science. We women are not just an embellishment for the hard facts established by men. Nevertheless, if at all possible, preserve your sense of humour and your womanly charm.

I am infinitely grateful and proud of what has grown from the seed I tried to sow. Those who sow in tears will sing when they reap. I am grateful and proud of what has been accomplished in my name on all five continents. Go to the edges and above all to those who are excluded. For that I am pleading for the fullness of God's blessing upon you, to be with you and strengthen you. However, I would like to end with a word to my sisters in the "old" European provinces and especially to those whose life is drawing to a close. There were 14 long years between the Bull of Suppression in 1631, which destroyed so much, and my death in 1645 – almost a quarter of my life. I had to withstand the destruction of a major part of my work, that work that my companions and I had built up with so much audacity and enthusiasm – not to mention the sacrifices, the love and the obstinate patient persistence. For me, those were years of financial difficulty, serious illness and ever dwindling physical strength. I know what it means to look on helplessly, while the project in which you have invested so much energy and enthusiasm collapses before your very eyes. Your pain is my pain. Nevertheless, drive out the demon of bitterness and let no one rob you of your sense of humour. Do not cling on tenaciously – because, if something is coming to an end, that does not mean it was worthless. None of your love will be lost; a fulfilled life bears its own meaning and worth. Do not be afraid of death; rather be afraid of going to seed. The most valuable legacy that you can give to your young sisters, but also to the young dynamic provinces, is the witness that the mystery of fruitfulness lies in the acceptance of death.

The religious orders have no guarantee that they will continue to exist until the end of time. Hundreds of them have already died out and I don't know what God has in store for my work. However, one thing I do know for certain: the one who tries to win and hold on tightly will lose. Do not talk about surrender, live it! Surrender yourselves – as individuals and communities to the mystery from which all life comes and to which it returns. Jesus addressed this mystery in familiar terms, saying: "Abba, beloved Father". Don't cling to your life and your works; free yourselves

from anxiety about your own importance and you will be caught up in the arms of this loving Father, this loving Mother. Thus, freed from yourselves, God's Holy Spirit will be able to create something new among you. Then it will happen that God will pour out his Spirit upon you: "Your sons and daughters will prophecy; your young people will see visions and your old will dream dreams". (Joel 3:1)