

EGC 2024

**Opening Welcome** – Judy Donovan

It is a joy to welcome us all to this Extended General Council (EGC) here in Le Puy, the place of our origins, the source of our charism. An EGC is ‘a consultative and participatory body in which each member is personally responsible with others for the life of the Congregation. It is an occasion to listen and to reflect together, to experience mutual conversion and to foster unity in the midst of diversity.’<sup>1</sup>

We have arrived from all over the world having extracted ourselves from many pressing matters. While our bodies are here, our heads and hearts might be elsewhere. I invite us all to ask for the grace to be truly present these next days: to God working within and around us, to each other and the kinds of conversations we will have, to the movement of the Spirit which already is among us and urging us in the direction of God’s dream. Let us be here. Let us be present. Let us together create a welcoming temporary shelter for each other.

I use that imagery of a temporary shelter because we are in an ancient place of pilgrimage. In the 10<sup>th</sup> Century Bishop Godescalc of Le Puy traveled from here to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, to the tomb of St. James. This journey became the famous Camino of Europe, a pilgrimage route that has continued for 11 centuries. In the Middle Ages, Le Puy itself became a pilgrimage destination when thousands of seekers a year began flocking to the great Basilica’s sanctuary to pay devotion to the Black Madonna, brought to Le Puy by Saint Louis on his return from the crusades. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century we were born in this place of pilgrimage and sent out, as pilgrims, to ‘love God and neighbor without distinction’. Next year will be the 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of that pilgrimage!

And last year, after General Chapter and our local Chapters of Application, we all set off again, with our Sisters and lay partners, on a new leg of the pilgrimage, guided by our new Chapter Orientations which call us to be Women of the Dawn who, ‘embrace our vulnerabilities and step out of our securities by courageously taking risks in our commitment to solidarity with the most vulnerable, in a process of personal and congregational transformation’.<sup>2</sup>

This EGC is like a temporary shelter, a place to pause on the pilgrim’s path, providing the time to stop, rest, reflect, and redirect. A time and place to glance back at the road we’ve come from, share stories of the journey, and adjust our maps and plans for the next piece of the road.

Pilgrimages have always been both inner and outer journeys that not only require attention to the logistics of the trail, but also to what is happening along with way in the pilgrim’s heart and soul. This is an inner searching, requiring letting go and openness to the new.

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<sup>1</sup> Constitutions #158

<sup>2</sup> 2023 General Chapter Orientation, Call For Today

Welcome to this time and place of inner and outer nourishment and refreshment, of reflecting honestly about where we've come from and setting ourselves for the next stretch of road.

Some of you have been to more EGC's than you perhaps can count and know everyone in the room. Some of you are meeting each other for the first time. Whether you think you know someone or not, I invite us all to take the time while we are here to get to know each other better, setting up one-on-one conversations during breaks and free time.

Pope Francis, in the opening liturgy of the Synod, called us to be, 'a church that makes itself a conversation'<sup>3</sup>. Imagine curious, vulnerable, reciprocal conversations leading us beyond superficial chats to the soul level with each other? Imagine that happening among us, with and among your sisters back home, with our lay partners? Imagine the transformation that could be ignited! This is the call and challenge of the Synod. And this is our call and challenge as congregational leaders as well.

Reflecting on another famous pilgrimage, the Emmaus journey of Luke 24, the Pope also said, 'We need a Church unafraid of going forth into the night...capable of meeting others on their way. ...of entering into their conversation.'<sup>4</sup> This sounds like the mission of Women of the Dawn to me!

Not only do we as leaders need these kinds of conversations, our world desperately needs them. Truly curious conversations, especially with those with whom we think we have nothing in common, those whom we have judged as being wrong or misguided, have the power to disrupt stereotyping, dissolve easy judgements, and challenge pre-set conclusions. These kinds of conversations are hard, and they are necessary. And beyond just a nice way to get to know each other, they create hope, restore faith, and stir us, like the Emmaus disciples, into action. They return us, re-energized, to our mission.

Our quests, Annick and Luc from ESDAC tonight and tomorrow, Nancy Bancroft later in the week, and Sr. Simone Sauges, our translator, will be reminding us of the practices of both profound spiritual conversations, good intercultural communication, and healthy group dynamics. We are grateful to have them with us.

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<sup>3</sup> Oct. 4, 2023, quoting Pope Paul VI ([Encyclical Letter \*Ecclesiam suam\*, 65](#))

<sup>4</sup> Address of Pope Francis, Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil, Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro, XXVIII World Youth Day, 28 July 2013,

This is the first EGC that our Sisters representing Maine, USA and the Sisters of England and Ireland are not with us in person. They will be joining us tomorrow via their sharing the State of the House, and they will be present in our prayers and hearts, but we will miss their physical presence.

Their physical absence will help remind us each day that during this pilgrim's pause this week, we carry with us and make present all of our Sisters around the world, our lay partners without whom we cannot imagine living our charism today, and all the people, creatures and creation herself to whom we are accountable for truly being Women of the Dawn who, 'Amidst the darkness and death all around us, (seek) to be women of radical boldness, sustaining hope, collaborating with life-giving efforts wherever and however we can.'<sup>5</sup>

May our time together in Le Puy, in this temporary shelter along our pilgrim way, deepen and energize us to go forth on that mission. Welcome, pilgrims!

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<sup>5</sup> 2023 General Chapter, Call for Today