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I feel very much at home

I am very happy to speak to you before an important moment: your general chapter. I'm doing it as a long time friend of the Fraternity, not just here at Tre Fontane, an important place with its humility and spirit of prayer among so many baroque monuments in Rome. I'm not just a friend of Tre Fontane, but also a friend of different fraternities that I have met during my trips around the world: often in troubled places, places of conflict or on the margins, like – as I recall – Damascus or elsewhere. And I'm also doing it as a friend of the general responsible about to finish her mandate, but still young and lively, little sister Maria Chiara with whom I became friends during the 25th anniversary of the meetings in the spirit of Assisi with Benedict XVI. The spirit of Assisi is simple and important: religions live together and found peace.

I also recall my relation with L Sr Magdeleine. Seeing several little sisters come to Sant'Egidio when the community first began, she asked to meet me. And that's how a friendship grew between us, to the point that I was asked to give my testimony when her cause for beatification was started. I recall that during one meeting she asked me point blank, "Do you trust Gorbachev?" She died on the eve of the Soviet leader's visit to Rome. What struck me about her was a deep faith, and an attitude that was different from that of a nun, a mother superior or an inspired foundress. She had a pronounced taste for the world, in its diversity and variety, which emanated through her words and her life.

I recall the newspaper "Le Monde" in her hands, and her desire to know the news: "The Bible and the newspaper" the great theological Karl Barth used to say, affirming that a spark should be kindled from the daily reading of the Bible and the newspaper. Because a Christian cannot afford to be ignorant of what is going on around him. Besides, after the Council a "theology of the signs of the times" developed: it meant reading life and contemporary history in the light of the Word of God. We cannot remain strangers to the history going on each day. Little Sister Magdeleine wasn't an intellectual, an academic, a political woman – but as a Christian – she was passionate about history that she viewed through the eyes of the little and the marginal. In June 1950 she wrote:

Look at the map of the world. We've covered so little of it. And especially look at all those who are in suffering and who are calling out to us: prisoners, refugees, homeless people, street cleaners, dishwashers in restaurants, day labourers...and take them with you into your prayer until the day when we will be able to live with them.

In her little room there was a map of the world. She was little among the little but breathed with a universal breath. She was never satisfied with the borders she had reached but she always tried to go beyond them.

A life that was a paradox

Her life was modeled on that of Br Charles of Jesus: a geographic prayer that in Rene Voillaume's words paid attention to what was little and concentrated on what was universal. She shows how it's possible to be at the crossroads of the world without being political, partisan or a powerful woman but by being little and a sister. At these crossroads you meet such different people: politicians and partisans, good people and bandits...but you don't easily find a "sister" who's little.

The ambiguity of the word "sister", soeur in French, sorella or suora can mean two things. It also reveals the pressure which a little sister can undergo, tempted by assimilation into the dominant model of how to be nun. During her first years the foundress would hear repeatedly that there was a religious dignity that needed

to be safeguarded. Little sister or sister? For her, a little sister is sister to all, especially to the poor (in this regard John XXIII used to say before the Council: “The Church of all and especially of the poor”), but she is little and sees life as do the little in the evangelical sense: to become little like children. A way of seeing life that is both original and unique.

Within the Church, the category of religious for both men and women quashed diversity and assimilated all: Whether one was a contemplative nun, a Salesian, a teaching sister or a nursing sister, a student sister or so on. The category of religious weighs more heavily than the originality of the charism, calling all by the same name: “sisters”! But the truth is that before anything else, little sister Magdeleine wanted women who in life and in history were like little people because the story of the little is for her, big history: by being among the little and like the little one can pray, one can even be a contemplative.

I would like to define what Magdeleine asked of her sisters as being “a life that was a paradox” by using an expression taken from the beautiful Christian text which dates from the second half of the second century: it is written that Christians “witness to an admirable and undoubtedly paradoxical way of social living.” For your foundress, it was essential that little sisters be fully human. The fact of being human prevailed over the fact of being a religious. At the end of 1942, she wrote: “Before being religious be Christian. Have the simple human virtues of hospitality and charity at the highest possible level. And only after that add on the virtues of religious life.”

In the 20th century there has been a process of elimination of the lines that divide the different states of Christian life. Lay people, who used to be asked to mostly be passive in the Church became protagonists and people began to speak of the “interior monasticism” of lay people. Little sisters- you surely don’t need me to tell you this – you came to birth and grew, not as one more congregation in order to meet some need that no one else has yet managed to take care of. Your charism was that of being Christian women in the midst of all, and mostly especially among the poor according to the Gospel. Thus in 1949 little sister Magdeleine wrote to Fr. Voillaume that I met here in Tre Fontane:

“We need to build something new. Something which is old, which is of the authentic Christianity of the first disciples of Christ. We need to go back to the Gospel taken literally. It’s so painful to see to what an extent the Gospel has been forgotten...That’s why, like Christ, we need to be with sinners. He doesn’t find enough love among most of the ancient forms of Christian life, in most of the religious forms...”

Her intuition is something new and is unparalleled in the Church, but as old as the Gospel. To be Christian and little in history so as to love people who are not worth much in the eyes of the world, those who do not share our faith, Muslims, the least of this earth, and pray in their midst.

Far from the centre

Her intuition was to come out of the logic of the French centre of Catholicism which was so important at the time, situated at the heart of a colonial empire: missionary undertakings, teaching orders, missionaries, hospitals. The French Church, “eldest daughter of the Church” was the hub of a global movement. It was the vantage point from which those who wished to do good to the poorest nations viewed the world. How far from what Magdeleine wrote in 1947: “We are so so far removed from the French attitude of staying among our own, where one could easily think they were at the centre of it all.”

Magdeleine felt the need to “go out” of the centre. To go out is a dynamic among little sisters since the very beginning, something that has an affinity with nomads, Tuaregs in Algeria or Roms. Religious life, in part anyway, is based on stability, on the permanence of houses, in places linked with its story (expressions of a vocation); the religious life of a little sister is contrary, largely based on spiritual and concrete nomadism which are in Voillaume’s words a “pathway of poverty and love.” She herself was to say, “I never feel closer to God than when I am on the road.”

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Your foundress was marked by French culture and spirituality, like each one of us is by her native country. A large part of this French spirituality will later lead at Vatican II. Her life will consist in “moving out” of the French centre, by travelling the world, seeking to meet little people and those who are furthest away. We see it in the way she faced problems of the Second World War, conflicts for independence of the colonies and Algeria, apartheid, the division of Europe into two with the border closed by an iron curtain.

Sharing the life of the poor makes you come out of the culture of the centre and opens you up to universality. Her trips around the world, taking the roads of the poor of numerous cities made her live life as in an exodus. Universality is not cosmopolitan tourism but begins by being on the side of the poor. He who is with the poor begins to be universal.

To be with all, with the poor, with sinners. This is felt in all the places where the little sisters live. These are so different from monasteries and convents, because they do not want to be a different space but a house among others' homes. As of 1949 L Sr Magdeleine refused the name “French houses” for the little sisters because that meant the protection of France before the religious institutions of the world. Their homes had to be like their neighbours, little and poor, but welcoming all the same and not gloomy.

Such is the characteristic of a presence: littleness and fraternity, or, if you prefer, “sorority”. A presence that is not characterized by its work, a service or a social role, not even by an evangelizing mission. It is a presence ordered to living friendship, love...to living with everyone, creating links. Living friendship has been the only guiding light since 1938 when the foundress wrote that the “external activity consists only in the duty of creating bonds of friendship...” up until 1989 when she replied to Iris Mary, just back from intimate celebration at Saint Peters that, “I did not create the Fraternity so that we just live among ourselves. I founded the fraternity to be a testimony in the midst of the world: it isn't a monastery...”

Is it the time of the little sisters?

For the little sisters, the centre is on the exterior: among the poor, among people, neighbours, the destitute, in the peripheries and among those who are peripheral. In 1988 she wrote, “The Lord and the poor are the essence of the vocation of the fraternity.” The poor are those who dwell on the margins of the world. They are the “damned” in a world that, today, has become more nomad than ever with more than 65 million refugees: 1 person out of 113 in the world is displaced within his own country, a refugee or an asylum seekers.

The years of Pope Francis have highlighted the value of your charism and its harmony with the Church's orientations. One could say that it's the time of the little sisters, and at the same time, within your own fraternity you can feel certain weaknesses, a bit of trouble living this vocation together serenely. There's aging...I say it and share it interiorly, with a certain closeness on the part of Sant'Egidio, a community of lay people, founded in Rome in 1968 which works free of charge for the poor and for peace and for the cohabitation between religions in about 66 countries of the world. Our orientation is somewhat uncommon at the heart of the Church because very often the point of view that is adopted is that of the centre. In listening to Pope Francis also from a personal point of view, I became aware of my harmony with his whole way of speaking about the peripheries.

The Pope wants to get the Church which is so complex and manifold to move: he pushes it to go out, to not close in on itself in one or several centres, in one or several houses. He encourages it to go out towards the peripheries. In this sense, your geographical presence in the world is silently significant for the Church. Let us apply ourselves to better understand the turn Francis wants, that he has called pastoral conversion since his talk during the meeting among cardinals before the conclave. If we were to speak politically (which isn't appropriate) we could say it was his electoral speech.

The Church is called to go out of itself and to go towards the peripheries, not just geographical but also existential: there where the mystery of sin, pain, injustice, and ignorance dwell, where believers and thinking are despised, where all the miseries are present.

This way of speaking isn't new in the Church, and yet, at the same time it is radically new. There is first and foremost and clear direction: go out! It's the key word, also in Francis' manifesto *Evangelii Gaudium*...with Abraham becoming the emblematic figure. "*In the Word of God*" explains Francis, "*this dynamic of going out, that God provokes in believers, constantly appears. Abraham accepted the call to go towards a new land.*" It's the perspective of pastoral transformation into a "Church that goes out": not defending institutions, spaces, houses, works but going out. To go out also means to leave behind the balance that had been found.

To go out in this time of walls and fear

It is equally necessary to go out, because in our life as in the history of a community, there comes a tendency with the passage of time to no longer go out and to close in on oneself. With time – it's normal -the cursor that used to go ahead, risks repositioning itself on the past. Dreams diminish. This tendency doesn't go in the right direction. It's the climate of our time, of globalization which is poor in dreams and rich in fear. In our days, people generally prefer the virtue of prudence to that of daring. We can also see it in the new generations. We live in a globalized world where borders are increasing and protective barriers are going up. People are afraid of history. In the northern hemisphere people fear migrants as if migrants were only moving towards Europe and it wasn't a reality in one or other of the African countries (only 6% ask for asylum in Europe). People fear terrorism which strikes unannounced. Our time doesn't seem to be that of exoduses, of open spaces but that of barriers and walls; a time of concentration on oneself and self defense.

The human condition has changed. Since 2007 more than half of humanity lives in the city, compared to one tenth during the first years of the 20th century, primarily in Europe and north America. The world is becoming urban, made of cities and numerous megacities. This means that there's a whole world living on the peripheries. More than 70% of sub Saharan Africa lives in slums, as well as 31% of the world's population. It's "slum-ification". The most common situation for human beings today is that they live on the periphery. There's a mass of people on the margins, whom the media constantly dazzle with pictures of lifestyle of the rich, but which is inaccessible to them. This world on the peripheries is a forgotten world.

In the 21st century, the rich are separating themselves from the world of the peripheries; they no longer live in the centre of cities but in compounds, true gated cities where their life consists in defending themselves from criminals and mafia by walls, vigilantes and police. The city is less and less a community of destiny, divided not by political and social walls. People who are other arouse fear. The rich ignore people who are in the periphery and sometimes they despise them. Subdivisions on the outskirts of the city are often uncontrollable. They seem to be places where the mafia take root. In Europe, they are places where the young and desperate are radicalised (think of the outskirts of Paris).

The Church has often placed its hopes on the centre. Cathedrals were built at the centre of the city, beside the palaces of power. In recent history it has also done this, concentrating its efforts on the formation of those who run society, careful about its relation with those in power, involved with the media who send out a send out their messages from the centre...the centre is the place from which you can radiate outwards to all the other places. *Evangelii Gaudium* encourages the opposite: "*to go out of your own comfort zone and have the courage to reach out to all those marginalized places that need the light of the Gospel.*" The choice from the periphery remains Francis' fundamental option, a choice that goes against the grain, to the point that he needs to fight against opposition an walls both within and outside of the Church.

The age old choice for the margins

Francis' vision is as old as the Gospel. Here I don't want to insist on the fact that Christianity was born as a community on the periphery, starting from the Galilean periphery, marginal land that bordered on pagan territory, considered impure by the Jews, marginal with respect to Jerusalem, to say nothing of its situation with respect to the great Roman empire. Christianity springs from the periphery. It carries within itself the accent of the periphery to such an extent that when Jesus is arrested Peter hears, "Surely you too, you are one of them! Besides, your way of speaking gives you away." An accent always characterizes someone's origin. Peter and the

first disciples always carried with them their accent from the periphery, that of Galilee. That is where certain of Jesus' meetings with the disciples took place after his resurrection.

The Gospel has the periphery as its starting point, even if according to the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles it arrives in Jerusalem and then in Rome. The Church of the origins was not ashamed of Peter's accent, even if his preaching was enriched by other accents, like Paul's. The martyrdom of the apostle Peter in Rome shows how a man from the margins, a Galilean without any knowledge of the language of the world can challenge the complexity of the imperial capital with the "madness" of his message, coming from a marginal land, a colony.

Throughout the Church's long history the periphery and people from the peripheries have been the places of renewal and rejuvenation for the Church, precisely because the Church was aware that in the poor and the marginal, Christ himself was present as we are taught by the parable of the Final Judgement in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 25. The Fathers of the Church also teach us the same thing, such as John Chrysostom for whom the poor is another Christ. In commenting the Gospel, John Chrysostom is Jesus' spokesman when he says, "remember the nakedness that suffers in the person of the poor." Since Chrysostom an awareness has grown that there exists a sacrament of the poor beside that of the altar. And yet that sacrament of the poor has often been forgotten, humiliated or neglected in the history of the Church down through the ages.

A Church built on the centre, centre of civic or ecclesial power loses its vigor. In the history of the Church, renewal comes from evangelical movements that have a centrifugal character: escape from the world, the city and the centre. After the time of persecutions Christianity moved to the margins: in the deserts in Egypt where monks dwelt, in deserted lands that were inhabited only by some marginal people. Saint Benedict left Rome, the centre, to go to the inaccessible areas around Subiaco: a world of marginalized people in a rural setting and which didn't have the benefit of the protection by institutions but was at the mercy of the violent. Benedict's monks often worked in fields, a job that was usually that of slaves. On this subject a scholar wrote: "Monasticism was born as a movement of popular piety in reaction to a Church which little by little was losing touch with the people."

I could talk about Francis of Assisi: a life outside of the big monasteries that in the 13th century had become fortresses of faith. His was a life of the *minores*, the little ones who journey on foot like the poor among ordinary people and not on horse back. In monastic experience, as in the later life of the Franciscans, there's often a move from life on the periphery to the creation of big centres: from the periphery to the big abbey, from the road to the big convent. The poor continue perhaps to be present but as people who need to be assisted and not as people with whom you share your life, with whom you speak, who are your friends.

The peripheries are the big empty space of the Church in the 20th century. In the northern hemisphere the working world, far from faith and the Church confided their redemption into the communist movement. An Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Suhard in 1943 wrote: "Most of our people no longer think in a Christian manner. There is a chasm between them and Christian communities. We need to go out of our houses and into their midst." Those are the years when little sister Magdeleine's intuitions were maturing. They are the years when Fr. Voillaume speaks of the little brothers in a book called "*Seeds of the Desert*." They are the years when worker priests, an experience wished by Cardinal Suhard, were present in the periphery, working in factories in order to bridge the gap. Their experience was interrupted in 1954 on order from the Holy See. They are the years when another Madeleine, Madeleine Delbrel, chooses to live among people in the communist suburbs of Paris in Ivry and wrote "*We the Ordinary People of the Streets*." The journey of I sr Magdeleine begins in the crucible of a Church struggling to go out and direct itself towards the peripheries, that's to say the big space, the deserts of love, there where Christian women live in prayer and love in the midst of others.

In the peripheries, Christians with poverty and love often understand men, women, a city or a people. Addressing the religious superiors Pope Francis said,

"The great changes in history didn't come about when history was viewed from the centre but from the periphery. It's a question of hermeneutics: reality is only understood when it's viewed from the periphery, and not when our point of view is situated at the centre, at an equal distance from everything."

In the world of today

Pope Francis' words are in natural harmony with the life of the little sisters, just as with the choice of Sant'Egidio. I don't say that in order to affirm that there's nothing new in the Pope's message. Unfortunately the Pope meets with a lot of resistance. He is accused of favouring certain social classes, of not proposing pastoral projects that are worthy of their name, of dismantling institutions. There is a lot of resistance. Certain of them are understandable, like our laziness. Others are deeply rooted and ideologically motivated. I have never seen either in my life or in my research on modern history so much resistance lodged at the very heart of the Church against a Pope.

And yet it's the way for the Church's future which brings out its evangelical essence: it's moving out to the periphery and among those who are marginal that allows you to understand the Gospel and the world. It's the true exodus that must be undergone by Christians in the XXI century. It's a message that needs to be received and lived. By living it we uphold it and make it concrete. I don't think it's a matter for long speeches, but requires courage and humility to make of it a practical evangelical orientation towards the peripheries. It's in living this message that we do "great things." I take this expression from the Magnificat: "The Almighty has done great things for me." (Lk 1:49)

It's in this spirit that L Sr Magdeleine wrote in 1944: "*We need to do extraordinary things in an ordinary way, very simple, so simple that no one will realise that it's something extraordinary.*" It's the vocation, to do things that are little and extraordinary, tiny and very great as Magdeleine would say – to listen once again today in a time of globalisation, when walls are going up and peripheries increase, when wars continue and distances increase.

This vocation exists in Africa which is so dear to the Fraternity, where the distance is great between the few who are rich and the many who are poor, where rural people are pouring into the periphery. In Latin America also where the mafia, criminal gangs and groups such as the *mara* in El Salvador take root in the wilderness of the peripheries. In contact also with the numerous Muslims who, convinced that their religion isn't that of violence, are dismayed in the face of terrorism. Among the damned of the earth who leave their homes for a future that they ignore but that they dream of. In Asia among the numerous non-Christian worlds which sometimes seem far away. In Europe walls are again going up. Among the humiliated unloved women. And elsewhere. It's in the peripheries that the Lord's call is heard, that we become close to the poor, their dreams, their requests.

"But, in order to do what?" That's the question that comes from a practical world where it's only results and pragmatism that count. Christians also sometimes ask themselves that question. They ask themselves that because they do not know the weak strength of prayer, because they do not perceive the new gaps that divide people. The walls that are no longer politico-ideological but are so high, like misery, contempt, nationalism that are once again rearing their head. Too many people lack love, too many young people have no future!

Power and money are not the only things that guide history. There are other deep currents in history: earthquakes are borne from the depths of the earth. They can be caused by little displacements. There are, for example, displacements caused by love. To love is a great undertaking, like daily bread broken and given to the hungry. To love people on the margins, in conflicts, wounded by life, forgotten. Love doesn't seem very useful. Whom does it serve? It is only justifiable if it produces immediate practical results. And yet love repairs day in day out a torn human fabric. It is that little displacement that comes from the depths and that will one day draw people and nations closer, impeding a final rift.

Jewish people speak of *sedaka*, which mostly means justice but also suggests reparation. The little sisters in the hidden recesses of the world, where the atmosphere is torn, repair and mend life by their presence. In doing this Jews fulfill *ghemilut hassadim*, spread a kindness of love, without looking for any return. Even if the next day this fabric is torn again, something remains, for example a hope.

The little sisters don't look for results from their work, as do social or religious organizations. They try to live without the right hand knowing what the left hand is doing. This idea is written in the gospel but it is also

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present in their charism. And yet, in the hidden nooks men and women living in the peripheries are a living witness that love is not impossible, that God has not forgotten, that Jesus had compassion, that all men and women have a common destiny. It's by the tenderness of their lives rather than by speeches that they offer a living witness. A life that is a witness of love in spite of limits, littleness and fragility. It's a treasure borne in earthenware jars.

Fraternities are scattered throughout the world, dispersed. What is the common project? I can better understand why Magdeleine spoke so much about unity, a unity that is brought about not by works or a project: it's mostly unity among sisters, but also a life poured out for the unity of the world, to affirm that it is possible to live together, to recall that our destiny isn't the opposition of some against others but the unity of humankind. Today, in a world of walls, of conflict between religion and ethnic groups, unity is a prophecy! In 1954 your foundress said, *"If I had to define the mission of the Fraternity in just one word, I wouldn't say "poverty" or "charity" but "unity".* My wish for you in these days is that you would find renewal in the light of the Gospel and the needs of the poor and the world. And I feel like telling you personally, that the world needs you, even if sometimes it doesn't say it or know it.