

NEWSLETTER FROM GRANDCHAMP
2009

Discipleship



“What are you looking for?” John 1:38

The first words of Jesus in John's Gospel are these. A question, first of all a look towards two of John the Baptist's disciples who have quietly begun to follow him. *“What are you looking for?”* and they offer shyly : *“Rabbi, where do you live?”*

- *“Come and see”* is Jesus' reply to them, an invitation that will lead them into the adventure of their lives.

“What are you looking for?” These simple words speak to each one of us, each in our search for our life's true meaning, in the deepest longing of a human heart. *“What are you looking for?”* The question urges us on to seek, it deepens the heart's desire. It turns us towards a person, to Jesus whose gaze fell on us one day, just as he looked at Nathaniel, and said *“I saw you”*; and so we set out.

“What are you looking for?” This question was there just beneath the surface in the theme we chose for our Council and that gave us direction throughout the year, *“Being and becoming a disciple”*. It brought us back to Christ's call to us in our own lives, to give thanks for it and to allow the real meaning of being a disciple in today's world to resonate within us. Even if we are already disciples, we will never finish becoming true disciples. We travel from one beginning to another.

We only become disciples by journeying with Jesus day by day. Following him today as we did yesterday opens us up to the unexpected, and does not excuse us from testing times. Jesus' attitude often surprises the first disciples and he upsets their outlook and ways of thinking. They had to accept being overwhelmed by events and coming face to face with their own need and fear; their faith was tested till they no longer understood where he was leading them nor by what path- and yet they continued to go on.

For us like them it means staying close to Jesus, listening to him, watching him live: as he withdraws into solitude, meets with the poor, the sick, the excluded and in particular, welcomes children; and we see him facing misunderstanding, rejection and suffering. To become a disciple is to learn from Christ who is *“humble and gentle of heart”*, who never imposes himself or judges others. We learn to receive ourselves from him, just as Jesus received himself from the Father and to allow the Holy Spirit, with time, to make our life like Jesus' life, as we enter into his compassionate gaze, his gestures, his silences. Journeying with Christ will always mean welcoming the gift of a communion, a Presence, a Love that awaits us, which never hangs on to evil and constantly offers newness of life. *“Do you love me?”* was the last question that the Risen Jesus asked Peter on the Galilean lakeside where it had all started. What a journey it was for the disciple with a stormy temperament and generous reflexes, who, like the others, often misunderstood Jesus' attitude and intentions, and his true mission. It was a journey that had to go through the painful experience of weakness and denial at the time of the Passion, of the failure, towards rebirth in the light of Easter, under the gaze of the Risen Christ as he asks *“Do you love me?”* It was

a look of infinite goodness that met Peter in the deepest recesses of his being and freed the secret ardent impulse of his heart. *“Lord you know everything, you know I love you.”* And so he again heard the call sweeping him along, beyond himself, to the total gift of his life: *“You, follow me.”*

It is a call that is always new at every stage of life. The Risen one journeys with us and tirelessly puts us back on our feet, by the strength of the Holy Spirit, each time the temptation comes to reduce the Gospel to our human capacities alone. He carries us across the inevitable passages.

How then can we train ourselves to look at our everyday lives, at today's world with all its challenges, at the Church with much calling into question, with the eyes of faith? God is at work. In such trust we want to let him throw light on the questions that preoccupy us. Take for example the fact of growing older that most communities are experiencing, with the accompanying reduction of capacity to do things... whilst the requests increase. What does God expect of us? Like so many others today, we have to accept reality as it is, with all the insecurity that comes with it that can put us off balance, but without yielding to the temptation of trying fearfully to organise the future. We need to accept journeying with open questions, without knowing where we are going. Our consent frees up our strength, stimulating a whole new creative approach to simplifying our daily life and opening us to new ways of sharing and working with others. God is waiting for us today as we learn to give our life, to love, to be together as a poor sign of the love with which we are loved, of a communion open to all. *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (John 13:35)

What are we looking for except to go forward together in the steps of the Risen one, offering the little we have, trusting that Another is at work and that this little offering is enough?

It is up to us to go forward with so many others, both known and unknown to us, both near and far, who sometimes live in vulnerable situations in their stand for justice and peace, and we uphold each other by prayer and through sharing, as we let ourselves be filled with the spirit of the Beatitudes:

THE JOY that the world needs so much
THE SIMPLICITY that lightens life
THE MERCY that widens our hearts

Sister Pierrette

The yearly News of the Community take a different turn this time. We offer you four stories or testimonies given by sr Regina after her trip to the D.R.Congo, by Renaud and Sang Wha both volunteers for a time among us and by sr Françoise following the beautiful and bright Festival of Inter-Faith Dialogue and Friendship in Neuchâtel ... as several little windows open on this very rich year we experienced in many respects.

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Journey to North Kivu

Welcoming sisters from other cultures is an invitation to go one day and discover those other countries. In the spring Sister Regina, who welcomes the new sisters, was able to fly off to D.R.Congo to join Sister Mariane where she was staying with her family in the region of North Kivu. While there they shared 10 intensive days of visits and meetings...

After a long journey I landed at Butembo in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Around the airport, as at Bunia, army camps and barracks are noticeable straight away, reminding us that this is a country still at war, a war that appears to be genocide, especially in the North Kivu region. Throughout my stay I was to be overwhelmed by the beauty and fertility of the country, and by the great suffering of this ravaged and exploited land. Sister Mariane, members of her family, her pastor uncle who came specially from Goma, sister Emmanuela M'Bake, prioress of the Oblates of the Assumption, Eve-Evelyne, and her sister Jeanne, were all

there to meet me. Their welcome was warm and joyful, according to african custom, a custom we experienced time and again throughout the ten days I was there, with countless invitations to share meals. And we were welcomed just as generously by Eve-Evelyne's mother, brothers and sisters.

A friend of sr Mariane is father of 9 children and looks after three of his brother's children too, and he said to me: "God blesses the women of Congo with so many children". Lots of families take other children into their homes to enable them to go through training or education - children who are so keen to learn. I was amazed by this: "Oh that's nothing Sister", Mariane's sister, who has several young people staying with her, told me: "it's just African solidarity". And there are another three girls staying with her mother while they study.

Every morning and evening you can hear drumming and songs of praise in the houses - you could almost think of Congo as one big monastery! We joined in an enthusiastic, lively prayer service. A preacher spoke of the importance of gift: "It's only in giving that we receive; that's the spiritual law". What a lesson: to give without counting the cost, even when you don't have enough for your own household.

Several times I found myself thinking of the widow in the Gospel who gave the little she had.

We met with church pastors and elders and spoke about monastic life within the Reformed tradition. There are women in this Baptist Church in Congo who feel called to a life of prayer in community, and so that is what they are truly seeking. On one unforgettable outing with the father-in-law of sr Mariane and Jeanne's brother, we went to a vast area with herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, up above Butembo. "All you have to do is plant it and will just grow by itself," the farmer told us. The beauty of the hills and the rich earth with its banana trees could almost make us forget that this land has flowed

with innocent blood. Rebels came here at night fall, burned the huts of the peasant farmers, stole what little they had and took away children of 8 to 12 years old. Now people are trying to reintegrate and educate these child soldiers, boys and girls. A young Congolese man who works for an NGO told us that there is so much work to do, but that it's seen as useless by some Europeans since it's hard to see results: very often the rebels come back to look for the children. For those who give themselves in this work it is simply an act of humanity and solidarity with people who are suffering. The families and villages of the children don't want them back and are afraid of them, because often, under the influence of drugs, they have suffered and been made to commit, incredible acts of violence.

Another time we went out to Ouicha, about 80 km from Butembo, to the Little Sisters of Jesus. Sr M'Bake and sr Mariane's cousin both came with us. Long lines of women and men carrying heavy loads now dare again to walk along the road to go and sell their products. At one time the fraternity of Little Sisters was on the edge of the forest where pygmies lived. Today the village has grown, but the sisters' pygmy friends, who retreated further into the forest, still come to see them.

As the plane took off, taking us back to Switzerland, sr Mariane and I were able to see what a vast city Butembo has become. And as we flew over immense tracts of virgin forest and huge lakes I had a last look at this country that is so rich, ...and which incites so much greed.

What an experience this journey has been! My heart has grown wider, becoming a little more universal, and in a small way I can be part of the reality of the Congo, lived within the body of our community through the presence of sr Mariane.

sr Regina

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Volunteers at Grandchamp

A large number of volunteers, men and women, of different ages, from different countries and continents, have come in their turn to experience community life at Grandchamp in the course of this year. Their presence, their quest for God whether expressed or not and their questions have opened new horizons for us and brought us back to what is essential urging us to live out that essential by the whole of our lives and by our life together. The gift of communion is lived out in shared prayer and work each day. The volunteers' help is invaluable and vital for us, enabling us to cope with the welcome of many visitors. Volunteering is a rich experience for the volunteers and for us!

I close my eyes and, in the silence, allow all sorts of moments at Grandchamp to emerge in me. A smile spreads over my face and peace in my heart. I'd like to sum it all up in these words of the prophet Isaiah: "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" (Isaiah 2, 5). During a time of personal journeying and searching I had the good fortune to pause for a while at Grandchamp, a place that became for me a setting out, handing over and destination point on a pilgrimage undertaken in my search for God, for prayer and monastic life. To be able to take some time out in my life, to place God at the centre, was a real blessing for me. In wonder I could sample the truth of words in the Epistle of James: "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you" (James 4, 8). Living at the rhythm of the common prayer, being nourished by silence, discovering communion through solitude, taking part in the life of the community, sharing work and meals together, and journeying with the help of one of the sisters, listening and ready to share. All of this forms a whole which gave and taught me so much, and

which helped me above all not to get lost on this huge journey which is faith. To be able to journey through the Holy Week, day by day, step by step, towards the radiant Light of Easter day, was a unique and intense experience for me. To live that in a place apart, with my mind and heart centred in God, enabled me to experience powerfully, and for the first time, that deep joy of the Resurrection. Grandchamp was also for me a place where I could discover the reality of God's presence in Creation. My walks along the stream down to the lake, the sun rise, birds songs: all of nature inspired me so much. And I'm so grateful too for an insight whispered to me one day by the lake, that I've kept in my note book: "little by little water polishes stones; little by little God's love polishes hearts".

Renaud (23 years)

Thinking about everything I experienced at Grandchamp gives me so much joy - and gratitude. So it was, too, with the presence of sr Lucie-Martine at my ordination this spring in the Korean Evangelical Holiness Church - where women have been ordained only since 2005. Before becoming a pastor, and beginning my ministry in Seoul, I worked for 16 years as an evangelist. Those long years of work left me worn out, on the edge of depression, full of doubts, regrets, self-criticism and sadness... One day a friend showed me a photo of a monastery in Switzerland. In a strange experience this picture touched me, and I felt my heart beating. That was what propelled me towards Grandchamp - a place I didn't know. I arrived in 2004, at the start of Lent. Straight away I felt happy, at home. By the entrance to the chapel, l'Arche, there was a picture, painted by a Korean

woman, showing Christ holding the world in his arms - he seemed to be waiting for me and I felt attended by him. During Lent, with the help of a sister who listened to me, I was able little by little, and not without tears, to return to God, like the prodigal son; and in the end I could say with confidence: "I am a child of God". In this journey of healing I was able to rediscover my relationship with my mother, who died 25 years ago, and to discover too that place in my heart where God dwells forever. Once again I could hear God's voice, and I could say with the psalmist; "*It was you who created my being, knit me together in my mother's womb. I thank you for the wonder of my being...*" (Ps 139, 13-14) After that wonderful experience of 9 months at Grandchamp, I was able to go back to my ministry. And then, just before my ordination, I returned for a short stay, to breathe again the air of my rebirth... a return to my heart's sacred place, which will surely help me, despite my fragile faith, to face those difficult situations in the Church where women struggle to find their place.

Sang Wha (50 years)

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Inter-faith Dialogue at Neuchâtel: "the feast of friendship"

There was a general air of excitement in the courtyard at Grandchamp on the 7th June as the first participants arrived. Small groups were busy with the preparations. At least 8 people including Buddhists, Jews and Christians sat around the table peeling vegetables. There was animated conversation! Preparing a "kasher" soup

needed lots of help from the spiritual leader of la Chaux-de-Fonds Synagogue, the spiritual boss of our kitchen and our saucepans.

Buddhists were preparing the place for the tea ceremony, which kindled a lot of interest. A group of Ba'hais welcomed people as they arrived, and put out the sweetmeats for the intercultural tea; meanwhile the orchestra, playing Kleezmer music that is traditional to the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe, practised under the baton of M.F. Lillfeld.

The 'Arche' Chapel saw succession of events unfolding throughout the day: musical interludes, round-table discussion, a lecture given by Denis Muller on the theme of "Wisdom that reaches out to others; towards a common humanist ethic" and personal encounters. This first public event of Neuchâtel's Inter Faith Dialogue Group bringing together representatives from all the religions in the district (Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Ba'hai, Christians) was a day of discovery both culturally and personally.

To mark the end of this day of celebration, the community invited the participants to attend evening prayer. The orchestra played again, giving the service a moving intensity.

We almost saw the roof of the 'Arche' chapel opening for God's joy to descend on the assembled gathering, before flowing out into our world.

Over 50 years ago, some sisters went to Israel, Algeria and Lebanon to live in small fraternities in a concrete expression of their desire to be open to the Jewish roots of our faith, and to the world of Islam. Today in the multicultural societies in which we live and in our common search for greater justice and peace in the world, for active non-violence, it is vital to weave strong bonds of friendship between all those who seek the divine. Inter-religious dialogue exposes us to what is new and stimulates us... Each discovery in the prayer and spiritual texts of another religion stirs us and makes us go deeper,

to discover the seriousness and depth of our own prayer. In addition it widens our prayer, gives it new colour. This quest for God together carries the world.

sr Françoise

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The Horizons Widen ...

... the horizon of everyday life is rather ordinary but it is enriched and made colourful by so many connections, ties from near and far creating communion; visible and invisible links, bonds of solidarity and friendship. We are amazed by it, and are infinitely grateful too for the prayer that surrounds us, the support of so many of you. From the bottom of our hearts we thank you ! In this new Advent time, may we be granted to see the face of the One who comes to meet us in the humility and poverty of the manger in Bethlehem - Yes the Prince of Peace! To each of you we wish a happy Christmas and a blessed New Year in his sight !

The Grandchamp Sisters

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On the Website www.grandchamp.org
you will find our programme for 2009,
as well as our reading lists

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