

Pilgrims of Hope



Newsletter from Grandchamp 2014

Daring the way to the future

*"Perhaps we need something new,
something never seen before,
something we've never done before."*

This is what Brother Richard told us last year, quoting Péguy. "Something new... a future that does not just repeat the past" he explained. Waiting for that future from God means waiting on the One who is always creating anew, and this newness often does not reveal itself in the way we expect, it surprises us, jostles us. The apostles must have gone through a time of deep disappointment and insecurity as they went through the events of the Passion. They felt a sense of failure at the death of Jesus, only then to open up to something new: their hope expanded into a communion with all human beings.

Looking towards the future that God wants for all of us, that is, a reconciled world, means listening to the Spirit and letting the Spirit reveal the way to us. This way passes through the Cross and the Resurrection, transforming our expectations and the way we imagine the future should be, and expanding it. For 'your thoughts are not my thoughts and my ways are not your ways' says God (Isaiah 55:3).

Easter is the great turning point, the irruption of a radical newness into the heart of history, and yet this newness is not imposed. Daring the way to the future means opening ourselves to the life of the resurrection which, like a seed planted in the earth, can only enter the world through hearts that welcome the newness in the reality of everyday living. By what sign can you recognise it? It reveals itself in a particular way of being with others, following the example of Jesus, living together with others in prayer, sharing possessions, in mutual service and forgiveness.

The Risen Christ stands in our midst, often as the One we do not recognise. He travels with us, as with the Emmaus disciples, he listens to us in our disappointments, our questions, and wants to transform our way of seeing things, expanding our hope, hope that events seem to belie today just as they did then. Growing crises, murderous conflicts and persecutions send whole populations into flight and exile with such tears. Hope is sometimes so shaky in our lives too when testing times put us off balance, when we no longer understand how God is leading us or what he expects of us. And yet, even in the depth of our nights, Christ is with us accompanying us through the trials, teaching us to live by faith and in faith.

Daring the way to the future *in interdependence*. That is what we named for this year. We live in an age of the *intercultural*, the *interreligious*, the *inter-confessional*, and the way we talk expresses an existential reality, that of interdependence. This 'between the two' speaks both of an emptiness and a

connectedness. It is the privileged place of the breath of God's goodness that always seeks to restore relationships, to reconcile, to bring together, to create communion. Basically, we need each other in order to become what God sees in us and what He hopes us to be, people of communion in the image of his Son, building peace together. We are all members of the one body, all rich in one thing and poor in another, called to live an exchange of gifts. Is there not a way of making the world more human through the humble acceptance of the gift that we are and that every people represents, each culture and each religion, in the one body, making up humanity? God first chose to be dependent on us and on our response in order to bring about his new heaven and new earth.

Faced with today's immense challenges, no one can claim to have the answer, the solution to successive crises, the vision of the way to the future. Faced with the vastness of the political, economic, social and ethical stakes before us, today we are increasingly conscious of the vital need to come together and to work together. An important conference on '*Globalisation: a spiritual question*' affirmed in its conclusions that '*the world awaits a new humanism in the acceptance of interdependence and dialogue.*' It named Christianity with its utopia of universal sister- and brother-hood, as a means to make an important contribution.

So will we dare to act, drawing from the source of the Gospel, in order to be credible in our witness at a moment when the church, especially in the northern hemisphere, is living through such difficult times? Will we dare to go and meet each other, learning to welcome difference as a gift, a richness and as the place where we are challenged to grow into a more open identity, letting ourselves be stripped of everything that prevents us from visibly living the communion that is in God?

With the Risen One, daring the way to the future, a way that is not marked out in advance, we have to consent tirelessly to pass from the known to the unknown. A future on the move must be lived today; the kingdom is in our midst. Today is a new beginning to be invented in docility to the Spirit of God; and so we go forward together like pilgrims, trusting only that Christ is with us to the end of time and that the Breath of God is at work even in the difficult events preparing the way, opening us to something new.

*On the way marked 'no thoroughfare'
I shall be a pilgrim of the future.
(a Chilean pilgrim)*

Sister Pierrette

AS DAYS GO BY, through encounters and happy or difficult events, the way is gradually revealed to us...

The start of this year was marked by the sudden death of sr Renée in Algeria, three months after that of sr Minke. Brother Alois was meeting with us for a few hours when the news arrived; we were so touched to have him present among us at that particular time and with what he shared. Sr Renée's vocation became clear to her while she was in Taizé in the late 1940's. Her death marks the end of a presence in Algeria of more than sixty years.

"... Sister Renée chose to involve herself with the poorest of the poor. With them she truly shared life in conditions that were difficult at times. But living in that way and accepting to be vulnerable means that being close is not just empty words but the Gospel itself! Her faith in God, in Jesus, carried her, nourished her. She was the salt of this earth, light for many people. She gave zest to life because her own life was full of savour, that of the gospel..."

Father Christian Mauvais Algiers

A few days after sr Renée's death, sr Anne-Geneviève, sr Lucie--Martine and sr Birgit were able to take part in the ecumenical celebration that brought together numerous friends including many muslims. The fact that Miassa, sr Renée's lifelong friend, had stayed with us in the summer with her niece has been a special joy. Algeria remains in our hearts: sr Anne-Geneviève and sr Lucie-Martine later went back for a few weeks. So many friends count on such visits.

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A page has been turned in the Holy Land too. In the spring, sr Mariane was able to join sr Dorothea for a few weeks and discover the beauty of the places there. As it had become impossible for us to provide an adequate, long term presence there, we had to take the decision to leave Saint Elisabeth. Even so we remain open to another form of presence there, with others maybe, or something completely new that will be revealed to us in this Land of our roots, a land so torn apart...

Sr Maatje and sr Dorothea went back in November to close the house. sr Pierrette joined them for two moving celebrations with neighbours, friends, brothers and sisters in nearby communities, also with the Lutheran parish, taking leave of them all after journeying together for so many years.

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Many communities are today experiencing a lack of means that opens them to others. Sr Héléne shares with us what she has been living in Lomme for four years now:

"One evening in Advent in 2010, several religious sisters were arriving at the terminus of a Lille Metropole underground line, close to where they would now live, in a new neighbourhood still under construction. They had just made a 40 day pilgrimage, discovering in turn each of their communities: the Deaconesses of Reuilly, the Carmelite sisters of St Joseph, the Oblates of the Eucharist and the sisters of Grandchamp.

They had received a 'Charter' drawn up by their four prioresses:

'The fraternity of Lomme is an ecumenical and inter-congregational fraternity. Essentially it wants to be a PRESENCE through a life of personal and common prayer lived in community life, open to the reality that surrounds it. For the fraternity, it is a matter of taking the humble path of shared daily life...and to show day after day, year after year, that what unites us is stronger than that which divides us. So that the world might believe!'

Thus an adventure of faith started for them: a real life laboratory of community living to be received and discovered and invented.

In Advent 2014, where are? The initial group has only changed slightly. Though not the main factor, this stability has been propitious to a slow growing together. It has been a school of patience, of mutual forgiveness and of trust. Our common life grows out of receiving and sharing the Word of God together, from common prayer in silence or the daily 'office' that we are slowly developing, also in the ordinariness of daily tasks, meetings day by day, by chance or arranged. All this helps us to continue the journey, to receive strength and challenges, certainties and doubts, joys and sufferings...

From when we first arrived, we received a warm welcome from the parish of the United Protestant Church of France and of the two ministers, and we have very friendly links with some priests, with the Bernadine Sisters and the sisters of the Society of Helpers, our neighbours on the Catholic side. We have chosen to find a balance in our worship, going from time to time together - especially at the main festivals - to take part in

one or other of our Churches. On Sundays each one takes part in the Eucharist in her own parish.

In our house, the Chapel only became accessible to us a year after we moved in. That is where we now pray together. Gradually, the Mass came to be celebrated regularly. Holy Communion is celebrated every Thursday by one of the ministers of the United Protestant Church, the Baptist Church or the Anglican Church. Our four Prioresses come together to visit us twice a year, to look back over how we have lived the previous months, to encourage us, and to discern and deepen the meaning of our presence in this neighbourhood. On their last visit they left us with this question: *Like the grain of wheat that needs to die, have we not, in following Christ, to give every-thing to him, all our expectations, our ideas and our fears, in order to let him alone plough the furrow and show us the way?*

Our common intercession is nourished and extended by the connections lived by each of our communities: in Congo Brazzaville, in the Cameroon, in Tahiti, the Near East, in Congo-Kinshasa, in Madagascar and in Vietnam..."

*Lord, give to Christians to reveal
the communion that is in you,
that they may be one so that the
world might believe!*

Sr Hélène and the sisters
of the Ecumenical Fraternity

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Going forward humbly with others, constantly seeking communion in the ordinariness of our days and of our meetings, this starts among ourselves! This learning to live together is

sometimes hard work, a challenge, but it is also a blessing: the joy of communion which is first a gift that we can live and share with those we live among, the people with whom we share our prayer life and our work in Grandchamp. Among them are sisters from other communities. Their presence, sometimes for several months, is a great gift! What a variety of gifts and charisma!

A number of little sisters of Jesus have stayed in Grandchamp for varying lengths of time, in retreat and to recharge their batteries...

One of them told us:

"When I came to Grandchamp, I felt at home, completely at home. I felt it so strongly that it worried me! Then I began to understand. Firstly there were some personal reasons (my Protestant forebears came from Switzerland) but also the great closeness between the vocations of the two communities.

Our vocations are indeed close but they are expressed very differently. If I think of how we are each present to the world: in Grandchamp, the 'world' comes to the prayer times, comes to eat at your table and sleeps in your houses. For us, our life is to go out and pray and live in the midst of the world. So why do I feel so at home in Grandchamp? Because the life of my sisters there shows me in other colours and under a different light what the Lord has called me to."

Welcoming a little sister of Jesus is a bit like welcoming a member of our family. So many connections have been formed and deepened down through the years, here, in Tre Fontane and in the countries where each of our communities had a presence. It is a friendship, a com-

munion that goes back right to our beginnings with the encounter of little sister Magdeleine and Mère Geneviève in the late 1940's, a true Visitation! This mystery of the Visitation still remains today at the heart of our meetings – and we think back with joy to the meeting we had with little sister Maria Chiara, who is now their international responsible, and with little sister Celina In Ja in September when they came to visit. We are still discovering ever more clearly the closeness and complementarity of our two vocations. Unity, openness and presence to the world just take on a different colouring. In the stage we are in now, the Little Sisters who are present in so many places of brokenness (Iraq, Syria, Congo...) give living expression to these realities in our midst.

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For the whole community everyday life in the last months has been rather demanding. In the retreat that Br Mark Ephrem gave us in February, he meditated on the hymn to the Philippians and highlighted the emptying of Christ, his *kenosis*, and ours as we follow him, as a path to becoming more human. If we consent to testing times and to the reality of becoming more fragile, in ourselves and in the world around us, we can grow into greater simplicity, into greater solidarity with other people and with each other – we have had to readjust how we use our energies in the various areas of activity. There has been a lot of moving around within the community but also towards the outside since requests keep coming.

Sr Siong was able to return to Madagascar to the Mamre sisters in April, together with sr Angéline who had just spent six months in Grandchamp. sr Michèle experienced another pilgrimage to Poland where contacts with the Lutheran Church and with friends involved in Judeo-Christian dialogue are ever deepening. Sr Anneke in Durham and sr Maatje in Assisi took part in ecumenical meetings (Kaïre and EIIR).

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At Sonnenhof a new step forward! Sr Mechthild reports on what took place on May 31st:

"We have been born..." that was our unanimous response on hearing the mandate describing the new Association of the 'Friend's Circle'. It was the 31st May this year, about sixty people had come to the Sonnenhof - under a big tent because of the numbers - to officially mark the foundation of the 'Friend's Circle'. Amongst those attending there were friends of long-standing as well as those who had only discovered the house recently, but everyone had a special link with the Sonnenhof and could express it. As a sign of hope and as reminder of the sweet fragrance that this 'Friend's Circle' wants to be for the Sonnenhof, we planted a rose bush. At the end of the afternoon we shared a Canadian meal generously prepared by our guests.

Who would have thought, just a year ago, that we could have celebrated this 'birth' so soon? We had to 'dare to take the road to the future' especially after sr Christel's serious stroke in summer 2013. In fact it was she who

first had the idea of this 'Friend's Circle'. Gradually a team formed and in the course of several meetings, the idea took shape. The 'flyer' sent out with the 2013 Newsletter was very well received and over 150 people got in touch. Some wanted to support the Sonnenhof in prayer, others with financial help, others offered to volunteer for a time. A very big thank you for all your generosity! Since this autumn, there has always been a member of the 'Friend's Circle' staying with the sisters for one or two weeks to help them. May this exchange of gifts bear fruit for the future of the Sonnenhof that means so much to us all. Who knows where this opening can lead us in the future?

The next day on June 1st, we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Sonnenhof. We all met again in the big tent with many close friends and several of our guests from the day before, this time to share a Eucharist and a time of celebration, when four people expressed their gratitude for all that's lived at the Sonnenhof, and offered words of encouragement for the future. The Gospel reading for that Sunday was from John chapter 17 (the prayer of Jesus for his friends) and it reminded us of the essential, as Elisabeth Strübin put it: 'It's just because Jesus prays for us and supports us that we can dare to take new steps'.

With Him and all together, let us dare to go forward on the way to the future.

Sr Mechthild

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If the slow and persevering quest for unity is perhaps lived first and foremost in our daily lives, there are some events and encounters that move us further on in this call to unity, pushing us to dare to make bold steps and simple actions according to the Gospel, as Pope Francis has done! So it was that during the week of prayer for Christian unity, in response to the invitation of the brothers in Hauterive Abbey, we experienced with them in a great simplicity, a humble gesture of mutual welcome in the washing of feet. We cannot measure the total effect of this gesture but it certainly opens a little path in what can't be seen.

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Yes we are surrounded by much kindness and generosity! We are amazed by it and deeply grateful for it! So many forms of sharing, of support... thank you for your friendship, your prayer. A big thank you in particular to our friends in Algeria for all they did at the time of sr Renée's death.

In these troubled times, may the mystery of Christmas renew our hope and our trust in the One who comes to meet us and to visit our wounded lands: the prince of Peace.

*On the downward slope of despair,
I will be a pilgrim of hope.*
(prayer of a Chilean pilgrim)

With all our good wishes for a blessed new year!

Your sisters of Grandchamp

Communauté de Grandchamp
CCP 20-2358-6

Grandchamp 4, CH - 2015 Areuse
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On the web site : www.grandchamp.org : programme for 2015 and listes of lectures
and : www.facebook.com/communautedegrandchamp