

*See,
something new...*



NEWSLETTER OF GRANDCHAMP 2021

“What do you see?”

As we came out of quarantine in January we received such a beautiful theme! *“What do you see? I see a flower of an almond tree” (Jer 1:11).*

It’s difficult when we feel helpless in the face of the suffering and hardships that afflict so many countries, as well as people close to us and our personal lives. And yet the question God asks Jeremiah is also addressed to us. It is a call to hope, trust and wonder, to gratitude that reconnects us with our divine source and makes us co-creators. God is at work, creating the new, showing us what is new; but do we let ourselves be challenged? *“What do you see?”* What do we see beyond the chaos, beyond what seems to be the end of the road, a death? Can we see there the newness of life in which God speaks to us?

In order to see this new life, we need to lift our heads, sharpen our vision to listen to our hearts as well as to in God. This way of looking has to do with inner listening. And we can see it in the opening, this almond blossom, this pure, fragile flower that turns us away from our limited and limiting thinking. There is something else, beyond, to be seen! What promise! In the uncertainty and turbulence of our time, a little sign of life, both beautiful and poetic, frees our heart and restores our confidence in the force of life. Jeremiah will be able to live with this hope that a future life will emerge because God watches over it; He is always present. God shows the prophet a sign of new life ahead of the difficult events that are to come: an almond branch in blossom.

In our retreat Brother Richard reminded us that Jesus used this image of fragile beauty when he spoke of the lilies of the fields (Mt 6). He emphasized that we can love this fragile beauty, consent to it, for there is the love of God that never leaves us. It’s enough to be in our right place today: that is, in God’s love. And so we are freed from our anguish and anxiety.

In Hebrew the word ‘almond’ has the same root as the word ‘keep watch’. God keeps watch and calls us to do the same, he calls us to watch, to be awake and wholly present with all our being, all our faculties. Yes, this almond blossom is fragile, delicate, but produces fruit that is protected by a hard shell that must be cracked in order to eat it. What a transformation! Watching, being awake in this new way of looking – watching for a sign of hope. The sign of God’s active presence is given through that ‘little almond blossom’, through beauty. That is what will save the world, said Dostoyevsky. It is the artist’s and the child’s way of seeing that is truly able to watch, to observe, to wonder. Beauty is present everywhere but we need to stop and take time to perceive beyond the visible to the Invisible world that gives us a sign.

“What do you see?” Contemplate and listen, simply be there. Take the risk of letting go of what we think we know. The danger is in staying with one single outlook to which these troubled times keep pushing us. That one thought that claims to have all the truth and is opposed to intuition, to openness to what is greater than our thinking, to what rises from another place that is beyond us and surprises us - not logical but half-whispered as we listen in prayer; *“My thoughts are not your thoughts, your ways are not my ways”*, says God in Isaiah 55.

The rabbis say *"Listening is going to visit someone else's world"*. That means without wanting to seize it, to capture it or to bring it into my own way of seeing. It means being able to change perspective. Listening, intentionally pausing my own reactions, my point of view, and taking the longer way round someone else's way of looking; allowing their word to take all the space it needs. Just being there, totally present to the Other and others. Leaving space for the Breath of the Spirit, where something new can arise. Listening like that is to love truly, authentically. To live the parable of communion.

If we are on a path of growth, it is because somewhere in our history we have been confronted by death and its apparent meaninglessness. That moment pushed us to search for God and to believe that there is meaning despite everything. Somewhere deep down in us we know that we come from God and return to God. And our journey on earth should invite us to remain anchored in this reality of God's world, of the Kingdom, to make it apparent in our way of living, of being, of listening. And...to always choose life! Thus, this pandemic that brings us face to face with death, can be a real source of life when we dare to face it without running away.

"When the world around us frightens us, Christian hope asks us a very simple question: how can we make of all that a chance to love more?" (Adrien Candiard) This year's theme invites us to look, to contemplate the beauty of life and to rejoice in it, listening to the echo it awakes in us, instead of remaining fixed on what's going badly. *"Making everything an opportunity to love"* and so contribute to the transformation of shadows into light.

A greater Love surrounds us from which nothing can separate us. If only we could welcome that Reality and love the Life we are given, which is so beautiful. Even in the very depth of darkness and death that try to dominate us, it shines out and constantly speaks to us - if we open wide our eyes and the ears of our heart.

At the dawn of this year, which will soon be upon us, what do you see? What are you ready to contemplate? Through the birth of this Child who comes in poverty, what will we choose to see?

As Brother Alois puts it: *"Let us let Christ renew our way of looking"*. Yes, what if that is all we need?

Sr. Anne-Emmanuelle

After the pause during the summer of 2020, Coronavirus starting spreading again, and everyone had to find how to live with this reality. That was a call to see and to hear something different again.

Sailing on a wave of prayer

Do we discern the work of the Holy Spirit in the unsettling times that the world experiences these days? I'd like to share a little example:

Our work to prepare for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2021 began three years ago. The liturgy and prayers—so carefully prepared with help of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity—presented in the booklet of 2021, were being read and appreciated by many already in the process of preparation!

Everything seemed prepared, ready, perfect: the liturgy, the prayers, and our online presence. But... in the beginning of January our community was struck and strictly confined by Miss Covid! We were worried as many of our sisters were sick; our basic needs of food and health preoccupied us and we prayed that nobody would become severely ill.

I sat in my room, confined, alone, and sick. I was sad, and angry. Soon we all received in our rooms the prayer booklet, prepared for each moment of common prayer. Now we were to pray it by ourselves, in front of our individual candle, icon, and Bible.... "What a disappointment!" I thought, staring, glaring out of the window. Some carefree birds constructed their nest under a corner of the roof of Arche (our chapel) that stood there, empty!

But then, as if it was the Holy Spirit, I remembered Psalm 84: *"My heart and flesh cry out for the living God. Even a sparrow finds a home, and a swallow, a nest for herself where she places her young—near your altars."*

In this moment something in me got back in place, turned around. I realized suddenly that, if we, as a community,

have prayed for Christian unity since the beginning of our history... could we not be carried, this particular week, by the prayer for unity of others? As so many around the globe were praying with the materials we prepared, could we just let go and take care of ourselves this week? Prayer does not begin or end with our personal efforts, success or failures.... it is a wave of prayer on which we are sailing. And this wave is so big that it can do without us for a little week; it carries us no matter!

Luckily, at some point in the week, the sisters who were not sick could gather for the evening prayers. And the wave of prayer carried me through. It even made me able again to pray fully and wholeheartedly in my room, confined, sick and alone. Could I have experienced that if we would have been able to pray as planned? I'm not sure.

Yes, the ways of the Spirit can be surprising, unsettling. And yet, we might discern the One that holds us. May we always sail on the waves of prayer, driven forward by the wind of the Spirit.

Sr. Marlieke

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And from Hilary in England

The pandemic! At the start of the first lockdown I thought, and wrote too, "Us, Servants of Unity, we know about that, we're used to it! That's our vocation – solitude and prayer in communion..." But, wait a minute, lockdown lasted a lot longer than we expected, and there are plenty of relationships in our lives, with people who we couldn't see. And then too, our churches stayed closed for months – we had no eucharists or other services, no singing, no parish life. But what affected us most was the

atmosphere all around, of fear and uncertainty.

For some time already I'd been following evening prayer on the internet with the community on days when I was at home. But at the start of the pandemic I realised that I risked getting up later and later in the morning - and going to bed later and later at night. I needed more structure and a rhythm to the days. Fortunately it was spring-time and each morning sunrise was a little earlier; it became a joy to get up at 6am and to pray with the community and to sing praise to God (before my head was filled with thoughts and the day's to-do lists). And there was still time for personal prayer before breakfast... Yes, prayer in front of my computer is possible, and I can watch as the trees outside the window open their leaves, then flower, and then turn to the gold of autumn...

Soon after the start of the first lockdown it was Easter. And no possibility of services or any liturgy in our parishes. But we were able to take part in the Easter retreat that the community shared with us through the internet. What a blessing! I even got up at 4am to light a small fire outside before dawn on Easter morning! And I knew that I was praying with the sisters' community and with many of the Servants of Unity who were increasingly joining the prayers online. And that means praying with the wider Church, far beyond the internet.

In January 2021 Grandchamp was locked down too, with each sister alone in her room; all of a sudden there was no more transmission from the chapel. For those of us dispersed and far away that came as a shock, a loss, but also a reminder that our prayer-in-communion does not depend on the internet! And

the meditations for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity were already posted on the website. Like so many other people, many of us, Servants of Unity, have learned to meet using zoom - and so we were able to live the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity together, and in more depth than usual.

But the pandemic was not over. Each of us remained alone, at home. Joining with the intercessions of the community morning and evening opens us up to the world in a tangible way. Together we pray for real people, real situations. And also, we find we need this encouragement to persevere in prayer. Connecting with the prayer of the community at certain moments in the day supports us in our commitment.

And so, we thank God for all that we've discovered during this time that we could not have imagined, for the journey we're making together in prayer. And we thank the community for all that they continue to share with us, through the possibilities offered by technology!

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Day to day work must go on, with or without coronavirus. What else can we see that's new? Martine, a volunteer, tells us:

My first memories of the community go back to when I was in my twenties; we used to tumble in all together, with our guitars, to morning prayer - the youth group in Colombier with students from Neuchâtel - there we were, Sister Anne-Marie's 'groupies', looking a bit rough after spending the night by the lake. Since that time, Grandchamp has remained a special place for me, a home-base, somewhere to find new strength and peace.

Later on, as I reached retirement after living for 30 years in Geneva and I moved back to live in Auvernier again, it seemed natural that I should be involved in the everyday life of the Community.

Every Wednesday I come to the laundry to iron a hundred or more kitchen towels, hand-towels and other cloths that witness to the intense and laborious work that goes on in this seemingly calm place. Dozens of table napkins, some of which remind me of the house linen of our forebears, damask ones with mysterious initials embroidered on them that have become almost transparent from wiping hundreds of mouths. It's the handkerchiefs that touch me most, especially when there are lots of them: all those germs harvested! Or could they be tears? Sometimes there are huge white tablecloths: from celebrations? or birthdays? Something I really like are the sisters' head-scarves, because of the name-tapes that evoke their faces; a thought flies up for this sister, and another thought for that one...and week after week you really get the feeling of belonging to the family.

This commitment with Grandchamp is a key moment in my week as a retiree, and gives me great satisfaction, doing something useful, simple and practical: a moment to pause in the silence (not always) that is so dear to the Community and to me as well, a very special time of sharing that often continues in the Evening Prayer.

From my balcony when I get home I can see the huge roof of the 'L'Arche' chapel, it is not a church steeple, but...a star. One of my singing teachers - who died of Aids - had an inspiring saying: "To make sure your furrow is straight, hitch yourself to a star!"

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These personal accounts are small examples that renew the way we see. What else can we see from the community's recent experience?

At Grandchamp: This year our community reflection has often been about the pandemic and its challenges, thus underlining the importance of rooting our lives again and again in what is essential, so that in our mutual relationships we can live a deeper quality of looking and listening, and thus respect our differences. This rootedness helps us to carry together our fragilities, whilst recognising each one's particular gifts; it also leads to a greater openness, creativity and helping one another in our work.

Sister Heidi-Elisabeth left for the new project at Sonnenhof, and Sisters Irmtraud and Miriam returned to Grandchamp; these were big changes. Although we are a large community, we still need help. So we are planning to form a 'Circle of Friends of Grandchamp' to support us. This idea came from an outside advisor who looked at how we organise our work, and from the encouraging experience at Sonnenhof. A group of volunteers is now looking at this plan with some sisters to see how to put it into practice. In this way our lack of resources becomes an opportunity to share that benefits us all.

In the days before Pentecost we had a session on listening, with Rev Pierre-André Pouly and Yolande Boinnard, that helped us deepen and sharpen our own listening. We learned much through their exercises, and they proposed a catch-phrase: "Have I heard you properly?". This creates a space between us, and a new freedom to share opens up in our relationships.

Hospitality has demanded a good deal of creativity and some re-arranging lately. For example, we changed the reception area into a dining room for our guests. Some retreats had to be canceled, while others took place with fewer participants or on-line. Modern technology has certainly helped!

Some of our missions: Our attendance at various meetings has been much reduced or taken place using Zoom. And so during the Week of Prayer for Unity we were able to respond to interviews and requests coming from different countries and churches. In March Sister Anne-Emmanuelle joined Belgian Benedictine Mother Abbesses to talk about... the post-pandemic(!); Sister Sonja took part in the Church and Peace meeting. Sister Pascale spoke at the meeting of the Association of Saint Silouane - fortunately this could be a face-to-face meeting in St Maurice; and Sister Carolina was able to get to Leysin for the Christian Forum of French-speaking Switzerland.

Another example of creativity - Sister Francoise has painted a 'Way of the Cross' which has just been published.

What else do we see?

Sisters celebrating! During the Council, on August 6th, we celebrated the Transfiguration with the profession of Sister Svenja, and the 50th anniversary of the professions of Sisters Christianne and Ingeborg-Marie. Sadly we were not able to welcome as many guests as usual for the occasion, but from far and near you upheld us in prayer and surrounded us with signs of friendship. The Lord's faithfulness in our lives can be so tangible! Even more so as we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the professions of Sister Anne-Geneviève and Sister Monique on September 3rd.

Something new is developing at Sonnenhof: early in 2022, a project "Weggemeinschaft" will begin: a new kind of community life. Grandchamp sisters will share with lay companions in a temporary life-community. Together they will continue the mission of silence and retreat at Sonnenhof. An adventure that requires trust and boldness!

At Woudsend (in the Netherlands) Sister Christianne with Maria de Groot have lived through some uncertain times, and some good times, always carried by hope and prayer. Their creativity has been able to develop through their writing, as well as through the solidarity that is so clearly there in the village.

The residents of Catharinahof in the Netherlands where **Sister Janny** lives were much affected by all the Covid Restrictions. Even so the prayer flourished and was stimulated by the news they could all share, sometimes bringing echoes of distant lands.

In the Home where she resides **Sister Anne-Geneviève** has also had to cope with restrictions, as has **Sister Gabrielle** in the centre for the Disabled. These times have been hard, really hard, when there was no getting together to sing, or prepare a drama as all common activities had to stop. But now little by little new things are possible and bring back hope.

Other places? The idea of (re)opening Fraternities remain a topic close to our hearts. We are still considering being present in Taizé - only Sister Lucie-Martine was able to spend two months there this year - and in Israel. Apart from that, we have been asked by the sisters from the Carmel of St Joseph to live with them in Normandy as an ecumenical presence of reconciliation....

Our spiritual family

Several new people are journeying with the Servants of Unity and the Third Order. These two groups have not been able to meet as they usually do, but nevertheless their links and exchanges continue unabated.

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Many of our old friends have gone into God's light: members of our spiritual family, in the Third Order of Unity, the Servants of Unity, the Homes for Unity and many others. Here we name only Brother Sylvain of Taizé and Sheik Allawi from the Sufi brotherhood of Allawia. We welcomed his family to the

Arche and committed him into the hands of God the Merciful One.

Our Sister Hiltje left us in November 2020; she kept her sense of humour to the end.

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We are very grateful and deeply touched by all the faithful gifts we have received and all the signs of friendship from so many friends during the period of the pandemic.

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At this new Christmas, may the welcome of the New-born into your heart cause an almond flower to blossom there.

The sisters of Grandchamp



Grandchamp 4, CH - 2015 Areuse

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