



THE LETTER OF THE WOMEN'S SECULAR INSTITUTE OF THE HEART OF JESUS

Dear Friends,

We had planned, for the next two letters, to share with you some testimonies on how to live out the virtue of hope as consecrated lay women. Due to lack of time, we were not able to send them to you earlier, and we sincerely apologize for this delay.

This letter contains the testimonies of several among us. A subsequent letter will be devoted exclusively to sharing news of the Institute.

I wish you enjoyable reading, Marie



Pilgrims of Hope in Midst of Darkness

As I begin to write this reflection, the Church is celebrating the feast day of Our Lady of the Way, Madonna della Strada, a memorial that is dear to all in the Ignatian family and beyond. It's a fitting backdrop to what I would like to share with you. And Our Lady of the Way has a special meaning as we ask her to show us the way as we continue our journey as Pilgrims of Hope during this Jubilee Year.



As expressed by a Canadian Jesuit:

*In this we are to be like Mary, the mother of Jesus:
She brings Christ into the world.
She shares Christ with the world.
She suffers with Christ in the world.
She experiences his resurrection
and becomes part of the community that is his
resurrected presence in the world.*

In February and March of this year, I spent time in Palestine, where I had lived for more than 35 years. Since leaving there in 2020 to move back to Toronto, I have returned at least once a year for an extended visit. In a very real way, it is one of the places I call home.

Lord, Grant Me This Grace Today Lord, grant me today the grace that nothing may disturb the deep peace of my heart; but that I may speak joy and hope to every person I meet, helping each one to discover the riches that lie within them.

Help me also, Lord, to look upon Your radiant face, even in the midst of difficult events: for there is not one that cannot still become a hidden source of good.

At every hour of this day, grant me to offer a joyful countenance and the smile of a friend to every person, your child and my brother.

Give me a heart too large to brood over my sorrows, too noble to harbor resentment too strong to yield to fear, too open ever to close itself to anyone.

Lord, I ask these graces for all people who struggle today that hatred may decrease and that Love may grow.

Open our eyes to the Invisible, so that nothing may shake the optimism of those who believe in You and believe in humanity, who hope in You and hope in humankind.

Sister Emmanuelle





Pilgrim of hope in the heart of the world

Many have asked me what life is like there today. Some have asked why I continue to go. “Aren’t you afraid?” they ask. We are all aware of the violence, oppression, and aggression that afflict this very small territory, and this reality can sometimes mask the fact that in the midst of the darkness and the devastation dwells a people who desire life. Like all peoples.



I invite you to accompany me on this journey to Palestine.

After entering Bethlehem through the heavily guarded, fortified military checkpoint, I came almost immediately to the monastery where I would spend the next five weeks, the same monastery on whose grounds I had lived for more than fifteen years. The Benedictine Greek Catholic nuns who live there have a mission to be a “presence of prayer at the wall.” A section of the Separation Wall, a bleak, nine-meter-high concrete reminder of the military occupation under which Palestinians live, is just outside the monastery gate. I ring the bell, and one of the nuns opens the gate. I enter, and almost immediately, the entire community (of five) greets me with hugs and tears and incredible warmth. “It’s so good to see you!”

2 “We had forgotten what it’s like to welcome people

from abroad. For more than a year and a half, all pilgrimages, all visits have stopped.” I pause, tears now filling my eyes, too, as I’m reminded that, even with the geographical distance that separates us and the absence for months on end, these are “my sisters,” women with whom I lived in close proximity for many years. Without words, we intuitively know that we are united by deep bonds of friendship and even deeper trust in Jesus.



This monastery oasis just beside heavily armed soldiers, military might, and the oppressive wall is one reminder of how I am called to live my vocation as a consecrated woman in the Institute of the Heart of Jesus: to dwell in the oasis of the Heart of Jesus even as I live in the midst of the challenges of the world, close to those who suffer. Of course, there are many different realities of suffering throughout the world, but here in Bethlehem, in this particular place where Jesus himself shared his life with those who were suffering, there is a sense of urgency. The horrors of Gaza are a mere hour’s drive from Bethlehem (but in reality, they are in everyone’s living room, obscenely displayed on large-screen TVs), and now these horrors are getting even closer, affecting, displacing, and terrorizing Palestinians in the West Bank as well.

To speak of hope in this situation seems almost scandalous. And yet, we are called to be pilgrims of hope



even here, pilgrims on a journey that leads us deeper into the Heart of Jesus and deeper into the world we live in, trusting in the mercy of God.



Later on, after a half-hour’s walk from the monastery through the winding Bethlehem streets, I come to the Church of the Nativity, and once inside, descend to the Grotto. Here, two thousand years ago in the midst of a chaotic world, Jesus was born. A small, vulnerable, needy baby cradled in the arms of his mother. The silence of the Grotto contrasts starkly with the sounds of the city outside, which sometimes include the clatter of military surveillance helicopters and military jeeps filled with soldiers.



A few steps from the Church of the Nativity is the community of L’Arche Bethlehem, Ma’an lil-Hayat in Arabic, meaning Together for Life, a community that brings together people with and without intellectual disabilities. When the name of the community was chosen we were aware of its two meanings:

- 1) We’ll be together for our whole life, forever; and
- 2) Being together we give life to each other. Ma’an lil-Hayat consists of two day programs, one in Bethlehem and one in a nearby village. There



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are no residential homes, as people live with their families and return to their homes at the end of each day. The community welcomes both Muslims and Christians.



When I enter Ma'an, the celebration begins! There's singing and dancing, and sharing stories and refreshments, and a moving time of prayer filled with much gratitude. This community that had been so used to welcoming visitors and guests has, like everyone in the area, been deprived of the usual comings and goings of old and new friends for more than a year and a half. So seeing a familiar face is cause for much rejoicing.

The joy that is part and parcel of every L'Arche community continues to animate Ma'an lil-Hayat. Community life gives a sense of stability and creates a safe place of refuge in the midst of uncertainty, danger, and distress. During our time of exchanging news, I asked Haytham, one of the people with a disability, how he was doing and how life



has been for him. Haytham, like a number of people in the community—both with and without disabilities—lives in a refugee camp in Bethlehem. After a long pause, he responded: "Life isn't easy. I can't sleep at night. In the middle of the night, almost every night, Israeli sol-

diers come into the camp and make some families leave their homes and stay outside in the cold and rain while the soldiers

go in and destroy everything they see—the furniture, the TV, the computer, the refrigerator, the beds...everything. And sometimes they harass or beat or arrest some of the younger or older men in the camp and we don't know why, and we don't know where they take them. They can disappear for days or weeks or months. And sometimes, when the night has been too difficult for me, I'm not able to come to Ma'an. I'm just too tired and too afraid to go out. But on other days, when I feel better, I'm really happy to come to the community. I need my friends."

Ma'an lil-Hayat exists within a context of much violence, aggression, and trauma, and yet it remains a place of improbable joy and peace. I recognize that Ma'an is truly a sign of hope.

A few days later, I planned to go to another place that's dear to my heart—the *malja*, an institution for people with disabilities in the town of Bethany—yes, the town of Lazarus and Mary and Martha. I asked a friend from Ma'an lil-Hayat to go with me.

The most direct route to Bethany from Bethlehem is through Jerusalem. But Palestinians who live in the West Bank are forbidden from traveling to Jerusalem unless they hold a permit issued by the Israeli military authorities. None of my friends from Ma'an lil-Hayat had permits. And so we needed to go by way of the desert route,

called Wadi Nar (the Valley of Fire), a long and winding road that is often blocked and closed off by military checkpoints. We could never be sure whether the road would be open or closed, so it was very risky to take this route, not knowing whether we'd be stranded sometimes for hours in the desert.

The *malja* is home to more than seventy people with disabilities. We enter and sit with about ten of the residents, my dear friends. Most are wheelchair users who have varying degrees of disability. After our first hellos, we make Arabic coffee and start to exchange news and reminisce about "the old days." The new director of the *malja* is with us. I don't know him very well. He listens as we speak of fond memories and of many of our friends who have died over the years. He asks us how long we've known each other. We all look around, smiling at one another. I pause and do a simple calculation in my head and say, "Well, believe it or not, it's been forty years! Many of us here at the *malja* have known each other since 1985." As I said that I was reminded that faithful friendships are a precious gift. Another incarnation of hope.



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One of my friends, I'll call her Amal (not her real name), shared some very distressing news that is similar to that of almost every Palestinian these days. Amal is originally from

Gaza. She came to the *malja* more than twenty-five years ago because her family was not able to provide the care she needed. But she keeps in close touch with her brothers and sisters. She shared that two of her brothers, a sister-in-law, and four of her nieces and nephews had been killed in bombings in Gaza. She was unconso-lable. We sat together for a while longer. In silence. And then prayed. Amal prayed especially for those in Gaza who are grieving loved ones. For those who are hungry. For the children.

My stay in Palestine awakened such conflicting feelings in me. Deep sadness and even anger as I witness the suffering, the injustice, the inhumanity, the traumatization. Deep joy as I spend time together with "my people." A deep longing for peace and healing and justice and love. A deep desire to be a presence of consolation in the midst of those who live in fear and uncertainty, faced with ongoing aggression, violence, and injustice.

I know that I'm not able to change the situation or to make life better for people, but what I've discovered is that faithful friendship, presence, simply being present to share life together, can be a powerful sign of hope that re-

minds people of the Light that continues to shine even in the midst of the deepest darkness.

I return once again to where I began, asking Mary, the mother of Jesus, to guide us along the way of hope.

In this we are to be like Mary, the mother of Jesus:

She brings Christ into the world.

She shares Christ with the world.

She suffers with Christ in the world.

She experiences his resurrection and becomes part of the community that is his resurrected presence in the world.



All of us are "living stones" (1 Pet 2:5), called through our baptism to build God's house in fraternal communion, in the harmony of the Spirit, in the coexistence of diversity. In the words of Saint Augustine: "The

Church consists of all those who are in harmony with their brothers and sisters and who love their neighbour" (Serm. 359,9).

Brothers and sisters, I would like that our first great desire be for a united Church, a sign of unity and communion, which becomes a leaven for a reconciled world.

In this our time, we still see too much discord, too many wounds caused by hatred, violence, prejudice, the fear of difference, and an economic paradigm that exploits the Earth's resources and marginalises the poorest. For our part, we want to be a small leaven of unity, communion and fraternity within the world. We want to say to the world, with humility and joy: Look to Christ! Come closer to him! Welcome his word that enlightens and consoles! Listen to his offer of love and become his one family: *in the one Christ, we are one*. This is the path to follow together, among ourselves but also with our sister Christian churches, with those who follow other religious paths, with those who are searching for God, with all women and men of good will, in order to build a new world where peace reigns!

This is the missionary spirit that must animate us; not closing ourselves off in our small groups, nor feeling superior to the world.

We are called to offer God's love to everyone, in order to achieve that unity which does not cancel out differences but values the personal history of each person and the social and religious culture of every people.

Brothers and sisters, this is the hour for love!

The holy father Leo XIV - Sunday, 18 May 2025



Kathy, from the United States Region

Kathy currently resides in Canada and is a long-time member of L'Arche. L'Arche is a community where people with and without intellectual disabilities or handicaps share life together, fostering mutual relationships and inclusion. Kathy served for 35 years with L'Arche in Palestine.

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My Ray of Hope

After making my first vows, I was integrated into the group of pastoral agents of my vicariate, where I take part in various meetings. Most of the members are religious men and women from different congregations.



As a secular consecrated woman — consecrated without any distinctive sign — I often wondered how I could collaborate with priests, brothers, and sisters in religious habit, who are so easily recognized and respected by the faithful and even by the wider community, especially in a culture where secularity is still a new and little-understood reality. This question frequently crossed my mind.

At my first gatherings with them, I felt somewhat out of place. During some pastoral activities carried out alongside consecrated men and women in habit, I even experienced attitudes of disregard from some of the faithful, while those in religious dress were warmly welcomed.

Faced with this, I quickly chose to embrace my secular vocation more deeply, reminding myself that Christ Himself is the First and Perfect Secular One. From that moment, I began to feel proud of my vocation and to affirm it without fear.



Many people are curious to understand this form of vocation — that of the Secular Institute of the Filles de Saint François (ISF). I never miss an opportunity to explain it, for most are hearing about it for the first time. Over time, I have developed strong bonds of collaboration with my brothers and sisters in religious life, and I now work with some of them on pastoral themes such as vocation promotion and Caritas.



This experience has become, for me, a place of discovery, fraternal relationship, and many opportunities

for growth. I see ever more clearly that our Mother the Church truly has everything we need to lead us to heaven. As Pope Francis reminds us, *walking together in unity amid diversity is a great richness.*

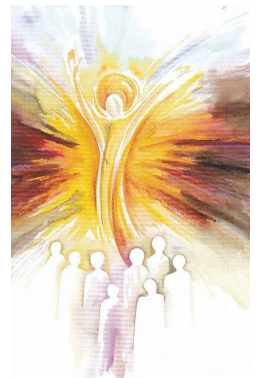
Chantal Adiko — Benin

Hope in daily life

A few months ago, a very talkative woman, standing at the edge of deep distress, asked that we come to her home for a prayer of protection. Together with the diocesan exorcist, I went to visit her and her eight-year-old son — a child so profoundly disabled that she cannot take her eyes off him. At that time, she was awaiting a move to another social housing apartment.

A few weeks later, she expressed her desire to be confirmed and to receive Holy Communion. Her son, now welcomed into a sheltered workshop for persons with disabilities, was following an adapted catechumenal journey in preparation for Baptism. This path, delicate and demanding for those who accompanied them, is now drawing to its close. The priest — who has since become her confessor — said to me with deep emotion: *"She is far above us."*

In my own daily life, it is hope that keeps me from being overwhelmed by difficulties and obstacles. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, I am strengthened to stand firm, to be enlightened and animated each day by His presence in the service of others. My heart is filled with trust and often with thanksgiving to Christ, the Lord of time and history. **Marie-Thérèse Valerenberghe — France** (Marie-Thérèse serves in the diocesan ministry of exorcism.)



Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people chosen as his inheritance.
From heaven the LORD looks down
and observes the children of Adam,

From his dwelling place he surveys
all who dwell on earth.
The One who fashioned together their hearts
is the One who knows all their works.
Our soul waits for the LORD,

he is our help and shield.
For in him our hearts rejoice;
in his holy name we trust.
May your mercy, LORD, be upon us;
as we put our hope in you. Ps 32





Pilgrim of hope in the heart of the world

Excerpt from the final message of the Jubilee of Consecrated Life

Dear brothers and sisters of the human family, peace be with you all!

Sometimes dusty, sometimes muddy—of the most remote places, in offices, in markets, on public transport, in churches, in our children's classrooms and those of catechism, in hospitals beside the bed of a sick person or behind the coffin of a loved one who has passed away.

By choice, you find us where war rages, where nature rebels, and where dictatorships deny every kind of human right. We share with all of you the sufferings in life's critical moments, as well as the joy of achievements and goals reached.

We entrust everything, with faith and gladness, in our prayer to God, who cares for us and enfolds us with His tenderness. On the day we said our "yes" to Jesus' call to live according to the Gospel in this form of life, we promised to be a presence—sisters and brothers among all—ready to give life, to generate it, to accompany it, and to believe in its power beyond appearances.

Mary, Mother of Jesus and of us all, be the model of how to build true peace according to God's plan.

Rome, October 11th, 2025

My Faith and Hope

Pang Tieng is a village of the K'Ho ethnic minority, 30 kilometers northwest of Da Lat city center, where I was born and raised. As if it were a plan prepared from eternity, God 'buried' me here like a handful of yeast - a child of the village, a person consecrated to God and to the Church.

The people of my village live in harmony with each other in the community and in the midst of nature. Besides the Christian faith, they still believe that in nature there exists a supernatural force that governs their daily lives. Therefore, although the faith has gradually matured through each generation, they still more or less retain the customs passed down by their ancestors, especially in rituals such as funerals and weddings. There were times when I chose to go against the flow, leaving my own safety to help my villagers understand the cultural value of traditional customs, gradually abandon superstitious customs and live true to the Christian faith they profess.

Clearly aware of my mission at work, I constantly improve my expertise and skills to fulfill the responsibilities assigned to me. If I just stopped there, then perhaps making a living would not be too difficult for me. However, God placed me — a religious and a preschool teacher — in Pang Tieng village, and that was certainly not a coincidence.

There are concepts of life, for me, are the mission of "a handful of yeast buried in a bowl of dough", but in the eyes of my colleagues, are considered eccentric. For example: professional conscience, sacrifice for children, a simple lifestyle without luxury, an honest lifestyle without flattery... These things often make me the target of slander and jealousy. Sometimes I wonder: Why is making a living so difficult and challenging? Overcoming those difficulties is a struggle with both tears and joy. Prayer, discernment, spiritual companionship and courageous choice — that is how I live in the world without belonging to the world, walking with the community without compromising.

With firm faith and hope, I am convinced that I, my family, the village where I live, the children I care for, my colleagues and even my superiors — all have a special place in God's boundless love. I believe that He is guiding each person's life in His own mysterious way. I give thanks to God, because my life has Him and I belong to Him. Please pray for me and for my beloved Pang Tieng village.

Lucia Sra



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Pilgrims of Hope

Is it hope or faith that

comes first. Faith is a gift from God. We have already been promised: "I am the way, the truth and the life." (John 14:6) "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)" "And so I say to

you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18) The aim of our life is to know God, to love him, and to fulfill his will. To enjoy our eternal life with God is his will. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1721) It is these things on which we base our hope.

Faith sometimes seems to come from the from the soul. Hope is human. Faith can be because it is not cultivated by hope. Hope is manifest. In a way, hope is endurance. Hope

Hope is the work of faith. God's plan is our faith tells us that the best is what God for us. In dark times the temptation is to look alone, and Jesus sometimes comes to us tures hope. We are united through contact, we connect through God's love. In times of losing, hope, in dark times, we rely on and try to be open to people around us. Our trust in others and our trustworthiness to others is connected to our trust in God. We have to allow God to work in our lives. We have to trust when in darkness.

We can't live without hope. It is our sometimes-wavering response to the gift of faith. We believe in the mercy of God. We fail yet we trust. Peter denied Christ and wept bitter tears but trusted the voice of Jesus to cast the net. When the world sees only darkness our faith leads us to hope.

Women of the Region of the United States and Canada



head, *I know what I believe*. But hope comes like a seed that is planted that doesn't grow our longing for what we believe to become perseveres in trial but also chooses joy.

alive in us. We "hope for the best" because has for us. Whatever happens will be good down when we should look up. We are never through other people. Companionship nur- the bonds of family. Even in a few minutes



Sowing seeds in the High-lands

It was the first time I set foot in a remote, isolated area - where ethnic minorities live in the highlands. The parish priest sent me to stay with the only religious family in the area. Conscious of the mission God had given me, I started with small steps: in the evening, the family and I read the Word of God and prayed the Rosary. During the day, I visited families in the area, regardless of religion. Thanks to those meetings, I discovered about 10 families who were Catholic, but had not lived their faith for a long time.

To be honest, at first my heart was filled with worries: sparse population, no church, no Mass, language barrier... and most of all, many people had never known



God. I felt so small, sometimes discouraged and wondered if I could do anything.

But then, I chose to be present with them in a very close way. The family and I went to the fields, waded through streams, worked on the farm, shared every simple meal, every joy and worry of the day. My familiar routine changed due to the lack of good living conditions. But in that situation, I felt my heart gradually being pulled out of its shyness, and filled with a great desire: to proclaim the Good News to the poor.

I no longer thought about fatigue, I only felt my heart urged to continue meeting, talking, supporting those who did not know God, and even those who knew Him but because of life had distanced themselves from the Church. I began to feel something profound: the





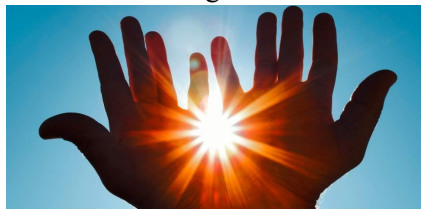
Pilgrim of hope in the heart of the world

Holy Spirit was working - silently but powerfully. He awakened faith in souls that seemed cold, aroused in them the desire to return to God and receive the sacraments.

And then, on the 5th Sunday of Lent 2025, a beautiful mark happened. In that land that was once unfamiliar with the Gospel, a solemn and fervent Mass was celebrated. During the Mass, 7 catechumens received the Sacrament of Baptism; 20 people who had been separated from God for 10 to 40 years were reconciled with Him through the Sacrament of Reconciliation; 15 young people, aged 8 to 17, began attending a basic catechism class to learn about God and the Church.

I cannot express the emotion in my heart. Thank God, because He did not let my hope become hopeless. As Saint Paul said: "Hope does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5). God's love and grace are always sufficient for those who trust in Him. Looking back on the journey in that highland, I realized that: God did not ask me to do great things. He only needed me to have the courage to sow a small seed, in silence and trust. And it is He who silently waters, makes the seed grow and bear fruit in due season. I learned that: for the Gospel to take root, sometimes it does not need eloquent preaching, but only a heart present, a pair of sharing hands, a sympathetic gaze, a patience to stay with the poor and the little ones. And as a sower I am also the one who is transformed by God first because I go not only to give, but also to receive a new faith, to be purified in trials, and to grow in hope.

Maria Hîru



A Life of Simple Witness

In My Family

I try to help my nephews and nieces who are in need — for example, by supporting their schooling through the purchase of notebooks, clothes, and school fees. I also assist the poorest and the elderly, giving a little money to help them buy coffee, sugar, or clothing (second-hand clothes are now more affordable in Madagascar). When someone faces illness or the death of a loved one, I also try to contribute what I can to support them.

In My Neighborhood

I visit elderly or sick people and offer them a little financial help to buy medicine, coffee, sugar, or other small necessities.

In My Native Village (Home Parish)

I participate actively with the faithful of my home parish, helping with the repair of our church roof, whose tin sheets are old and full of holes. Inside the church, there is still much to improve. Together with the regular parishioners — and with the support of those who have moved away but remain attached to our



community — we plan to increase the number of benches, as the number of faithful is growing. *Thanks be to God!*

My personal wish now is to buy a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Our Lady of Lourdes) for our church. The parish is under the patronage of Saint Lawrence; his statue, offered long ago by the Jesuit Fathers, is still there. Today, our parish is served by diocesan priests.



In My Institute

I have known the Cor Unum Family since 1986, thanks to a *Fidei donum* priest, Father Bertrand de Vergeron. After asking me many questions about my personal life, he encouraged me to join the Cor Unum Family. After much reflection and prayer, I made the decision to do so — and today, I am part of the Institute!

The international session held in Elweyt, Brussels, in 1999, helped me profoundly. The theme was *Mission and Contemplation, Work and Prayer*. This has guided me ever since, and I try to live it daily in my life.

Thanks be to the Lord!



Marthe, ISF – Madagascar



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