



18<sup>th</sup> July 2023

**SHARING SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF THE RENEWAL PROGRAMME IN  
ROME: 21/3/2023 - 1/5 2023**



**A few highlights of my experience of the renewal programme held in Rome**

A renewal programme had been planned in 2020 for RSCJs in two age-wise groups (55-65 yrs. and 65-75 yrs). Then came Covid! The programmes were postponed. When it was proposed again for 2022, we were 3 years older and some had dropped out. So, the groups were combined and we had the programme from 19<sup>th</sup> March to 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2022. Sisters Kathy, Mariado and Digna were the team conducting the programme. The pattern in general was: sessions on a particular theme over several days, with input from resource persons, (all RSCJ, except for one), followed by personal reflection and sharing in small groups, then sharing in the full group and a day for personal integration. There was simultaneous translation when we were in the big group, and also, occasionally, when needed in the small groups.



There were 25 of us from 14 provinces. The Indian group was the largest – five of us (Ananda, Kirti, Mariaelena, Shanti and myself). The languages spoken were Spanish, English and French. I don't think any one of us spoke all three languages and if any spoke a second language, it was a rare person who was fluent in the 2<sup>nd</sup> one. Yet the wonder was that

we were very soon one family, crossing all language barriers. It was really an experience of the RSCJ family spirit which our Holy Mother infused into the Society.

It also made me aware, with greater force, of the strength of our internationality. Internationality for us is not just the fact that the Society is in 42 countries, but that our charism produces a strong bond crossing the boundaries of language and culture, so that we feel one with each other even when we have never met before.

One of the first modules was personal sharing of a transformative experience. The sharing was deep, though we had just met. Practically all the experiences were of some kind of suffering or difficult experience – cancer, the unexpected death of someone dear, a very difficult ministry, a painful choice made willingly. As I listened to each one, I realized that each one had lived her experience with the Lord. I really appreciated the contemplative spirit of the Society which had drawn them closer in their relationship with the Lord through this suffering, instead of it leading to depression.

Another module was a sharing on our mission and ministry. What struck me as each one shared, was the passion for mission, the dynamism and the willingness, even among the oldest sisters, to venture into something new or difficult. The option for the poor seemed to permeate the choices, even when, as in a few cases, the ministry may not have been directly with the poor or marginalized.



Then we had a “Mini Chapter” in our “new provinces”!! The five of us met with Mariko from Indonesia, and Digna, who represented both the Philippines and Vietnam. We discussed the implications of the new ways of organizing the Society and shared our hopes, joys and anxieties. Listening to each one in our new province group, and then in the larger group, gave me not only greater clarity, but also hope for the future. I also felt very appreciative of our Society's willingness to explore such new ways to meet a changing world! It reminded me of the élan of the 1970s.

The sessions on Synodality, facilitated by three different resource persons gave me a hope for the church at every level. It also gave me the realization that synodality is a value to be lived not only at the organizational level of the church, from its centre in Rome down to the local church, but in our daily lives e.g. at the Society, community and institutional levels. It was an eye-opener for me that in this, the women's congregations have actually taken a lead; for

example, the whole participatory process we as a Society are undergoing while searching for and deciding on a new way forward has been a synodal process.

There were many more precious experiences, but I shall leave those to the others to share!

*Vimala Verghese, rscj*

### **Experience of Language, Culture**

We were 24 participants from different parts of the world with different cultures and languages, directed by a team of three RSCJs. There were also four to five translators working in rotation, two at a time. Communication was in three languages: English, French and Spanish. During the sessions, the translators brought out the meaning of what was said to all.



For the first few days, there were puzzled looks and questioning eyebrows as we tried to understand the on-going conversations! Shy hesitation, wrinkled foreheads, begging eyes often interrupted conversations with nervous laughter or friendly giggles! We often giggled together as we tried to learn new languages from the three being

used around us. (Of course, Hindi could not enter this arena!)

At the beginning of each talk we were given sheets translating the talks into our three languages. For some of us the big difficulty was that our mother tongues were different from any of the three which were being used. There could not be translators for them all! But in ordinary conversations, often much laughter echoed round at the efforts to explain our ideas successfully in different languages! We could converse on our shared life and on the talks quite well, though there were often bursts of laughter at our efforts.

For me personally, in this international group, language was a mighty effort, which sometimes made me feel awkward. Now, as I look back, I understand better the meaning of “International Society”. Personally too, I have widened my knowledge of my own native language among many different languages of our world. I will always be grateful for the understanding laughter which often accompanied explanation!

I was amazed and thankful at the fact that, without having the same native language, I could both understand and accept what our Society meant to us, expected from us, planned for us in the future.

It seemed to me that I had walked long years in the Society. I had learned to see the world from the Society’s point of view; I had grown into beliefs, ideas and a vision for the future based on the dreams of our Holy Mother, St Madeleine Sophie Barat. Communication need not be a barrier, I realized. Just as it was not for our Holy Mother. I will always thank her for

this marvellous experience of our “International Society,” which has drawn me into a new understanding of the gift of self.

*Kirti Bhuiyan, rscj*

### **Living Holy Week in Rome**

R O M E. Rome and Vatican City. I had heard, I had imagined, I had seen them many times before. I had seen crowds of Roman Catholics, crowds of pilgrims in exotic clothes, going from church to church. I had heard big bells and small bells ringing around me. I had seen pictures of little children with their parents, helping their grandparents, walking into great Basilicas. I had spent almost six months there, the six months before my final profession. I had had the opportunity to visit churches and houses important in both Church History and Roman history. The city of Rome, the Vatican, the Colosseum, the churches of the Apostles, Peter, Paul etc. etc. which we visited, devoutly kissing stone steps or wall pictures.

This renewal course took me back to Rome, reminding me of my past visit there.

My second experience of Holy Week in Rome was DIFFERENT! The crowds, from all over the world, walking resolutely through the streets in silence to enter in time for the services. The services were long, 3 to 4 hours each. The crowd did not seem to be aware of time passing. They were absorbed in eternity, in the Son of God who died, who rose from the dead. The son of God whom they were waiting for. I was dumb-founded as I walked: little me, from far off little Kenduda in Jharkhand, here in this grand centre of the Catholic faith. I was one in these crowds, walking from one basilica to the next, kissing the entrance steps with people from the North and South, from the East and West, of this world; walking daily from the Villa Lante for five minutes to the great St. Peter’s at the heart of the Vatican State. This was the Church of Jesus made real to me.

What inspired me was that this was the Church of Jesus, the Son of God who became man for me. Who placed me in Kenduda in a family deeply devoted to Jesus, with a great devotion to the Sacred Heart.

For me, Holy Week began with Palm Sunday at St. Peter’s Square. The crowds moving silently towards and around St. Peter’s Square were massive, the palms waved in thousands, gleaming green in the sun. We were all waiting for His Holiness to arrive for the Holy Eucharist. The Eucharist was in Italian, the prayers of the faithful were in different languages – I was thrilled to hear even Hindi! It moved me deeply to watch their silent listening to the solemn singing through the whole service. An amazing jolt when the Holy Father turned to give us the final Blessing, an overwhelming experience of affection and faith.

Maundy Thursday and Good Friday gave me similar experiences. Good Friday at the Colosseum gave us the full depth of sharing the pain of Jesus. There was utter silence in the crowd. The night was dark – deeply dark. The choir accompanied us with stately music throughout the 14 stations. We prayed through different experiences of sickness, loneliness, poverty, torture, ignorance, hate and death. This Good Friday will remain in my heart till my death. Holy Saturday was quiet till midnight mass: another deeply powerful and moving experience.

Easter Sunday brought amazement and bursting joy. Mass was scheduled for 10 am. Little me, however, left the Villa Lante at 6. 00 am to be sure of a good place in St. Peter's Square!!! The crowds in and around the Square, as the time for the Mass approached, were unbelievable! Pushed together, silent lips, wide eyes looking for His Holiness to enter. When he did enter at 10 am, in solemn vestments of gold, there was complete silence. All eyes followed him to the splendidly decorated immense altar in front of the main door of St. Peter's where the Holy Father bowed low and began the Easter mass. The singing at mass was mainly in Italian, but readings were from other languages, including English. No one could ever forget, for the whole of their lives, the final overwhelming greetings of the crowds as His Holiness was driven down past the rows of Cardinals and Bishops, before he came to the lay crowd. Shouts of Paschal joy and overwhelming greetings resounded around the great Basilica. The Pope was wheeled in his open carriage to give Easter blessings to the immense crowd filling St. Peter's Square and to receive the tumultuous greetings of the people.

I am sure each one of our Renewal Group must have experienced the living Christ, His great love and final triumph with her whole heart and mind. It was an experience that made one feel proud of having been born in the Catholic Church. Seeing Holy Rome with my own eyes, hearing its own language, ways and prayers increased my faith in Jesus Christ. No RSCJ, experiencing so great an outpouring of faith during her Renewal time in Rome could forget these moments which bind our Society to the Church of Rome. Deo Gratias! Alleluia ...

*Kirti Bhuiyan, rscj*

## **The Retreat**

Our Retreat began about two weeks before the end of the Renewal Programme. In addition to Kathy and Mariado, we had three additional Directors, all RSCJ. Stephanie Romaine from ENW, Veronique Thibaut from BFN, and Kim Hyo Seung from KOC (at present in Joigny). As soon as we began our programme, we were expected to go for accompaniment every week, and some of us were assigned to the above three so we had to meet them on Zoom. However, all three came to Villa Lante and stayed with us throughout the retreat so we could see them every day in person rather than on Zoom.

At the beginning of the retreat Veronique gave us a short orientation, highlighting some foundational aspect:

- The Love of Christ holds us. Give Him the key to your house – your heart. Let us be contemplated by Him.
- Ezekiel: Eat, taste and relish his word.
- Religious of the Sacred Heart – the Heart transpierced for love, that bears the scars of wounds, that cares for our wounds and heals us to be reborn.
- We are called to live in the Presence of the Lord listening to His Spirit.

Each one made her own time-table for prayer, visits to the guide etc. At 9 p.m. each day, we all met before the Blessed Sacrament exposed, to pray for an hour together in silence.

The atmosphere of Villa Lante was very conducive to prayer and contemplation. Besides the three chapels especially prepared, living in the house in which Sophie had lived, walking in the beautiful garden where Sophie had walked, and being surrounded by the whole atmosphere of Rome, helped us to remain connected with the Spirit and profoundly aware of God's presence around us.



*Villa Lante garden*



*St Madeleine Sophie's chapel - renovated*

At the end of the retreat, we were all given the privilege of visiting Assisi. Most of us had been there before but returning to it now after all these years was a spiritually deepening experience. The beautiful setting, the simplicity of life lived there, the enormous churches filled with devotees – all have an otherworldly flavour to them.

We tried to walk the streets in the spirit of St. Francis and imbibe his radical love for God. It was amazing to see the number of pilgrims of all ages and from all over the world, coming to pay their homage, walking the steep hills in a spirit of asceticism. It struck me that genuineness lived from the depths of the heart touches the hearts of others and attracts them to something profound within.

So all we could do is to raise our hearts aloft and sing the Canticum in gratitude!

*Shanti Fernandes, rscj*

### **Some learnings....**

This time – so precious, so graced – brought in its wake so many learnings that will take a lifetime to explore and integrate. The whole experience was such a rich one – the input sessions, the time for personal reflection and integration, the encounter with so many of our sisters from all over the world, being in Rome itself ....

The programme began with a module on personal exploration, conducted by Mariajo Iribarren (ESP) who led us to delve deep into ourselves, examining connections between

emotions, communication and relationships. Her use of myth to explore the many-layered aspect of the reality we inhabit was an invitation to continue this exploration in my own context.

From there we went on to reflection on our mission, with Paloma Fernandez de la Hoz (ESP) illustrating, through scripture and the situation of the world today, the way in which synodality can be and is woven into our very apostolate. An afternoon with Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ (the first woman undersecretary appointed to the Synod of Bishops, the first woman to be given the right to vote during the Synod) proved to be most enlightening. She shared with us the process of preparing for the Synod, and also the methodology being employed so that the theme of Synodality is being explored and experienced at every stage. I was deeply struck by her way of quietly working for transformation and liberation from within the Church. The module was rounded off with an online session with Maria Cimperman (USC) whose discussion of synodality as it affected our lives was challenging. Two questions she raised have stayed with me:

- How do we exercise our power, as RSCJ?
- How do we, as RSCJ, practice discernment?

One afternoon of an exposure experience was very powerful. Each of the three groups were taken to organisations working with migrants. I was profoundly moved by the concern, the sensitivity and the commitment of those working with these marginalised people, so many of whom had no legal standing. Another aspect that seemed radical to me was the way in which these initiatives are wholeheartedly supported by the government.

The module on My Vocation as RSCJ Today gave us rich insights into the reality of the Society in the present moment. Specially powerful was the morning spent with the General Council – they gave us their time and, more important, their trust, as they addressed any and all questions and issues that arose, with simplicity and openness. Once again, the invitation was to enter fully into the movement of the One Body as we journey forward in faith and hope.

The last module – Spirituality – was handled by Mariola Lopez (ESP) whose presentation wove passion and poetry in an unforgettable way. She touched upon a number of scriptural figures (Ruth and Naomi, the Samaritan woman, among others) and references, highlighting the connectedness and intimacy of relationship that ran like a golden thread through them all. A call to deepen this aspect of all our relatedness realising that they flow from God, lead us back to God. A perfect prelude to the retreat that followed!

Evenings of dance with Lorraine Pratt (ENW) and Mariola were times to relax but also to re-discover the expressiveness of the body and of movement. Walks, visits to significant places in Rome, time spent with each other during free times...all these had their own place and meaning in the six weeks.

I cannot end this without emphasising how much I experienced and learnt of the RSCJ spirit during these days. The Villa Lante is still in the process of restoration and reconstruction, and ours was the first group to be using it again. It is beautiful and well-planned – but there were many small (and big!) things that still needed attention. It was wonderful to see the

patience and good humour with which all the inconveniences (ranging from no hot water, to confusion about the electronic door-keys, to windows that didn't open or wouldn't shut, to meals that were not always very appetising) were met by the participants. The concern and care that were lavished on anyone who was ill (I was one recipient during a second bout of Covid in the first week in Rome!) was very touching. The attentiveness to every detail of the programme on the part of the three organisers, Kathy, Mariado and Digna, was most inspiring. The General Council's engagement with the group and the way they and the Mother House community opened their home to us on Easter Sunday was a strong witness to the welcome, generosity and sisterliness that characterises the Society.

And last but not least, the Villa Lante community – Meg Causey (USC), Mary Finlayson (USC) and Florence de la Villeon (BFN) – together with their partners in mission, Stefane and Rosaria, were always available to attend smilingly to our every need. Meg co-ordinated all the practical details, Mary served as one of the translators, brought her artistic sense to all the arrangements and decorations, Florence's technical wizardry tamed all the electronic gadgets so that presentations and simultaneous translations could proceed smoothly. They made the whole experience possible for us all with their quiet behind-the-scenes efforts, their unstinting generosity. Deep gratitude to each of them! A special thank you to our own Province, our communities and those with whom we work – for making it possible for us to be away from India for such a long period. We have gained much – and we hope that over the years these learnings will only be deepened!

*Ananda Amritmahal, rscj*

