



September 8, 2015

Dear Sisters,

Greetings of love, peace, and joy on this beautiful feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary! May she, who is the Queen of all creation, enfold us with her maternal affection and watchful care that we may learn from her how to live faithfully our vocation as protectors of God's handiwork.

The most recent encyclical letter of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, entitled *LAUDATO SI*, challenges us to work together towards a more passionate concern for the protection of the world, our common home. I urge you, dear Sisters, to read and reflect on the letter of the Holy Father and as a community or as an institution implement ways to respond concretely and radically to the call for a "global ecological conversion."¹

Allow me to share with you my own reflections, particularly on the points in the encyclical letter that have direct implications on our life and mission as consecrated persons. Here, we turn our gaze on Mary, our mother and model, for in her "all the splendor of creation shines forth."²

Mary is a woman with a grateful heart. At every moment in her life she rejoiced at the graciousness of God and she expressed this in her song of thanksgiving: "*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*" (Lk.1, 46-47). We can imagine Mary singing her *Magnificat*, not only at the Annunciation or Visitation, but also at the Nativity and even at the foot of the cross.

The primary attitude towards God's creation that we need to cultivate is **gratuitousness**. When we recognize that creation is a gift, we begin to treat one another and all other God's creatures with reverence and with deep respect. When we see everything that exists as a reflection of God's beauty, goodness, and love, we are moved to praise and glorify him, and to respect his creation. Humility is the attitude that comes with a grateful heart. With humility we acknowledge that everything comes from the hands of our Gracious God. Though we are unworthy, God continues to gift us because his

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, (24 May 2015), 5.

² *Vita Consecrata*, 28.

graciousness is not dependent on our worthiness or unworthiness, but on his love for us. The only response we can give to this great love is “to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works.”³ The same spirit of gratuitousness moves us to love one another and “to love and accept the wind, the sun and the clouds, even though we cannot control them.”⁴ We have a shared responsibility for the well-being of our brothers and sisters and to create a genuine culture of care for our environment.

Last month, in Rome, I was awakened by a very strong thunder and lightning. Figuratively speaking, I was “hit” by the incident. At that moment, the reality of “climate change” and degradation of our environment came to me strongly. It made me reflect on my own contribution to the global ecological catastrophe. The first step towards ecological conversion is to examine our lives and acknowledge our own contribution, big or small, to the destruction of our environment. How do we value the ordinary things we have each day, like water, light, air, etc.? Do we treat each other in the community and the people in our workplace with respect and love? Do we see them and all other creatures as reflections of God’s love?

Mary went *in great haste* (Lk 1:39) to bring the Good News to the world. “*In great haste*” not only describes the speed with which Mary went, but of “her diligence and the careful attention with which she undertakes the journey.”⁵ Her commitment for the common good was manifested when she uttered her “Fiat” to God’s will for her. She accepted to be the Mother of God, uncertain of how this will happen or where this will take her, trusting only the words of God through the Angel that: “*the child to be born will be holy; and will be called the Son of God.*” (Lk 1:35) We find in Mary our model of “thoughtful, warmhearted service of others,”⁶ and she does this with much love, enthusiasm and joy! She was willing to let go of her own plans and desires for the love of God and for the common good. If we truly desire to care for others and for our earth, we need to develop a **disinterested concern** for our brothers and sisters and to let go of any form of self-centeredness and self-absorption.

In the encyclical, the Holy Father drew from the ancient stories of Cain and Abel and Noah, to emphasize the fact that “everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.”⁷

On the day of our profession we publicly proclaimed that we “consecrate ourselves to the Kingdom of the Father in the service of mankind...”⁸ The prevailing cultures of individualism, consumerism and materialism, challenge us to give a prophetic witness to our life of consecration. Are we willing to be “stretched,” to be “disturbed” and to go

³ Laudato Si, 220.

⁴ Ibid., Art. 228.

⁵ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Rejoice*, p. 66

⁶ Book of Life, Art 5.

⁷ Laudato Si, 70.

⁸ Formula of Profession.

beyond our “comfort zones” so as to reach out to those who are most in need? Where are we being called today to go “*in great haste*” in order to bring the Good News?

In the simple village of Nazareth, Jesus “*grew and became strong, filled with wisdom.*” (Lk 2:40) He was under the paternal guidance of Joseph and the motherly care of Mary. If we contemplate the scene of Jesus’ hidden life, we imagine the Holy Family living together in utter **simplicity**, yet happy and contented with whatever they had. They witness to us how to live life to the full, how to appreciate simple pleasures in life, like being in contact with nature, and how to find satisfaction in fraternal relationships and service.

The issue of environmental degradation also challenges us to examine our lifestyle. There can be no authentic ecological conversion without a return to that “simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack.”⁹ My dear Sisters, these words of the Holy Father are at the very heart of our life of evangelical poverty. They challenge us to question our lifestyle in community and as individual Sisters. They draw us back to the spirit of Levesville, where the poor girls gathered, to live together in poverty and in simplicity, in order to serve the poor as “*gratuitously as possible.*”¹⁰

Let us take an honest look at ourselves and examine our choices, our attitudes and our lifestyle. Do they speak of a life that is conformed to the poverty of the disciples of Christ? How many of us find pleasure in shopping? Even if we do not intend to buy anything, we sometimes end up buying something else. How many of us have accumulated things, thinking that we “might” use them in the future, but never did so. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said: “Purchasing is always a moral – and not simply economic act.”¹¹ Let us go back to the practice of making an inventory of our things at the end of each year, and decide to discard or share with the poor whatever you do not need. Changes of assignment are not only “outstanding moments in our life of obedience,”¹² but are also great opportunities to sort out our things and to assess our life of poverty. Let us replace “consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing.”¹³

Simplicity and sobriety are attitudes that are related to a balanced lifestyle. Today, we live in a world with a profound sense of imbalance. Our religious communities are not exempted from this. How many of us find ourselves always busy doing something, constantly in a hurry, hopping from one activity to the other? There is hardly no time to rest, to pray, to eat, to breathe, to smell the flowers, to enjoy each other’s company. An imbalanced lifestyle also affects the way we treat the environment. Our fast-paced and “instant” culture makes us want for immediate results, for success. The value

⁹ Laudato Si, 222

¹⁰ Draft of the Rule. Chapter 1.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009), 66.

¹² Book of Life, Art. 30

¹³ Laudato Si, Art. 9.



of waiting, which is characteristic of nature, is totally ignored, creating an imbalance. Let us not forget, dear Sisters, that we are first called to be faithful and not to be successful!

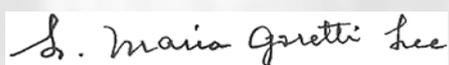
The Holy Father has stressed the important role of Christian communities in ecological education. Specifically, he urged all “seminaries and houses of formation to provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment.”¹⁴ I hope that all our formators will take this appeal seriously and emphasize these aspects in the formation program and processes. Our schools, hospitals, dispensaries, parishes and pastoral centers are also strategic places for ecological education. What policies and concrete measures have we undertaken to protect our common home?

Mary is a woman of contemplation. Twice in the Gospel of Luke, we are told that “*Mary treasured these words/things and pondered them in her heart.*” (Lk 2:19,51). One area of ecological conversion that we need to recover is the **contemplative attitude**, which sees God in all creation and all creation in God’s eyes. We need to develop our sense of awe and wonder at the beauty of creation and to contemplate the Creator who communicates himself to us in everything that exists. This means that we should have the attitude of “serene attentiveness.”¹⁵ It is an attitude that makes us completely present to everyone and everything. This is concretely expressed when we stop and notice the flowers, the trees, the birds, the sun, the stars, the poor, the children, etc., when we give thanks to our Creator, when we listen attentively to those who come to us without thinking what comes next, and when we accept each moment, whether joyful or sorrowful, as God’s gift.

“Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.”¹⁶ Let us rise above ourselves and make a fresh start. We ask the intercession of our Blessed Mother and St. Joseph to show us how to protect and take care of our environment.

In union with all creatures, may we journey together towards **building** a Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty!

Affectionately in Our Lady,



S. Maria Gzretti Lee

Superior General

¹⁴ Ibid, art 214.

¹⁵ Ibid, art 226.

¹⁶ Ibid., art 12.

