My dear Sisters,

Although this letter is written specifically for the Feast of the Sacred Heart, I cannot separate it from the convergence this year of the feast of Madeleine Sophie and, two days later, the profession ceremony which took place on the feast of Pentecost. I love it when Sophie and the Spirit are celebrated together, and how I wish that you all could have been present to welcome our nine new professed Religious of the Sacred Heart, whose hearts burn to be leaven of communion in our world! One of the enormous privileges of our service in Rome is welcoming group after group of probanists, getting to know them, and being inspired by them.

In a world where we are aware of and experience in various ways increasing division, violence, greed, corruption, pornography, trafficking, and political oppression (the list could go on), it is so encouraging that young women from many countries of the world would want to give the whole of their being to following Jesus forever, together with others who have been captivated by Sophie’s vision, believing that his way of being and doing continues to have meaning. Each celebration of final profession confirms our vocations, reinvigorates the Society, and strengthens us as a body. I assure you that you were included in our prayer on May 27th as our sisters pronounced their vows, “trusting in the fidelity of God and the love of their sisters.” Let us thank God for them!

Since the Assembly of Provincials in Uganda, the whole Society has begun to prepare for the 2008 General Chapter. Among the suggestions sent by the General Council to the Society last February as a help in the preparation, a “first step” is a reflection on our “Context” as a necessary framework for looking at our Spirituality and trying to identify the specificity and gift of each culture, the gift that will be brought to the intercultural dialogue of the Chapter. In subsequent reflection, it occurred to me that the questions offered are particularly directed to our dialogue on Spirituality and do not focus directly on the other topic of the Chapter which is government, or “the way we organize ourselves”. It is true that we expect that the reflection and discussion on this topic will flow out of the intercultural dialogue on our Spirituality, but I am hoping that this letter can offer further elements for a reflection and so be a help to the preparation of provincial chapters, most of which are still to come. I offer these reflections, which have been taking shape in my own mind and heart for some time now, not just in view of the Chapter, but as a possible help for our lives, here and now and in the years to come.

As our Team has come to know the Society through our visits, an insight which began as a tentative intuition has become a kind of “refrain” for me. Some of you will recognize it. My growing conviction is that culture is like the air we breathe and we are often unconscious of its effects on us. I first began to think about this when visiting a province that was revising its government plan. In its day to day living it is a very communitarian province but the plan that had been elaborated was excessively hierarchical. It did not seem to
be the appropriate structure to nourish the life that was so evident. All of a sudden it occurred to me that even though consciously what is in our Constitutions on the Spirit of Government was the underpinning of their plan, perhaps unconsciously the way political authority had been exercised for many years in that country had affected our sisters’ conception of authority and structures.

From then on I became fascinated by the history of each country’s political system, as much as I could learn of it, by the diversity that exists in the countries where we are, by the evolution -- or revolution -- that some have lived, by the intertwining of the histories of various countries, in the past and to the present moment. What I also became aware of was the fact that ordinarily we do not make the connection between our political reality and our own attempts to organize ourselves. I think we need to grow in our awareness of how our various histories have affected us and continue to affect us. Our culture is reflected not only in language, ethnicity and religious tradition, but in the historical evolution of our governments -- the type of system and the way authority has been used (or abused), as well as the way a people controls, reacts to or suffers from authority. Personally, I have never liked the term “government” in speaking of our life together because of the political connotations of the word. I prefer to talk about how we are co-responsible, how we organize ourselves and provide for one another what we need to live out of the depths of our spirituality.

The forty-four countries where we are living run the gamut of political systems, both past and present. Regardless of the type of government, many of us in the Society have experienced or are still experiencing internal conflicts within our own country, many of them bitter, and some of them violent: between immigrants/refugees and indigenous peoples, rebel or separatist groups, regional autonomies, past or present civil wars. Few of our countries can boast of leaders who are truly committed to the common good, who put the people before the allure of power, personal prestige and financial gain. In which of our countries do the poorest, weakest, most vulnerable have a privileged place?

When we look at the reality of our world, the ideal Jesus puts before us could not be more counter-cultural. Much of his energy went into trying to instill into his disciples a model of authority that differed from the prevailing culture. He did not lord it over them. He rebuked them for arguing over who was “first”. He told them to become like little children. He washed their feet. He offered his own gentle and humble heart as a model. But exhortation did not reach their hearts. Parables were not enough. Finally, he became the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep: his body given for them, the cup of the new covenant in his blood poured out for them, for us.

After the Crucifixion, the apostles who had scattered out of fear for their lives, came together and remained together. They experienced the Risen Jesus together and as a group they awaited the coming of the Spirit. With the wind and fire of Pentecost, somehow, the presence of the Spirit empowered Jesus’ followers to organize themselves for the common good. The cowardly group of apostles, locked in the Cenacle, was transformed. Soon their numbers swelled. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles:

“The many miracles and signs worked through the apostles made a deep impression on everyone. The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed.” (Acts 2:43-47). “The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything they owned was held in
common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all given great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from them to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any members who might be in need.” (Acts 4: 32-35)

This is a call to find ways to allow each one’s gift to be put at the service of all, to assure that each one’s need is taken care of. This is the spirit in which we want to organize ourselves. It is a call to all of us, not just to those who have a particular responsibility to care for others. We have received the same Spirit as Jesus’ first disciples. Can we let ourselves be led by that Spirit to “enter into a new relationship with one another in faith and love?”

As the five of us said in our letter of 18 December 2006, the Chapter of 2008 is going to be a “different kind of Chapter… a dialogue of experiences, of visions, of the lived experience of our spirituality”. It will also be an opportunity to look with new eyes at how we organize ourselves. Certainly this will involve looking at structures, but there is a deeper level that is absolutely necessary to any conversation about structures. It has to do with **how we understand and feel about our co-responsibility for the life of the Society**. We bring to the task of organizing ourselves a spirit that is “not of this world” but is the spirit of Jesus, as he prayed so earnestly the night before he gave his life for our world. As we reflect on and converse with others about how we can allow his attitudes to transform our own so that we may act more and more like him, let us rejoice in our common call to learn the gentleness and humility of his heart whose love will show us how best to organize ourselves for the mission that has been confided to us.

On a separate page you will find some questions which are offered as a help to your reflection personally and in community or other groupings as you prepare for the Chapter.

As we renew our vows, expressing once again our commitment to God and to one another, let us pray for one another, that we may be attentive to the cultural influences that shape our thinking and our attitudes, and open to being transformed by the Spirit of the one who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life that all might have fullness of Life!

The motherhouse community joins me in wishing you a very Happy Feast!

With much love,

Clare Pratt, rscj
Superior General
TO SITUATE OURSELVES IN THE CONTEXT IN WHICH WE LIVE

• Am I aware of how the manner in which civil authority is exercised in my country influences
  ▪ my concept of authority
  ▪ how I experience
    □ the structures of my province/district/area
    □ other structures of the Society
    □ those who exercise a specific service of authority

• How do I feel about my own exercise of authority?
  ▪ in the community
  ▪ in my ministry
  ▪ in my province/district/area

• Is there anything that needs “evangelizing”, conversion in my own attitudes?