

Experience of the religious congregation of the Sisters Helpers of the Holy Souls

## A charism enters our times

Sr. Elisabetta Flick

*It is truly challenging to enter into dialogue with one's own history. In the case of charismatic gifts, it's necessary to strike a balance between the normal tendency of wanting to remain faithful to the original, God-given charism with its first inspirations and that of reading the signs of the times to discern God's callings in the midst of today's world. A spiritual charism continues its growth and development in this dialectical context. We asked Sister Elisabetta Flick, superior general of the Sisters Helpers of the Holy Souls for eleven years, about their own adventure in this regard.*

### ▲ The beginnings...

Historically, a charism grows and develops in a dynamic relationship between a desire to be faithful to its founding ideas and the need for creativity to remain vibrant and active in today's world. In our case, it is a long, complex story spanning 163 years. I will focus on those key passages that have enabled us to live the charism in this dynamic, one that has allowed for its ongoing development and expression in the world of today.

I would first consider how we Sisters Helpers of the Holy Souls have aimed at being "faithful to the foundational intuitions of Mary of Providence [our foundress in 1856] and attentive to developing her riches by creatively responding to the needs of our time" (cf. Constitutions, n. 14). Images that come to mind are those of the parable of the talents in order to bear fruits and the precious stone that cannot remain locked away for safekeeping. Rather, the stone must be available to all, to shine forth with its own unique light in every culture and age.

### ▲ What changes...

Language, lifestyle, ways of thinking and being, are all elements that change throughout history; we cannot envision a static charism, a charism unable to evolve in accordance with time and circumstances, while at the same time losing nothing of its original essence.

Let's look deeper into this journey.

The original, founding ideas of our history were described as follows: «the Society of Religious Helpers of the souls in Purgatory *was born to comfort and liberate, through assiduous prayer and the practice of works of mercy, those souls who complete their atonement before entering into the glory and joys of Heaven*". This aim was expressed in the motto, "Pray, suffer, act for the souls in Purgatory".

In the second half of the nineteenth century, concern for the suffering and liberation of the souls in purgatory was widespread in France. Clearly, this formulation has needed to be adapted throughout the Society's history, and in accordance with the different cultures in

which the Society was present. Upon entering the Society in 1968, I lived moments of heartfelt concern, anxiety, questioning, fear, a desire for change, as well as moments of darkness and light. My first fifteen years of religious life were deeply influenced by the study and reflection taking place within the Society at that time. I, too, personally lived through both the positive and the awkward attempts to translate and embody the charism in the thinking of that time.

Later, during my service as superior general from 2002 to 2013, I enjoyed revisiting and studying our roots with the light of today. I could see how that original foundation formed the basis of the Society as it exists today, and for all that will develop in the future. I found seeds of those early "Founding ideas" throughout all our history. During those years, we also celebrated the Society's 150<sup>th</sup> founding jubilee. It was a joy-filled occasion, one in which we were able to recognize both the golden thread binding us together, and God's plan of love for each Sister Helper of the Holy Souls and the Society as a whole. Now, once again retracing this golden thread, I'm able to identify those key points of our charism's development as they related to this dialogue between *fidelity* and *creativity*.

### ▲ Throughout history

Pope Pius XII's words at the 1957 beatification of our foundress, Eugénie Smet, are an important starting point: ". . . Charity towards suffering souls was united so intimately in Eugénie Smet to the most concrete, most active, most universal of apostolates. Without a doubt, it was a salient feature of her physiognomy and a particular trait that God wanted to give her." This trait came to life in her through faith in God. For her, God had the loving and attentive face of Providence. Because of this, Eugénie chose Mary of Providence as her religious name, a name that would become her life mission: *To be the providence of Providence* and, therefore, *concretely respond to the signs sent to her by God during that founding period*. This response can be seen through:

- Development of a concrete apostolate that began in response to the needs of a nearby poor and home-bound neighbor.
- Growth into a universal apostolate beginning in 1867, one that would first, at the request of the Church, send Helpers to China. This desire to be a universal apostolate with a worldwide presence of Sisters Helpers who would journey "from the depths of Purgatory to the ends of the earth" has its roots precisely in this foundational period of the congregation's history. Then, from 1873 - 1950, communities developed in Europe, North and South America, and Japan, as well as in Africa and India during the following years.
- Contact with varying cultures helped to actualize and later reformulate the founding principles. Time, courage, faith and trust were all necessary in order to accept the idea that being faithful to the charism did not mean identical ways of living in every part of the world, nor even "...keeping Society traditions intact so they could be handed down as they had been received, by those tasked with passing them on...", " as one mother general had said.

A crucial turning point and clarification regarding this point, however, came soon afterwards in 1948, through the words of the next mother general, Mother Marie de la Croix, who said: "This is precisely what we must never do!"

### ▲ A decisive step

Aware of steps the Society needed to take to clarify the connection and the distinction between both Purgatory and the active apostolate of its mission, Mother Marie convened all the superiors in 1951, and all formators in 1952, for days of study and reflection. The purpose

was to dispel discontent regarding understandings of the Society's spirit. "For us," she affirmed, "the apostolate is not only a means of alleviating souls in Purgatory; it has a value all its own. It is not a question of doing one or the other, but both, with one another."

To carry out these founding principles while remaining faithful to the path indicated by the Church, the mother general proposed a new formulation of purpose: *the vocation of the Sisters Helpers of the Holy Souls is a consecration to the totality of redemptive work, without specific limitations.*

This formulation breathed new life into the Society and led to a renewed apostolic thrust throughout the Society, paving the way for new missionary opportunities.

This spirit of renewal also influenced community life (the introduction of small teams inserted in outlying neighborhoods) and forms of prayer (adoption of the office of the Church in place of the daily office of the dead). The use of religious habits was also replaced with regular dress, something desired from the Society's early beginnings, but for which the Church had required the use of habits by the Society as a condition for its formal approval. During Mother Marie de la Croix's tenure as superior general until 1966, the Society welcomed the changes of the Second Vatican Council and adopted the preface of the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts."

During the post-Conciliar period, different provinces in the countries where Sister Helpers were present carefully tried to read the signs of the times to discern God's callings. They strived to find those words and actions that allowed them to become *truly and intimately supportive* of the men and women to whom they had been sent. Their aim was – and is -- to ensure that "from the depths of Purgatory to the ends of the earth", every human person is recognized, loved and respected in his or her dignity as a child of God. Similarly, we've also tried to live in accordance with, *Perfectae caritatis*, the conciliar decree on the renewal of religious life.

### ▲ The Society today

In 1984, after studying the work done over fifteen years, the General Chapter voted for new Constitutions that were later approved by the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes in 1987 and are still valid today. They express the Society's basic values and principles and contain decrees for revision and reconsideration of the Constitutions every six years during general chapters. They are meant to be reflective of the Society's internal and external changes.

Reformulation of the Society's founding core aroused countless debates and was not without sufferings, fears and misunderstandings. Eventually, however, we arrived at a reformulation that, while respecting the original intuition and different sensitivities, expressed itself using understandable modern terminology in a way that is a creative response to the needs of today's world. In order to reach agreement, it took the strong winds of the Spirit during our 1969, 1975, and 1984 General Chapters, and the courage to embark upon new paths regarding our understandings of mission.

Our current Constitutions, departing from an initial framework serving to ensure fidelity to

founding intuitions, go on in subsequent articles (18-21) to use more contemporized terminology. Since 1987, the Sisters Helpers have strived to live according to the spirit of these Constitutions, aware that "the challenge of the present, with the help of the Holy Spirit, consists in continuing to impact history by constantly growing and developing in our identity."

### ▲ Actualization

We are currently 468 Helpers in 22 countries, with 15 different native languages. Our average age is 70 and we are divided into 104 communities. In our mission statement, we've placed more emphasis on two characteristics of the Society present from the beginning: Care for the most forgotten and faith that there are no barriers for the one who loves.

*Care for the most forgotten* translates into a commitment to the emarginated: migrants, abandoned elders, broken or impoverished families, youth without meaningful futures. This also brought us to change our lifestyles. Little by little, we left large residences and entered the parishes, living instead in suburban apartment buildings. This was followed, on the part of some, by going out into the streets and neighborhoods in order to encounter those persons who are most struggling . . . in order to "walk together".

*Believing there are no barriers for those who love* translates into determined efforts to create communion while respecting cultural diversity in our various provinces. Today's world is before a reality in which persons are often closed within themselves in order to protect their identity. With exclusion of "the foreigner" and "the one who is different" comes the risk of ever greater political and religious extremism. We are convinced that in bearing witness that it's possible to live together while respecting the dignity of every human being, we can offer a harbinger of hope in this regard.

In order to achieve this in a moment of history when numbers and human strength are diminishing in the Society signifies making a bold choice: *to move towards greater interdependence and solidarity among ourselves and with others in service to the mission* (Cap. January 2007). Thus, we strive to live our charism ever more deeply. This has meant letting go – more or less joyfully -- in order to allow room for differing cultures and personalities. It's been a process of "purification" in which we've allowed others to assume roles in passing on the charism that are different from our own, and in places where we, ourselves, can no longer be present.

Changes in wording and expressions have also taken place. The word, "souls", for example, has given way instead to use of the word, "people". We've also acknowledged that a purgatorial dimension begins already in the here and now: "We are in solidarity with all those who follow Jesus Christ in his Easter mission, whether they are still on earth or passed on through death ..." (Const., N. 18). We favor *being with ...*, *respect in doing for ...*, and try to help others become protagonists and to walk together. Today we see the "sick and impoverished" (who were the original focus of our sisters at the beginning) as "those who are forgotten, who are wounded in their human dignity, and who most need the proclamation of the Gospel". Today, we also favor use of the word "accompaniment" rather than "direction". We do want to direct or tell another what to do; rather we want to be close to those persons who ask this service from us. Our goal is to walk, to sustain, and to help each one discovers their own potential and abilities and make them feel worthy of esteem

and respect regardless of history or their life journey in the present.

