

+ Rome, December 16, 2005

Dear Sisters,

For my Christmas letter this year I chose the photo that you see here. It shows Pauline. She is eight years old and, since December 4<sup>th</sup>, one of the youngest members of Margaretha Home in Manila/Quezon City. Sister Theresia writes: “The mother cried when she had to leave the little one here; but she is also grateful that she will get help. The cause of her blindness is not clear. An attempted abortion cannot be excluded. From the mother we got to know that she was a kind of “minor wife“ to her husband who died last year. Her husband’s first wife exploited the mother and her children very much. The mother does not know much about her own family background. She never went to school and she uses her thumbprint for her signature. When we asked for the name of the child, she said: *We call her baby*. We asked for the name on the birth certificate. The mother said that the child never was registered and that it does not have a name. We spoke about various names. Sister Maria Dolores suggested the name *Pauline*. The mother liked this name. When we asked for the date of birth we got to know that her Birthday is on **January 15**. We were struck by this coincidence. In the meantime Pauline already identifies herself with her new name.”



What has all that to do with a letter for Christmas, you might ask. Now, if we consider it carefully: Very much! When the angels announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, they said: “This will be a sign for you: you will find an infant.” (Luke 2:12) Christmas has to do with an infant, with a child. Not only for the shepherds at that time, but also for us, should the child “be a sign.” This child is a sign and a challenge to orient our actions to the action of God. God did not enter into the world in power and glory but as a poor, needy and vulnerable child, at the margin of the city, unnamed and unrecognized by most people. The destiny of the child of Bethlehem did not change much during the past 2000 years. It is repeated today in millions of children throughout the world. It is repeated in little Pauline, who for eight years grew up without a name, without any prospect of a future, without identity. With the name *Pauline* she discovered her own person for the first time. *Who is Pauline?*, the Sisters asked, and Pauline answered: *I am Pauline*. A “someone” became a human being with a name, not a nonentity. “When a person becomes a little more human, then Christ will be born again and will reveal himself to us.” (Henri Boulard)

On Christmas we celebrate a child. The Feast invites us to orient ourselves to God. “Christmas is celebrated best in letting ourselves be carried away to a total other life, to a life that is oriented to the child in the crib. Christmas is best celebrated in showing one another our wounds and our ability to endure sufferings; in opening wide the window of our vulnerability and in entering into the fate of others: into their poverty, death, hunger and misery, into their tears and grief, but also into their happiness and trust, into their rejoicing and dancing. Christmas is celebrated best by withdrawing our desire for power and by appreciating others near to us; by giving space to the guiding principles of love in our midst and by renouncing the desire to be considered better than others, wanting to form them according to our image. Christmas is celebrated best in becoming like the child in the crib.” (Anton Rotzetter)

But Christmas has also to do with the child that wants to live and grow in us. Because God himself became a child, Christmas invites us to become a “child.” But – who is willing to become a “child” in a society in which children often don’t fit in? Does God seem apparently far away for many people because there is no relationship to children? “When God becomes a child, he makes himself helpless and vulnerable. In such a God we recognize ourselves but, at the same time, experience that we find protection and security in him. When God becomes a child, he shows us how we can face reality with wonder and gratitude. When God becomes a child, he shows us that the world is good and that we can enjoy life, not merely on a superficial level, but with a deep-rooted joy which draws its credibility not from arguing but from a lived experience.” (Pater Cappabianca OP)

In this sense, dear Sisters, let us celebrate Christmas! Let us wonder that God became a child and that he wants to become a child over and over again: in the many children of our world, whom the little *Pauline* represents here in these reflections, and in our own hearts. Let us make room for this child that wants to be born in us, so that we will become more human, a “child” like God! Mother Pauline prays in the language of her time: “Lord, give me a childlike spirit and humility. Let me learn these virtues from the Child Jesus in the crib.” (Retreat 1848)

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#### Some information:

- On November 19th and 20th I participated in the peaceful protest and watch at Fort Benning, Georgia, together with three Sisters from the N.A. Western Province and two Sisters from the N.A. Eastern Province. The intention of this action is to achieve the closing of the “School of the Americas,” in short named SOA. What is the purpose of this school? It was established in Panama in 1946 to train soldiers from Latin America. In 1984 it was transferred to Georgia, USA, because it was no longer wanted in Panama. At that time the President of Panama stated that that School was the “biggest base for destabilization in Latin America.” During its almost 60 years of existence the SOA has “professionally” trained over 60,000 Latin American soldiers. It has been proven that many of its graduates have improperly used their “professional” knowledge against the poor in their own countries and against those who work for the rights of the poor. Thousands of men, women and children, among them Bishops, priests and religious, have been tortured, raped, assassinated. Fr. Roy Bourgeois, who received the “Charlemagne Award” last May in Aix-la Chapelle for his efforts for peace and human rights, began the non-violent protest against the School in Fort Benning 16 years ago. The number of the participants is growing every year. This year about 20,000 were present. Because of the growing resistance and protest against the SOA it was renamed in 2001 “The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation” (WHINSEC), but the training did not essentially change.

Highlights, for me, during those two days were the Eucharist celebrated on Saturday evening in the tent of the Jesuits and the memorial ceremony for the victims of terror and violence which took place on Sunday. In the form of a litany thousands of victims were named, among them many names of children and mothers. After each name all responded: PRESENTE – this man, this woman, this child is not forgotten. In a procession that lasted for more than two hours all the participants passed by the three-fold fence which made the entrance to the SOA inaccessible. Almost all participants carried a white cross on which were written the names of victims. All put their crosses into the wire netting fence. Many people remained there afterwards in order to pray. Some, who themselves had experienced violence or had witnessed violence and torture done to their family members, cried. There was an awed silence which was an evident contrast to a military helicopter that now and then hovered above us, remaining some times for several minutes immobile over us. At the end there was expressed the desire that the day might come when both sides – the participants in the peaceful watch and the military – would meet, reaching out to one another.

Why was the participation in this peaceful protest action so important to me? Together with thousands of participants I wanted to give a sign that we, as Sisters of Christian Charity, reject every kind of violence

- One year ago in Rome Congress 2004 took place, during which more than 800 religious reflected on “signs of life” which are indispensable for religious life today. The presidents of the International Unions of Higher Superiors (women and men religious) reminded us recently of these signs and encouraged us not to get tired of putting them into action:
  - to desire a “new birth” of the vision and charism of the founder/foundress;
  - to live religious life in this time, in the here and now by witnessing a passion for Christ and humanity;
  - to stay, not with the past forms of common life and apostolic life and mission, but to consider and clarify how religious life today should be so that we are close to the people and “on the road,”
  - to make a transition from a consecrated life that separates us from the world to a consecrated life that is incarnated into the world and a witness to transcendence;
  - to extend community to the parish, diocese, city, in short, to those places where we are living;
  - to live a deeper spirituality by taking the Scripture into our life as individuals and as community.

I think it is worthwhile to reflect about these “signs of life” for religious life today, because for all of us considerations with regard to the future viability of our Congregation are important.

- My heart-felt gratitude goes to all of you, dear Sisters, for your Birthday congratulations and good wishes that had reached me via phone calls, Fax, e-mail or by “traditional” mail. Thank you for all material and spiritual gifts, especially for the Holy Masses. You all share in this abundance of grace.
- From January 5 to January 30 I will be in the Chilean Province in order to accompany a group of Sisters in a spiritual renewal. Afterwards I will make a short visit in the Uruguayan-Argentinean Province. My return to Rome is planned for February 5/6.

Dear Sisters, it is my wish for the coming year that we will look at people, things, and life in the light of Him who became man, a child, for us and who since that time reveals himself to us in human ways, especially in daily and often insignificant events.

With festive Christmas greetings, also from my councilors and all the Sisters of Villa Paolina,

I am your grateful

*Sr. Adalberto*