

On behalf of the Institute leadership team – Kate, Geraldine, Mary and Natalie and I a very warm welcome to you all to this Ignatian space and to this historic gathering.

In Chapter 4 of Deirdre Raftery's biography of Teresa Ball, she debunks the myth of a carefree young Frances experiencing a locution during a lavish ball in Dublin, where she heard the words: 'Seek first the kingdom of God... Deirdre attributes York Minster as the locus of a moment of profound awareness of the Divine rather than Dublin. This initial sensing of the Divine happened while Frances Ball was a student in the Bar Convent. Deirdre goes on to tease out why Archbishop Murray chose the Bar Convent as the place where this young woman would be formed as a foundress – there was no enclosure, the nuns went out to visit the sick and the importance of the Catholic community in England as a role model for Dublin. What was important was that Dr. Murray knew the York convent and greatly appreciated the fact that they had adopted the Jesuit constitutions for apostolic women religious. It was this text that Teresa Ball so painstakingly copied before returning to Dublin to begin the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Deirdre goes on to title the following chapter: Transplanting the English ladies to Ireland, the foundation at Rathfarnham. Shortly before the publication of the biography, in a Zoom presentation for province /region leaders, Deirdre was unequivocal in saying that Frances Ball's education and formation in York informed every decision she made as the leader of a new congregation.

Fast forward over two hundred years and we find ourselves on the cusp of merger-something we have dreamt of, have asked for, the culmination of a long process. As a leadership team, in our frequent meetings with the CJs, we come back again and again to the why of merger. There had been attempts before to bring it about. Why did they fail? As human beings we don't know. Two things are clear for us– firstly the merger is led by the Spirit who is the main protagonist. Secondly, it is an exercise in trust. We believe that through this discerned, intentional coming together our charism will be strengthened, by the respectful honouring of what is best in our congregational identities and cultures.

In our interactions with other congregations, it is clear that now is a critical point in the evolution of religious life. There is a lot of pain and loss and a lack of clarity and certainty. Perhaps more than ever we need to see our charism and identity as gifts of

the Spirit, as part of this evolution and shifting realities. This era of deep change presents an opportunity to strengthen religious life and one another. So many congregations are facing endings and beginnings whether through restructuring of provinces, drawing up completion strategies or critically examining current formation models.

As we travel throughout the Institute, encountering different generations and cultures is such a blessing for us. Demographic changes, which give rise to many issues, cannot be ignored. Issues such as - What adaptations need to be made to governance structures when there is no longer a sufficient pool of leaders? Are there ways in which inter-congregational collaboration is possible? For some provinces/regions honest conversation, prayer and reflection have led to an understanding that the meaning of religious life is not determined by numbers. In the past in many countries, religious were such a force for good, visible and working hard to address the issues presented in local contexts. When we were flourishing, mission was so often equated with ministry. Then when active ministry ceased many experienced a loss of purpose and the need to recalibrate identity. Now, in some areas the visibility and energy is much reduced and Sisters are a strong contemplative presence, deepening personal relationships with Christ while continuously asking what is mission. Prayer has become more still and quiet, a waiting on God. No big promises are made. At this stage of their lives, apostolic women desire to be present to Jesus, while experiencing a different engagement in mission. The graciousness and joy with which many embrace their elder status is quite moving.

Something which is very striking with the younger Sisters is that they are not afraid of the future. So many of them expressed genuine excitement about merger. Some are frank enough to say that it is taking time for them to grow into their Loreto skin and consequently they will segue easily to being a CJ. These young women, regardless of continent or context, are clear about what drew them to be religious. They desire to keep falling in love with Christ anew. They want to be of service in a global context and they want to deepen their inner life. They are present in the second week of the exercises, listening to the call of the king, labouring with him and doing so in joy. They

want to accompany Jesus as he walks, talks, heals and preaches. How can we help them, and all in initial formation particularly, to flourish and thrive in vocation?

What is common to the two groups – the less active and the younger Sisters is the quest for God and a desire for service. Both ask how can we be a presence of love in fractured societies? How can we bring Christ to the wider world? The living God is being found in all things with varying degrees of energy and engagement. The older Sisters have a wisdom and serenity about them which is humbling and is pure gift to the Institute. For them, and indeed for all of us, the way forward is not carefully mapped out. However, we trust, we believe that God is doing a new thing. Yes, pain has to be incubated to let it birth something new. Currently, I suspect that many of us are experiencing moving between the third week of the exercises - a school of the heart where the cross becomes an extension of Jesus' ministry of loving presence - and the fourth week where we encounter the risen Christ in our scared, confused moments. This movement is reflected in a deepened sense of spirituality, shaped by loss and letting go, interspersed with glimpses of the joy and life of resurrection.

Why did I begin with Teresa Ball? The doubting Thomas in me often looks for the concrete. There is irrefutable historical proof that the constitutions Teresa Ball brought to Rathfarnham were those of Mary Ward's Institute. This is our lineage. We made them our own and gave them a lived expression that has stood the test of time. The merger is a significant moment of renewal and revitalization in the Church. Both congregations voted unanimously to proceed to being one from a deeply felt desire for re-union. We are faith-filled, free Mary Ward/Teresa Ball women, ready to join with our CJ sisters to share in the healing mission of Christ.

Constitution 1.7 expresses it beautifully:

It was through continual prayer that MW found the courage to be faithful to her convictions. She waited on God with inner freedom and fidelity. It is this spirit that impels us an Institute to place boundless trust in God amid uncertainty and change, and with discerning love to walk the way of faith in joy.

