

Circular 16/90 Rome, Italy, January 15, 1990

School Sisters of Notre Dame  
Dear Sisters,

Epiphany is a special time in the liturgical year of the Church. On this feast we celebrate the myriad ways God is manifested to us and to the world. On this 15<sup>th</sup> day of January, in the first month of this New Year, new decade, we commemorate another manifestation, another epiphany as we witness the open borders and new governments developing in the many countries of East Europe.

We rejoice with all the people of East Europe as they claim their full rights and dignity. We stand in solidarity with them and, in a special way we stand in solidarity with our Sisters in Czechoslovakia, the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR), Hungary, Poland, Rumania, and Yugoslavia. We offer them our prayers and our support as they, in their respective countries, move with hope into the future.

In this circular I wish to update you with as much current information as we have about our Sisters in Romania, the DDR and Czechoslovakia. While changes continue to happen very rapidly in these countries, we want to respond to the many inquiries we have had from all parts of the Congregation about them,

Before sharing on these three countries, I wish to note that this circular is a supplement to REPORT, the January communication from the General Council regarding our recent visitation in East and West Europe.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank you in the name of our Sisters in East Europe for your concern and prayerful support. They have felt your solidarity with them. Truly the words of our Mother Theresa ring true, "The Holy Spirit has brought us together and Jesus Christ our divine bridegroom has knotted the bond among us...Therefore, let us love one another in time of health and sickness, of joy and sorrow." (Letter # 14)

## **Romania**

This is the first time in the past forty years that we are able to acknowledge officially that we have Sisters in Romania. It is profound joy to be able to do so and to offer our love and support to the 90 Sisters who are members of this province.

This past October, 1989, Sister Brunhild and I spent a week in Romania meeting and visiting with approximately half of our Sisters in Timisoara and Arad. Given the political climate there, we had to do this carefully trying not to bring attention to our visiting. It was not possible to meet all the Sisters because of the growing tension and unrest within the country, especially along the northwest border near Hungary where a large number of our Sisters live and minister. It was both a shock and a matter of concern that

we learned about the December 17 attack by the security forces on the people protesting in Timisoara. About half of our Sisters live in and around this city and in Arad where some of the bloodiest battles took place during the revolution to overthrow Ceausescu and the communist government.

After waiting three weeks, monitoring the situation, and also trying to reach our Sisters or anyone who might know of their well-being, the General Council agreed that Sister Adrien and I would try to go to Romania and visit them.

We were able to do this on January 7 (1990) as part of a convoy traveling through Hungary into Romania with hospital supplies. We were joined for one day by Sister Jozefina, provincial leader of Hungary, and Sister Margit, also of Hungary,

As you can imagine we did surprise our Sisters in Romania when we appeared at their convent church that Sunday morning. Word spread quickly that we were there and Sisters came to greet us. It was a great joy to learn that all of them were safe and unharmed. A number of them had witnessed the fighting in the streets between the army and the members of the security forces. They spoke of their sense of relief and freedom now that the fighting was over and a new government was emerging.

While there is still unrest in parts of the country and no one is absolutely sure how the new political structures will develop, political and religious freedom seems to be guaranteed.

Before leaving the country, Sister Adrien and I visited Opera Square in Timisoara with its many shrines of candles burning for all the victims of that first clash there on December 17 in which men, women and children were killed. We experienced a sense of solemnity, of mourning, yet of new life in the people of Romania gathered at this makeshift shrine.

On January 8, Sister Adrien and I joined our Sisters for liturgy. After the liturgy, we gathered for breakfast and to say good-bye. We asked if we could tell the rest of the Congregation about them. They readily agreed and spoke of their joy in their new freedom and their gratitude for the love and care of all of us, their Sisters.

### **Berlin and the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR)**

On January 1, Sister Brunhild (Teufel) and I traveled to West Berlin to meet with the provincial council of West Berlin and the regional council of the DDR. Since the cause of its separation into a province and a region had been removed - the Wall, the question each was asking of us and of each other was whether or not to reunify the province and, if so, how to do it.

It was a beautiful moment of grace to hear each council member and subsequently each member of the provincial assembly on January 3 and then each member of the regional assembly on January 4 answer the question, "What do I think about the

reunification of the province? Why?" Our charism, our call to unity came alive as each Sister spoke of the bonds which had always been there between East and West. The only separation was an external one - the Wall; other than that, they had never really been separated. Aware that reunification will bring other changes, all the Sisters reiterated their deep desire TO BE ONE. As a first step to make this dream a reality, the two assemblies will meet on February 6 at the Motherhouse in West Berlin to make the final decision together. It will be a historic moment. We and they ask your continued prayers and support for this day, this time, this meeting, and then for all that this decision will entail.

Before leaving the DDR, we asked our Sisters what we could say about them to the rest of the Congregation. They responded, "Tell them that we are joyful, free, grateful, hopeful, yet cautious about the changes which have taken place and still need to take place to guarantee a new future for us and all the citizens of the DDR."

## **Czechoslovakia**

November 17 marks the day the so-called "Velvet Revolution" began in Czechoslovakia. In these past two months the political situation has changed rapidly in the CSSR. It is only gradually that these changes are reaching out and affecting all parts of the country.

For our Sisters in Bila Voda life has continued as it has been in these past years, but change is coming there as well. What all these changes mean remains to be seen, but the signs are very hopeful.

On January 10, a meeting concerning the present structures governing religious congregations was held for Church leaders and religious congregations with government officials. It seems that within the next six months significant changes will take place regarding the present control and governance of religious congregations by the government organization called Caritas. With religious freedom now guaranteed by the new non-communist government, it may be possible for our Sisters to live more freely in various communities, to give public witness to their consecration and to serve in a variety of ministries.

More information and details will be given us as the Czechoslovakian Church works with the new government to guarantee these rights.

## **Future**

Each country in East Europe has changed its structures in its own way. Yet there are similarities for religious congregations including the School Sisters of Notre Dame because these questions have surfaced in various countries:

What changes are needed in religious life, community living after more than 40 years of living under communist rule?

What do we decide about our current ministries and the call to reopen schools? What are the pressing needs of the Church and the country? What is the best use of our personnel?

What to do with the buildings and institutions the government confiscated and may want to return?

What new structures are needed in the units of the Congregation to accommodate these changes?

### **Fund for East Europe**

The general council has established a fund to help our Sisters in the various parts of East Europe as they adapt to the changes in their countries. No one really knows what will be entailed in this rebuilding, but if you or any group with whom you work wishes to help in this rebuilding, we would be happy to receive donations here and distribute them as needed.

### **February 11, Day of Solidarity**

The gospel acclamation of the Christmas liturgy speaks powerfully to us as we confirm that "A holy day has dawned upon us. Come, you nations, and adore the Lord. Today a great light has come upon the earth. Alleluia." I urge each of you to continue to pray for our Sisters and for all the people of East Europe. I also invite you and the people with whom you minister to make February 11 a special day of prayer and solidarity for our Sisters and for all the peoples and countries of East Europe. Let it be a day of gratitude and celebration for all that has happened.

In closing, I quote the words of Mother Theresa for January 15 for they speak to our reality of today.

He, who by his almighty word once stilled the wind and waves during the storm at sea, can and will do the same today, in these our troubled times. His arm has not been shortened; his love, his mercy are still the same as they were in the days when he visibly walked this earth. (Letter of Mother Theresa, #3020)

Gratefully in Notre Dame,

Patricia Flynn, SSND  
General Superior

