

## Minutes of the 20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter    October 27, 1997

S. Pietra introduced the three speakers for the panel presentation: S. Ingeborg Gersing of the Bavarian province, S. Margaret Ellen Traxler from the Mankato province, and S. Catharina Gabriel Felipe from the province of Sao Paulo. These three sisters spoke on how they have embraced the Mandate for Action and the theme of this general chapter.

On Monday, October 27, three of the wise women of the congregation formed a panel that addressed the chapter.

Sister Ingeborg spoke of how she had come to know and care for the poor through the example of a social worker, later a School Sister of Notre Dame that she came to know in her youth. She began to see how poverty is the result of unjust structures through her acquaintance with Sister Margaret Ellen when they were together at the general chapter in 1968. When she returned home she was able to find ways to engage her students in activities that helped them to understand the roots of poverty as they worked for social change. Later she was instrumental in establishing a chapter of Amnesty International and joined in successful protests against the construction of a nuclear power plant. When she began working in Rome as a translator at the generalate, she continued to find ways to reach out to the poor through her service at the meal program of the St. Egidio community and through efforts to raise money for School Sisters of Notre Dame ministering in Central America..

S. Margaret Ellen shared her history of involvement in the civil rights struggle in the United States as a staff member and later Executive Director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice. She shared her recollections of the marches that were held to demand equal rights for black Americans and the educational programs that she helped to design and implement, to address needs in teacher-training and in classroom materials. She also described her successful efforts of behalf of Soviet Jews. In 1974 she was part of an ecumenical group that established the Institute of Women Today aimed at empowering poor women and children. She has worked with women in state and federal prisons, helping to provide legal advice and opportunities to earn money to support families. She has also been instrumental in establishing two shelters where women, recently released from prison can, with their children, re-integrate themselves into society. She quoted the late Cardinal Bernadin who, when visiting one of the shelters, said, "This is a secret church. This is a suffering church. This is my church."

S. Catharina described her work with the landless people of Brazil. She described her participation in an attempt by a group of unarmed, landless people to take over a piece of land guarded by heavily armed troops. She spoke of the hardships endured by the people in their quest for a piece of land and her efforts to confront the commanders of the troops with the inhumanity of their actions. Ultimately, over 900 families did obtain

their own land. S. Catharina then went on to describe her own kidnapping and how her faith kept her safe through a long night of fear and pain. This experience did not deter her in her ministry to the poor. She continues to be with and for the poor as they try to find homes and she continues to confront the authorities who would deny them this basic right. She concluded by quoting the current Brazilian president who said that Brazil is not a poor nation but an unjust country. Therefore, S. Catharina says, "...we struggle in the name of the God of Life in favor of LIFE."

After the presentations, S. Pietra thanked the sisters for being a witness for the poor and a prophetic voice of the poor to all of us.

There were some reflection/questions/comments in interaction with the three panelists:

-Sharing your work, sharing new life, giving us inspiration to continue working, helping us in our personal conversion, teaching us to risk and struggle along side the poor  
-impelling us to act with open and generous heart to accomplish the Mandate for Action with even greater courage and strength.

-For S. Margaret Ellen, I ask forgiveness for myself and for the congregation if we have made you suffer because we were judgmental. Thank you for being a prophet in our midst.

*Her response: Thank you, sister, but I have never felt rejected or abandoned. I love SSND and have felt affirmed by that sisterhood.*

There was also gratitude for those responsible for coordinating the panel of our own sisters, from three different countries, speaking three different languages, giving three different presentations and helping us to realize that the struggle for justice is for each one of us.

S. Patricia (Flynn, Superior General) closed this sharing time by saying in part: "You have shared your stories, have energized us and enriched us, and showed us how to act for justice and to bring about peace. Your response to the chapter theme is a response that has come from hundreds of School Sisters whose lives have shaped us and our chapter theme. I invite all of us to look on these three sisters with loving eyes as I read a description of their lives. [from You Are Sent, Constitution #17]\*

To all three of you, I beg your pardon for any way that we have failed to support you in your ministry of justice. I thank God and the people with whom you have served and shared your life.

\*17. "Our living of gospel poverty as School Sisters of Notre Dame urges us to serve the poor. Making the concerns of the poor our own, we become painfully aware of the many who suffer privations stemming from the sinfulness of our world. In accord with church teaching and directives, we work actively, especially in our local situations, to eliminate the root causes of injustice in order to realize a world of peace, justice, and love. To

confront injustice credibly requires that we ourselves act justly. We strive to live simply, to value human labor rightly, and to respect the dignity of every person, witnessing that living these values is a possibility for humanity. Strengthened by Christ's grace and following his example, we are willing to suffer want, insult, oppression, and death for the sake of the kingdom."