

Q & A General Congregation

Following the celebrations of the 400 years of Mary Ward's Foundation held in Rome from 5 – 9 October 2009, some 50 members of the IBVM gathered in Arricia for a General Congregation of the Institute. Arricia is small hillside town 50 kms. South of Rome. The centre where the General Congregation is meeting is set in a woodland area outside the town.

Three sisters of the IBVM were interviewed about the General Congregation, Christine Burke , from Australia, Pat Hanvey from the South African Province working in Zambia and Cecilia O'Dwyer from Spain.

Interviewer: Often religious people use language which is strange to us. What do you mean by a "General Congregation"?

Christine: Well, our sense of unity and internationality doesn't just 'happen'. We have to work at it! Every eight years a group representing each province or section of the Institute gathers to consider issues relevant to the works and life of the members, and to set priorities and elect a new leadership.

Interviewer: But it isn't eight years since you last gathered in Peru because you told us about the 3 Calls from your last gathering! Why are you gathering this time?

Cecilia: In 2003 a major event happened. The North American and the Irish Branches of the IBVM re-united. We had been separate since the mid 1800s. One condition of that re-union was that we work together on our Constitutions and develop a common ground from which to go forward. That is why we are having this meeting. At the beginning of the 20th Century Mary Ward's Institute was separated into many separate Generalates. Since 2003 we have two Branches, the Congregation of Jesus and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto).

Interviewer: what exactly are Constitutions and why have them?

Christine: Under a very wise church law all official groups in the church have to have some basic "laws" which ensure they are well governed, that people know their rights and responsibilities and that the whole framework is grounded in the particular spirituality of the particular Institute. Our spirituality is Ignatian, based on Ignatius of Loyola's insights on how to bring our whole lives to God. The Constitutions he wrote put into words and structures his deep sense that God is to be found in all aspects of life, but also that if a group is formed to serve others, they need to have a structure which supports this. We have his basic Constitutions, which we have supported by companion Constitutions. This latter volume incorporates more recent theological and scriptural insights as well as Canonical requirements, and brings the insights from Mary Ward's experience and women's experience today into dialogue with Ignatian spirituality. This meeting we are having is to finalise these documents so they can be presented to the church authority for approval.

Interviewer: Pat, how are you feeling as you come into this meeting?

Pat: I come to this meeting with a great deal of hope and expectation. Something new has been born with the Reunion of the two Branches and this meeting is working on a document which will reflect the current desires of the whole Institute and guide our future presence and action in the world as one body living out Mary Ward's Charism. It is important to have two Sisters from the CJ (Congregation of Jesus) – the other Branch of Mary Ward's Institute, with us.