

Minister's Letter

Sister Joyce CSF, Minister General of the First Order Sisters, writes:



Dear Friends,

As I write this letter the daily media coverage for this past month has been of economic carnage on a global scale - when we thought things were getting better they just got worse. Spectacularly banks, those seeming bastions of solid stone, have teetered on the verge of collapse, as some did, but others have been propped up by substantial governmental injections. We shall all feel the effects and consequences of economies spiralling downward out of control of those in positions of financial power.

Also in this past month we have celebrated the feast of Francis, our inspiration and the patron saint of the downwardly mobile. So perhaps the present shape of the world economy is something of a wake-up call as we too can become complacent about our financial situation and succumb like most others to the expected comforts of western life style and forget where our true treasures lie. Francis described them as to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ, the most downwardly mobile of all. So how do we respond?

Recently, at our meeting of the Chapters of the First Order in Australia, we were reminded of another carnage facing the world - that of climate change - and the effects of tidal changes in one area of the world, the Pacific Ocean, and in particular, the islands of Kiribati. Many other island communities are facing the same devastation and threat to their homelands. Another wake-up call which we ignore at our peril. How do we respond?

During the eighties we were more aware of the carnage of death from AIDS, as it affected the lives of many known to us. This carnage still wreaks havoc on millions of Africans in particular, who continue to live with the disease and its related cost. We have the annual reminder each December on World AIDS Day. One small South African community has made a response to their experience of the effects of AIDS through the creation of a stunning work of art, the Keiskamma Altarpiece, which was installed in Southwark Cathedral for the month of October 2008. I had seen it before in Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, in April 2007. Created by the women of the coastal town of Hamburg, in South Africa's largely rural, poverty-stricken Eastern Cape Province, the altarpiece is a message of hope for all people contending with the devastation that AIDS has wrought, and it offers solace, strength and

inspiration. It replicates the multi-panel format of the famed Isenheim Altarpiece, created by Mathias Grünewald in the fifteenth century, for a hospice where patients were dying of ergot poisoning. This disease caused large-scale suffering and death throughout Europe. The Keiskamma Altarpiece is constructed as a series of hinged panels that open to reveal three 'layers' and was made using embroidery, beadwork, wire sculpture and photographs. It depicts the annunciation, crucifixion, resurrection and other events from the New Testament from the point of view of the people of the Keiskamma region.

May we respond to the outward devastations in our lives by creating, like the women of Hamburg, that which can bring abundant blessing and hope and may we, like Francis, find even in suffering, the glory of God. *f*