

## Experience with the community of the DAMES de MARIE

Louvain-Leuven 1964-1968

This experience begins in my Basque village on the Spanish coast. Within myself, I have a desire to pray and help others.

On 26 April 1964 I left my family, my friends and my village. I was 17 years old. I was not alone. The mistress of novices Sr. Madeleine D. came to fetch us. We were two who wanted to enter the Congregation of the Ladies of Mary to realize an inner dream. My dream was to love God and go to an African country. The journey as far as Belgium was made by train. In the village we heard about the "Dames de Marie" thanks to a missionary from our village who worked in Burundi. The reception in Brussels and in the novitiate was very warm. We spoke in Spanish with our 6 compatriots who had quietly opened the way to the "Ladies of Mary".

Everything went very fast, I learnt that there are different schedules to respect in community life: the celebration of the Mass, the different moments of prayer, the courses to be followed at the Institute of Religious Science, preparations and shopping for meals in our turn, visits to families or lonely people etc. Today I still feel that all this went smoothly and with a great human and spiritual learning.

I quickly learned to make diagrams for my program of the week and to underline according to importance in red or green ... My first duty (among others) was to learn French, because I did not know this language. Neither did I know the history of Belgium and even the history of the Congregation of the Ladies of Mary.

My happiness was the few courses which I audited at the Institute of Religious Sciences. There must have been a very discrete agreement between the director of the Institute and the mistress of novices, for I had left school at the age of 14. Here too I was free and happy. I far from understood everything but in the novitiate the novice mistress ensured that we could be happy in our community and spiritual life. There was a mutual understanding and help between us. In the reading room where silence was kept, I copied the course notes taken by one or the other of the novices of Belgian origin. I remember following the courses in Morality, the Old and New Testaments, the History of the Church, and Psychology. The classes were not always comprehensible to me. It was a mystery to live these hours with such joy. From this time of novitiate, I essentially retain that freedom we had to go to courses and the joy we found around the table, at times of prayer or recreation. But it was in listening to those religious professors who with passion, simply and convincingly taught what they discovered in the Bible, at the level of faith.... It was there that I had my first crisis of "faith in God". The God of my childhood and adolescence was not the same as the God these men were trying to convey to us. I experienced growing in inner freedom. It was in the novitiate that I learned to listen to the silence, read the Bible and pray differently. And all this, in a climate of respect, attention to others and in peace.

The second event that marked my life in Leuven is the gift of being able to make the 30 day Ignatian retreat. What did I understand? I am unable to describe it, but what I experienced during those 30 days was an adjustment of my life with the God of Jesus Christ.

Within myself, I always wanted to go to help others with and in the community of the Ladies of Mary. I was still too young. The mistress of novices must have felt that I was not mature enough for a long course of study and proposed that I do a short training as a "family helper". I passed the year and with this diploma I left in 1968 for Brazil to join a small community of two religious and a secular teacher.

From these "almost three years" lived in Santa Cruz I retain in myself the experience of a communion, where human suffering was sometimes unbearable and there was also human and spiritual joy with these people where I could hear the words of Jesus Christ : "Blessed are the poor, the kingdom of heaven is theirs".

Today I thank God for giving me parents, brothers and sisters and for being able to walk for some years with and in the community of the Ladies of Mary. I would like to say to you, "THANK YOU dear sisters of the Ladies of Mary for the years of kindness and your discreet and freely given generosity towards me and many others. May God bless you all. I wish you a beautiful birthday celebration and a long and happy journey still, towards this Kingdom promised by Jesus Christ.

Mercedes Garmenia