

In the footsteps of the Founder - 2009 and 2017- Sr. Agnès Charles

In 2005, at West Wickham, a number of Josephites, some Daughters of Mary and Joseph and two Sisters of St. Joseph met for a few days for a symposium. We shared about the history of our congregations, our apostolates, our spirituality. It was a very rewarding and positive experience for me. We came from different countries and we all, I believe, have benefited greatly from this meeting.

A little later, Father Robert Hamilton told me about one of his projects ... to organize together a pilgrimage "In the Footsteps of the Founder". We wanted to invite the four congregations to take part. Preparatory meetings were held to organize visits, meetings, liturgies, the spiritual and historical input, and slowly it materialized. We were all interested in this event and ready to participate. The date of this meeting was fixed, it would be in July 2009 and the Joséphite Fathers proposed that we stay in the college of Melle. The invitations were sent and the more detailed preparations organized ... We would visit Grammont, Aalst, Melle, Mouscron, Herseaux, Erpe Mere, Blankenberg, Mechelen, Brussels, Bruges and Ghent. For each day, the liturgy was planned, with a chosen theme, each pilgrim would be given each morning a small explanatory booklet on the places visited, both in the "civil" context and in the perspective that affects our Founder and our congregations. The themes chosen for the liturgy took up points on which the Founder insisted in his writings, so joy, gratitude, family spirit ...



During the pilgrimage, each congregation received us with the hospitality so dear to our Founder. Everywhere was the joy of reunion, meetings, conversations, shared prayer. A visit to the Belgian Parliament allowed us to sit in the room where the Founder delivered his speeches. In Ghent, a beautiful Eucharist of closing was presided over by the bishop of the place in the crypt of the cathedral.

For me, it was a privileged time of meeting, of sharing, of discovery and I think that for many it was also a time marked by the joy of meeting or meeting again, sisters and confreres, deepening our spirituality, visiting places full of history. Several sisters told me how much they were touched by the time spent in the chapel of the college in Aalst, where it all began for us, to stop in front of the little house of Colette de Brandt, to see or see again, Uccle where many had lived during their novitiate.

In preparing and living this experience, I was very touched by the interest of each and every one to live together this privileged time, a bit like an acknowledgement of all this history charged with a common heritage in many ways, but also distinct for each of our congregations.

And then, a few years later, the idea was thrown out by the DMJ: Let's organise a new pilgrimage in 2017, the bicentenary of the founding of our congregations.

Father Robert Hamilton agreed to re-prepare a program and handle the content with me. We had a few meetings to focus that. Marie Claire Nakayiza agreed to help us especially with all the administrative part, accommodation, meals, transport, photocopies, links with officials of places visited and did this brilliantly. We also worked together for a few days to finalise the details. The Sisters of St Joseph and the Sisters of Mary and Joseph assured us that they would be happy to welcome us and this was the case. Of course, the Joséphite Fathers and the DMJ received us with great affection and attention.

A fairly large group of younger sisters came, mostly from Africa, but I want to emphasize this, with a presence from every entity of our congregation taking part in this new adventure. Two young African Joséphite Fathers participated, as well as Father Ludo from California.

Despite our fears about obtaining visas, Belgium granted them to all but one of our sisters and a father.



The pilgrimage took place in the second half of April 2017. This time it was based in Drongen, in a beautiful old abbey run by the Jesuits. We were made very welcome, could pray in a beautiful chapel, have a large meeting room, take some meals on site in a large refectory. We started our meeting by sharing with the participants some more historical and spiritual data of our life since 1817. Then, a coach took us first to Grammont, then over the days we also went to Aalst, Melle, Leuven, Mouscron, Brussels, Ghent, Coloma, Blankenberge, Bruges. All these places are steeped in history for us, the Founder has marked them with his spirit to this day. It is also, for us especially, the joy of meeting, our three sisters in Aalst, Yvonne in Erpe Mere, and a large number of us in Brussels.

I must admit that I was a little apprehensive about a second pilgrimage, but I was almost immediately brought to live a brand-new experience that was very rewarding and positive. Fortunately, some directives received from the CLT (Congregation Leadership Team) enabled me to focus the meetings with the Sisters of Belgium, with school principals, with the

Josephite Fathers and the Sisters of Mary and Joseph and the Sisters of Saint Joseph. And we were able to achieve that successfully.

What made me happy from the first day was to meet sisters I had met a few years ago, to meet new faces and build relationships. These sisters amazed me by their openness, their desire to live this pilgrimage in its spiritual dimension, their sense of reality, their conviction that they are the ones that will ensure the future and that will allow our charism to continue to live in the world of tomorrow. What potential there is among them to secure the future and to invest in life and mission. I was also touched to see how, in all the institutions that were founded by members of our four congregations, the laity keep alive the educational principles and values that the Founder wanted to see reign in schools and in other institutions too. I noticed this everywhere we went and it was a time of thanksgiving for me.

I feel privileged to have been able to live intensely these two experiences and to have received graces which still live to me today: hope, confidence, recognition.

Thank you very much to everyone who participated in one, or even some of the two, journeys in the footsteps of the Founder, and that with a committed enthusiasm. It's good to live such moments together, in prayer, in sharing, in discovery. It is a link that unites us and that bears fruit.

Thank you to Father Robert for sharing his profound and inspired knowledge of the Founder, thanks for his kindness, his listening and his good advice.

Thanks to Linda Webb and her team for encouraging the implementation of the first pilgrimage and to Helen Lane and those around her at the general level for daring to undertake a second pilgrimage and for keeping it on track.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to discover how well the sisters who represent the new generation are doing so generously, competently, attentive to the fact that charism and values are alive in our world today and tomorrow where the love of God is waiting for us.