Years back I had come across a meaningful verse connected with Christmas. I do not remember the exact quotation. But the content was, ‘the angels have sung, the shepherds have visited the manger, the wise kings have paid their homage, and now the real work of Christmas begins: ’to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, to heal the sick and to proclaim the kingdom of God to all’.

As the New Year has begun, the liturgical texts lead us on the road, with renewed fervour, dedication, and commitment to continue the Mission of Jesus: ‘Proclamation of the Kingdom’. Going back to our Chapter Document, which by now we are very familiar with, has the same call:

“...to continue the mission of Jesus in minority and solidarity”… “The Spirit leads us to continue this mission in our suffering world by living in minority, serving and sharing life with others”’.(Cover and page 3)

This is a challenge that requires great perseverance. If we have made a commitment, and we encounter difficulties, we will look for solutions and find them.

Now for the New Year, what is new in the ‘Meeting Space?’ With this first bulletin of this year, we are introducing a new theme ‘the Charism spreads its Roots’, with a logo and introduction by Rosanna Marin, fmm. It speaks of the life and mission of our first vocations in the continents. The title fascinated me; for, when we think of spreading (keeping tree as reference) we think in terms of branches spreading; but here it is in the roots, invisible expansion subsoil, which are most important for holding the tree firmly in times of storms ...to nourish the tree, and to spread its branches. It is the same sap that runs through the branches and the roots. So, while the branches grow, the roots need to grow and be healthy. Hence, I think that, we as Institute, while continuing to grow, pay attention to the roots, realise the appeal of our Charism and keep it as dynamic and attractive as it was 133 years ago.

To affirm that over the years we have been reading the signs of the time and responding relevantly, we have our own contributions from the provinces which share the lived experience of our sisters in different apostolate. Each of them, may it be with the elderly sisters, mission with the refugees, the displaced, those in prison, learning a new language, or promoting self help projects, portray how we draw vitality and vision for our life from the same Charism.

So let us continue to march forward, like the Three Kings/Wisemen! They saw a sign and followed the star till they fulfilled their mission. Reflecting on the Epiphany and on our birth as Institute, our Foundress says, “Continue the Epiphany of the Lord, in contributing, to manifest Jesus to the nations.” (Liturgical mediations vol.1, 1896.)

Mary Lobo, fmm
From 23 to 25 November 2009 the grand celebration inaugurating the Holy Year commenced in Hano, which commemorated the 350 years of the foundation of the Episcopal Conference. It was the town of SO KIEN (still called KE S0), 60 km from Hanoi, which was chosen for the opening celebrations, because it was the first country town of the Diocese of the North until the transfer of the bishopric to Hano. The remains of the Martyrs of Vietnam are in this town.

The year 2010 will mark important events for the history of the Church in Vietnam: 350 years since the foundation of the Dioceses of the north and the south (1659-2009) and 50 years since the foundation of the Conference of Bishops (1960-2010).

The Holy Year is an occasion for all the Christians to review the past, to render thanks to the Lord and to learn lessons from it; to look at the present with its values and challenges; to look to the future so as together renew our lives and continue to build up the Church, in accordance with the plan of God.

At the same time in Thailand the Diocese of Chanthaburry, situated at 400km from Bangkok is celebrating its 300 years of presence in this land of Buddhist majority. This diocese invited a delegation from the Church of Vietnam. In fact, at the time of the persecutions, the Vietnamese Christians took refuge in Laos in Cambodia, and ultimately settled in Thailand in this poor isolated part. They were the first Christians who faithfully and regularly gathered together in the absence of any priests. Today there are more than 600 forming a very solid community.

Preparation
The Episcopal Conference wrote a letter to each diocese and to all the People of God giving orientations to celebrate and live the Holy Year 2010 in the faith. Some of the powerful times proposed were: a novena of preparation; the celebration of the opening of the year in each parish; the pilgrimage; the deepening of the faith beginning with the document “Building up the Church Mystery/Communion/Mission...”
At 19.30 a vigil was held with hymns, prayers, scenic presentation, dances, etc. Each diocese expressed its faith in the Good News of the Gospel with much creativity. Through theatrical plays in particular, they revived the time of the persecutions and the courage of the martyrs.

The press also had its part with poems, articles, books, etc. The book entitled “The History of the Mission in Vietnam” was given prominence wherein is also presented the role of the Consecrated Life with its 2500 religious men and 12,000 religious women.

May the Holy Year renew the hearts of all the People of God, thus bringing the graces of the Lord on our Church and our nation.

Information sent by Elisabeth Tran-Thi Puynh Giao, fmm

Netherlands – Launching of a comic strip book on Sr Adolphine’s life in her native Dutch village

‘The Far Destination’ was written by a Belgian, fascinated by the lives of our missionaries. It is the same author that drew the life of Sr Amandine, which was published in 2002 for our martyrs’ canonization.

On November 7th, 2009, several fmmns head to Ossendrecht to partake in this launching of a new comic strip.

On arrival, we are greeted by a young woman dressed exactly as Sr Marie Aldophine upon her departure to China. She is holding a palm branch in her hand to symbolize the triumph of our sister’s faith.

There is a warm atmosphere in the room with an enthusiastic crowd. They have come to highlight this important moment for Ossendrecht, the Church, the Institute of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, and several sponsors.

The title of the comic strip is clearly explained by the author. It speaks of the long horizontal and vertical journey undertaken by Sr Marie Aldophine. In the image of God, she is a mirror for us of past values incarnated in today’s reality... What a meditation!

After the distribution and sale of the book, all are absorbed as they glance through each page with great curiosity. They are caught by this fascinating way of communication, which reveals both humour and adventure in an incorporated text to so vibrant, realistic pictures: a beautiful, touching witness for all.

Krista Verhoeven, fmm
Malta - Mission Awareness Week

This is the second year in a row that the Mission Office in Malta took on the task of celebrating Mission Week. In collaboration with the Mission Office, Malta, a committee, made up of two lay persons and two religious, of which Sr. Yvonne Gera fmm is a member, worked hard throughout the year in preparation for Mission Week.

At the opening Mass Fr. Timothy Lehane, International General Secretary of the Propagation of the Faith, urged us to be Christ-centred. He related a story of a poor lady whose house crumbled down following an earthquake for the second time, she was rescued from the rubble. On being asked what she had in her clenched fist, she exposed a small crucifix saying, ‘I saved Him again’. Fr. Timothy encouraged us to treasure Christ and to take Him to others.

There were nineteen stands representing the mission outreach of the participants. The FMM stand was beautifully decorated with the picture of Blessed Mary of the Passion, literature on the Institute and coloured posters with large coloured photos of Maltese sisters and their service in different parts of the world outside Europe. Australia, Papua New Guinea, Canada, Tunisia, Libya, Ghana, Liberia, Senegal, Ethiopia, Kenya, India, Israel, Sri Lanka, Faroe Islands, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa, Madagascar, Egypt, Syria, Algeria and China were very well represented. One poster calls for special mention – on it one could see an outline of the 30 countries outside Europe where Maltese sisters were sent. Next to each map were the names of the 125 Maltese Missionaries who gave or are still giving their service in that country. On the other posters, the collages and the decorations were the work of Sr. Yvonne Gera.

A number of FMMs volunteered, assuring a presence at the FMM stand at the Mission Village all the time throughout the entire week, 9.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m. The President of Malta, Dr. George Abela showed a great interest in each and every poster. He reflected back on the dedication and saintly life of Sr. Emmanuela Vassallo who he knew had died tragically in Libya in 1989. Sr. Yvonne presented him with the 2009 Maltese Biography of Blessed Mary of the Passion and the FMM Foundation in Malta by Joseph Flask. The Bishop visited all the stands, spending quality time at the FMM stand.

Rita Zammit-Pace, fmm

India - Delhi: Conference of Religious of India

Of the one billion inhabitants and less than 2% Christians, India counted over 90,000 religious sisters, 13,000 religious priests and 5,000 religious brothers. (Statistics as on 31st January 2005). In 2009, there are around 125,000 religious men and women in the country.

The Conference of Religious of India has 3 units: one for Religious Sisters; one for Religious Priests and one for Religious Brothers; all three meet in a General Assembly once in three years. This year, the assembly was held in Delhi with 515 participants who were
Terrorism has not ceased to give rise to victims. Victims who are not sufficiently numerous and too anonymous to interest the media, but each victim has a face, a history, connections... The fact related by Jocelyne Andrin, fmm, took place in June 2009, but it reflects what is happening periodically in the country.

I am walking along...What then is this crowd in front of the hospital? Cars are being stopped, no matter how, police trying to channel the people and make them move along...I go past and a little further on, I ask a tradesman: "What is happening?". He tells me that five local guards have been assassinated in Seiar. I remain speechless.

"But what are these terrorists wanting"? No one has any reply. A young boy, who was listening to our conversation said: "They need a change of heart".

What struck me among all my speakers of that day was their helplessness, without any apparent revolt, a lack of understanding and a suffering which can be summed up in a single question: "Why?"

I was greatly upset and I hastened to telephone Ahmed whose son is in the local guard in Seiar. The latter, his father told me, was on holiday, but that did not prevent Ahmed from sobbing for he is a native of this palm grove where he knows everyone.

On the whole, men retreat into distressing silence; women speak and express their feelings full of horror and grief. All were asking me if I knew Seiar. Yes, I know this village. I was vaccinated there, looked after the school children, kept watch over the water with my work colleagues during the years 82-87.

It was there, on Ash Wednesday, when I had decided to fast that this same Ahmed on seeing me, cried out joyfully: "It is God who has sent you. Today for the first time I am eating 'goundi' (a sort of Indian pig which lives among the rocks) and tradition requires that I eat it with a visitor. Come." How to refuse such an evident joy?... and I ate the 'goundi' that day.

I was also with him when in community we went for a long walk in the barren and uneven mountain as far as another small very isolated palm grove Binet and Ojebel, where we received a similar welcome to that of Abraham. On the journey back, our guide lost his way... We arrived at Seiar, very tired. What has become of its inhabitants today? Have they fled this too isolated region? It was also in this village that Rosanna Bigoni, fmm, was able for a time to open a small centre of feminine formation: one room without any furniture. The young girls sat on mats and learned, while chattering joyously, to embroider and to sew.

Celine Monteiro, fmm

Algeria - The international press no longer speaks of terrorism

Terrorism has not ceased to give rise to victims. Victims who are not sufficiently numerous and too anonymous to interest the media, but each victim has a face, a history, connections... The fact related by Jocelyne Andrin, fmm, took place in June 2009, but it reflects what is happening periodically in the country.

The Assembly theme this year was: “Towards A Harmonious India”. The topics chosen for discussion were: “Good Governance and the mission of Religious in India”, “Challenges and Opportunities for the Indian Church”, “Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society”, “Good Governance and People Living in Poverty”, “Greening Consecrated Life Today”. Prominent resource persons and teams were invited from political, social and religious spheres. Very concrete options were taken in relation to each topic. This Conference thus leaves a vast programme to be achieved by the Religious Women and Men in India for the coming years.
A joyful conviviality is past. And the present? Death, silence, incomprehension. May life take up again its rights! And God in all that? There only remains for me to pray for these people whom I love and who place so much trust in us, who share what they have with us and thus enable us to live in reciprocity, brought about by respect of our differences, friendship and trust.

Jocelyne Audrin.fmm

The text appeared in "L'Echo" of the diocese of Constantine and Hippone, September 2009.

IRAQ – Seminar between the local church and ROACO

Ankawa, Iraqi Kurdistan

In the Book of Genesis (Gen 12:4), it is written about Abraham that “he went” and in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 11:8), it is added that “he set out, not knowing where he was going.” One of the commentaries on this addition states: “proof that it was the right way!”

Bishop Philippe Brizard, member of l’Oeuvre d’Orient, made this comment at the close of the seminar held in Ankawa, Iraqi Kurdistan from November 9th to 12th, 2009.

This meeting gathered people from the Iraqi Church, especially bishops and members of ROACO (Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches).

Some of the participating agencies were Missio, Misereor, Caritas, Aid to the Church in Need, Oeuvre d’Orient, Jungschar, and ICO (Christian Initiative in the Middle East).

Wardé Kairouz, fmm was invited by Aid to the Church in Need to speak about our 11 years fmm experience in this region. The goal of this seminar was to create a network between the Iraqi Church and the agencies.

For the Church, especially for the bishops, it was an opportunity to state their needs, their projects, and their problems. For the agencies, it was a chance to state their areas of expertise and their operational reality. In a very practical manner, the agencies also taught us how to ask for project grants and how to be accountable for all donations received.

They emphasized the fact that most donations come from simple workers who give in an evangelical manner as the poor widow not giving from her abundance.

The assembly grasped the great wealth in human and material resources of the Iraqi Church: among them the youth, a great wealth under used (50% of the population is less than 20%).
The Church knows how to ask questions: What are some new strategies to improve relationship with the ecclesiastical body? Is the Iraqi Church able to determine its priorities? What are the specific structures for formation in programming, the qualifications, and the needed evaluation to create better dialogue at the Church’s core?

It realized that it needed to move forward towards the future in a creative manner so the Christians will truly be the yeast in the dough. The Pope has called for a special Synod on the Middle East to be held from October 10th to 24th, 2010. We left this seminar with a desire for more dialogue at all levels, a vision, and a plan for this Church with so much potential, which has suffered greatly. It is now time to invest in Iraq!

Narelle Skeers, fmm

Thailand – SIGNIS World Congress
“Media for a Culture of Peace – Children’s Rights, Tomorrow’s Promise”

The Congress Theme was “Media for a Culture of Peace – Children’s Rights, Tomorrow’s Promise”. It was a global gathering of Catholic television directors in Chiang Mai from October 17th to 21st, 2009. It was organized by the Catholic World Association of Communications (SIGNIS) under the patronage of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council of Social Communications. More than 100 countries and around 600 Catholic persons in media took part in this meeting to share their experiences and to reflect the media’s effect on children. While this meeting was taking place, a special focus, through the daily liturgies, was given to the African Synod being held in Rome. There was a prayer communion between these two gatherings as they met at the same time. In the general meetings, the workshops, and the seminars, the participants reflected on the Medias and the protection of Children’s rights throughout the world. The themes developed were relevant and several producers presented their works at this Congress.

The particular element of this Congress was the very active participation of the Chiang Mai school children. This was clearly visible by their massive presence at the conferences. They impressed by their talent and their creativity through Thai culture: music, clothes design, handicrafts, a theatrical production, a concert, and a choir.

In the Congress’ final recommendations, the directors of Medias were asked to work at protecting children’s rights in their full dignity. The Thai Church had worked hard towards the success of this world gathering. A solemn Mass was celebrated to end the Congress. Pope Benedict spoke to the participants with words of encouragement and a blessing. He asked them to promote good educational values and children’s rights in the Medias. As an African proverb states: “A child is the treasure of the community, which everyone must protect and educate.” May the Medias take this wisdom and make it a conviction that all children should be considered a wealth in our societies.

Marie Rachel ZONGO, fmm

Part of the group photo - 3rd row, second from the right: Marie Rachel ZONGO, fmm