

To speak of my international experience (as designed by my Formation Program) is to speak of the wealth that the Congregation possesses. This experience has been very enriching, since I opened myself to new opportunities of living the contemplative life differently from what I was accustomed to. I knew that to leave my country (Ecuador) was to be prepared for diversity – and to its contributions to our growth. Personally, it would help me step out of familiar ways and to explore untried paths. So, first of all, I thank God for this time given me (which without a doubt I believe God had planned for me) and I thank my Province (Ecuador) and the Province of New York/Toronto for this gift.

When I came to Wolcott, Connecticut (a year ago in January), I found a reality very different from where I came from. I was normally accustomed to follow a schedule from morning till night. But in Wolcott, I learned that structures can be fluid without the Sisters being any less loving! A community of 3 Sisters cannot pretend that they are a community of 12! Sisters Carol, Edith and Sonia, all twice my age, welcomed me and helped me to learn new things – they introduced me to new perspectives (the interconnectedness of the universe, for example) and ways of global thinking that helped me clarify the evolution of my own. In particular, how differently I envision now *what it means to be a contemplative sister within an apostolic Congregation*. During this time of my international experience God gave me new sisters, each of whom strengthened my own appreciation, desires and core-values for the religious life – in their simplicity I have come to know that God and God’s people are in their lives -- in the ordinariness of very small acts mindfully done every day. They earn their living chiefly by distribution of Altar Breads. They also have a Gift Shop (Convent Market) where they sell the labor of their hands. Whatever they earn is given totally for Good Shepherd work through GSIF. I have also come to love, very much more, the *Liturgy of the Hours* – the spaces it creates for imagination, song and prayer.

Having one’s mind and heart open to God is always a call to be at vigil, to pay attention to Presence. To yearn for (*añorar*), to desire, God. With the Sisters in Wolcott, I began to know more about prayer (unlike many of you, perhaps, who know a lot about prayer, I don’t) because it is something I need to learn and do, practice, every day. It is not easy, it is a gift that comes only with long-term discipline and ... “centering prayer”, I have learned, is one of the disciplines -- where a single word, where the breath, is “the one thing necessary.” I have begun to learn and recognize how wonderful it is to see God in creation, to contemplate and realize that what seems insignificant has its reason to exist ... matter, spirit, energy ... In prayer, I am the Universe breathing – my, your, the homeless person’s BREATH -- is God’s breath ... Life is One. We are one. Every day is a beautiful detail of God ... How we love one another is how we love God.

Now that I am going back to my community in Ecuador, how do I make the Wolcott community – where I really felt at home -- part of my life? I hope to bring back Prayer and perhaps others will want to pray with me? To look at the richness of this contemplative community -- so different from my experiences and my own standards -- to feel the sisters’ hopes as they remain open to a ‘change of an era’ is to be encouraged to continue to discover my call every day which includes the ‘global call to internationality.’

I want to bring back with me to Ecuador the friendships offered by many of our New York apostolic Sisters especially by Sisters Maureen McGowan (Provincial) and Elaine Basinger who came to Wolcott many times to share with me the Universe Story and the many international activities of the Congregation; I recall with fondness Sr Clare Nolan who made the Position Papers easier to understand – enjoyable, actually. Sisters Paulette and Katie invited me to my first visit to New York City for a birthday party for Sr. Winifred Doherty. When I first arrived and afterwards, Sr. Judy Mannix would join our community meetings and be our translator. When I renewed my vows in May, all the Sisters who could come, came, including Sr. Miriam Moroney who brought our contemplative sisters from their Massachusetts Nursing Home. (How many, many times we visited our contemplative sisters in their Nursing Homes and how I profited from their wisdom-stories.) When Sr. Ellen Kelly was home in the U.S., the Wickatunk community (Sisters Debbie, Virginia and Fran) welcomed me to NJ to visit with her. I was invited to all the Province Gatherings and every time, every Sister welcomed me and made me feel at home ... I was one

of them, not a stranger. From the moment I arrived I was one of the sisters in the province and not a foreigner ... this gift of 'making Article One concrete' I want to bring with me wherever I go!

What shall I say about the English language (I studied 2x a week at Bristol Adult School for ESL) that I continue to learn and how I want to bring this learning back with me – the pronunciations, the grammar, the vocabulary, etc. bursting out of a whole different world of culture and meaning? I cherish the hope that all the classes I had on the writings of Jesús Pagola, Elizabeth Johnson, Thomas Keating, the LCWR Papers, Connie Fitzgerald, our own Transformation Document, etc. etc. will continue to shape my mind, heart and soul for the years to come.

I end my story with how I began it ... “to speak of my international experience (as designed by my Formation Program) is to speak of the wealth that the Congregation possesses” ... knowing that for me, it is a wealth that will continue to be a GIFT SHARED-- the rest of my life as a Sister of the Good Shepherd.

Special thanks to Sisters Carol and Soni – and Sr. E, thank you for accompanying me in this phase of my Formation especially in its spiritual and human aspects. Above all, you helped me to understand how necessary it is to walk the path of discernment, choosing not only what is good but what is right; choosing to be vulnerable rather than to be in control. THANKS FOR SHARING EVERY DAY AND BEING PART OF MY JOYS MY FEARS AND MY HOPES.

Las llevo en mis oraciones y en mi ❤️

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shirley Tomalá". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Sr. Shirley Tomalá Catuto, rlp
Province of Ecuador, January 2020