

On the 2nd of February Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo received a doctorate "honoris causa" from the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium).

Teresa Santa Clara Gomes and Isabel Allegro, who attended the ceremony, share here their impressions on what was for all present a very meaningful event.



It came like a Christmas gift. We were sitting around the dinner table, on Christmas night, when Maria shared the news: she had received a letter from the Rector of the University of Louvain informing her that on the annual celebration of the University, the 2nd of February, the University wanted "to honour personalities who, by their spiritual, cultural, artistic or political action had given to their contemporaries living witness of the humanistic values that the University stands for".

The theme for this year's celebration was "Planetary Solidarity". Maria had been chosen to be one of the three personalities to be honoured with the degree of "Doctor honoris causa". (The other two were Mgr. Asztrik Varszegi, Bishop from Budapest, Hungary, a historian and Benedictine monk, and Barbara Hendricks from U.S.A., the soprano singer well known in the most prestigious opera houses in USA and Europe.)

When we heard this news, there was joy and gratitude in every heart! We all felt that after many years of hard involvement in social, cultural and political transformation on a national as on an international level, this was for Maria a much deserved recognition. We gave special meaning to the fact that it came from a European famous Catholic University. Hadn't Maria's efforts and struggles been inspired by the Faith commitment to more justice, freedom and peace in the world?

Pondering over what it meant, we felt that this was first of all a "personal honour" given to Maria, but that it could also be seen as an "honour" for all of us, for all the Grail in Portugal and around the world.



Many of us would have liked to go to Louvain for the official ceremony, but finally, only the two of us (Isabel and Teresa) could attend. Magdalene Oberhoffer came from Germany, a meaningful presence from the international Grail community. Annie de Riemaecker welcomed us in Brussels, her home city, when we arrived, together with two Yugoslavian friends of Maria, on the 1st of February.

On February 2nd, we arrived at the University on its new campus: many open spaces, many new-looking buildings and in the centre the University church.

At 3 o'clock, the ceremony started with a Eucharistic celebration, presided over by the Cardinal Archbishop of Brussels, concelebrating with three other bishops and twenty four priests. The church was packed with professors and students - altogether about six hundred persons! For a moment we wondered if this was going to be a traditional hieratic ceremony remote from the daily concerns of people's lives. How wrong we were! This liturgical celebration was one great prayerful meditation on life in our time, in this world of ours, and on our personal responsibility in it. The text which we all received carried the title "What have you made of the world?" and this was indeed the context and challenging theme of the whole celebration. But what for us brought a very special note was the singing of negro spirituals done by a large, spirited choir. In the first part of the Mass they sang "Swing low, sweet charriot", later followed by "Lord, I want to be a Christian" and, after the consecration, by "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?". Of course, these songs were chosen 'in honour' of Barbara Hendricks, but Maria said, later, how she felt that it was as chosen for her, these spirituals being the very first songs which inspired our Grail life during its beginnings.

When we left the church we felt that this liturgy had created an atmosphere of togetherness that the accent had not been on honouring but on humbly being a Christian community.

After the Mass a solemn cortege was formed by the professors, with official guards leading the way, with torchbearers accompanying the procession and, oh joyful element, with two trumpeters who from time to time gave a mighty blow!

The Rector of the University and the three laureates with their "godfathers" were taken by this cortege to the great auditorium. There we all first listened to a short but meaningful introductory speech of the Rector, mainly on the role of the university. At the end, addressing himself to Mgr. Varszegi, to Maria de Lourdes and to Barbara Hendricks, he said:



"You are coming from quite different horizons, from the American continent and from the extremes of the East and West of Europe, you are cultivating different but complementary fields: those of art, of politics, of the spiritual, but one and the same vision unites you: you believe in the human person "à la mesure de Dieu". You have come out from your first calling and have enlarged it progressively to the dimensions of humankind. May your engagement in the world remind our community, each of its members, and particularly its students, that there is no moment in professional life in which one can leave behind - as if it were a youthful ideal which has been surpassed - the role of effort, of service and, to say it all, of love."

One of the students, representing the student body, then gave a discourse on the meaning and role of the university and the formation which young people can receive there in our times, asking penetrating questions "What does the university of our time still teach? Why? How? What does a university nowadays offer the students and society, in a time in which it is understood that a human being has to be learning all his/her life? In a time in which students had to die, in China, in Rumania, because they dared to defend freedom?"

And then came the climax of the day.

First the formal presentation of each of the three laureates, individually, by their respective "godfather", who would give a description of each one's life: background, particularly meaningful events, contribution in special fields, thus making clear, directly and indirectly, the reasons why the Catholic University of Louvain had seen fit to receive and welcome that person as a new member.

After each introduction, the Rector then read solemnly the bull by which the doctorate "honoris causa" was conferred on the person and presented this document to each of the three. Also this ceremony was interspersed from time to time by the blowing of the trumpets, which made it all the more joyful.

Then finally came the response of the new doctors.

Mgr. Varszegi had given a response already in his homily during Mass, so Maria de Lourdes was the first to speak. In her personal way, she gave her reflections on "planetary solidarity", explaining too how she grew into this main concern as a woman, and one challenging other women.

The audience listened intently and she received a most enthusiastic and warm applause. One felt she had touched the hearts.



After Maria it was the turn of Barbara Hendricks. She was almost in tears and said only a few informal words, touchingly too. But she had still another means of expressing herself. With her strong warm soprano she regaled us with a soulful rendering of the negro spiritual "He's got the whole world in His hands..."

Spontaneously we all rose and applauded in joy, in hope, in gratitude.

The ceremony was over.

The Catholic University of Louvain had placed itself from its beginning under the patronage of "Our Lady Seat of Wisdom", choosing WISDOM as the horizon for human knowledge and scientific research. We felt in this celebration that we had been nourished by this wisdom, in spiritual beauty and depth of thinking.

A reception still followed, well attended and joyful.

Then Magdalene returned to Aachen, Annie to Brussels, we -Teresa and Isabel - to Paris with the Yugoslavian friends, while Maria stayed on for a more intimate dinner of the three new doctors with the Rector and all the Academic Senate.

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On the way back to Paris we could not help rejoicing in the privilege of having been there, going over the different moments of beauty and intense meditation again and again. Our Yugoslavian friends, who are from Orthodox tradition but had long left any church practice, expressed their surprise and unexpected joy for having felt totally at home in this Catholic academic setting. We had to smile. It does not always happen that the Catholic community shows off its best...

Looking back at it all now, from some distance, we realise that Maria's "honouring" was finally even more than we expected. It was more than a recognition given to her, or to her Grail background. It was somehow a recognition, on the Feast of Light, Candlemass 1990, of the light that FAITH can bring to the world.

