

Educational Congress, Barcelona, July 10, 2007

WELCOME ADDRESS

**Begoña Zubizarretta, odn
Provincial of Spain**

Good Day to All

On behalf of the entire Company of Mary in Spain, I wish to welcome you all to this land, which is also yours, and in which with all our hearts we want you to feel truly at “home.”

We welcome you to Barcelona, and we wish to offer you the same welcome which the first sisters of the Company of Mary coming from Beziers received 357 years ago. They were the first seed of the Company in Spanish lands.

Many years have passed since then, and today we are gathered here from so many different places where that same seed has bore fruit. We want to relive with you the same experience of welcome that those sisters received. This is your family, this is your home!

The year 2007 has been a Jubilee Year for the Company of Mary; an intense and resplendent year which has bestowed vigor and new hopes to all who form this great family.

When on the day in which Pope Paul V approved the Company of Mary, Jeanne de Lestonnac could not have guessed the long and fertile journey of the Company of Mary in a 400 year history.

Nonetheless, she was aware of carrying out a new mission: “*extend your hand to women, to the young people of Bordeaux who find themselves in the “hells” of ignorance, of neglect, of meaninglessness*”, “*extend your hand to the youth who are lost*,” because they “do not know” what is needed in order to grow and take charge of their own lives.

It is for this reason that she founds a new style of religious life, providing a new type of education for women. She will seek the means, intuit the ways, struggle to carry out the mission she believes she has received. She thus bequeaths history with an educational project, an open path which other men and women can follow throughout the ages and in different lands... offering at each moment and in each place new responses to new challenges. “*Extend your hand*”, and “*maintain the flame*”, continue to resonate among us today with a new spirit.

400 Years of an Educational Project!

The mission of the Company of Mary is rooted and nurtured in the ideals of Jeanne de Lestonnac: accompany young women so that they can grow, in every sense, as women who can make a difference in the transformation of the society of each moment in history.

With the first 5 companions, a Gospel-based educational project was initiated in Bordeaux, one that would rapidly grow: at the time of Saint Jeanne's death in 1640 there already existed 30 convent-schools in France; 10 years later, the first school opened here in Barcelona, and from here, like a fertile tree, it grows, extending to other parts of Spain and the Americas. It is plentiful with new branches....

Four centuries have passed and that initial spirit continues living. It is present today in 4 continents and 26 countries, thanks to the extended hands of so many people, men and women of various races and cultures who faithfully and courageously continue believing in and doing everything possible to create a more fraternal and humane world.

We celebrate the fruit of a Project which, like a tree abounding with 400 years of history, has deep roots and new growth inspired by the Spirit, enriched with the characteristics and richness of each context. The Project of Jeanne de Lestonnac and her first companions, is now **our project**, and today and at this place, it bears the face and voice of men and women from different lands, languages and cultures.

In Spain we are present in various regions with very different characteristics and languages: Andalucia, Extremadura, Castille, Galicia, Cantabria, the Basque Country, Rioja, Navarra, Aragon, Cataluña and Madrid. With a diversity of educational platforms: 25 schools, 7 University Residences, various social-educational projects targeting, in a particular way, the marginalized and excluded members of the general population... in collaboration with other congregations and Church institutions, together with other entities and associations which struggle and work for a more humane and fraternal world.

400 years of a Christian humanistic education in a pluralistic world.

May this Congress be for all an encounter with Jeanne de Lestonnac and with the deepest roots of her project. May the fire in our hearts be enkindled and our vision enlightened to continue planting, in our world today and in new generations, seeds of wisdom, reconciliation, peace, solidarity, and a sense of the transcendent in our lives. That it may inspire us to continue building a world and a society in which all peoples and nations can live fully.

May this city of Barcelona, open and cosmopolitan, place of gatherings and of cultural crossroads, of a pluralistic society, city of a thousand faces and of infinite dialogues, may it truly be for all, throughout these days, a place of ENCOUNTER.