

(Maria) Teresa Santa Clara Gomes

*There is a Presence of the unknown,
of the ineffable that goes beyond images,
and crosses the barriers of language.*



Teresa Santa Clara Gomes, location and date unknown

Very often, members from afar brought the Grail to a new country. But occasionally, the women of the country themselves started the Grail. Teresa Santa Clara Gomes and her Portuguese collaborator, Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, were two such women. Teresa Santa Clara and Maria de Lourdes both became involved with the Grail as students in Lisbon during the mid-1950s, when Catholic Action was very much alive in universities in Portugal.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Catholic Action was the name of many groups of lay Catholics who, beginning in the nineteenth century, attempted to encourage a Catholic influence on society. "Catholic Action," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, accessed July 13, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Action. See also 2016 Introduction, vii-xxviii.

For Teresa Santa Clara, the intellectual vitality of the Catholic Action movement, with its emphasis on new ideas and new forms of community, provided a contrast to the specialization of university academic studies. She described herself as a person who never planned the future but was always open to new possibilities. She was especially drawn to the concept of the lay apostolate, with its emphasis on a lay spirituality. She credited her involvement in this movement with receiving high grades while at university, because in Catholic Action groups she learned to think for herself and take a critical approach to society.

Born in Lisbon in 1936 to parents who had emigrated from the Madeira Islands, Teresa Santa Clara grew up in a traditional Catholic home. Regular attendance at church, at Catholic schools, and in parish groups was considered a way of protecting the young, and especially girls. Teresa Santa Clara felt that the influences of her early years were formative but "only one way of being Christian."

Teresa Santa Clara's mother, a homemaker and caregiver, provided security for her eight children; her father, an engineer, encouraged his children to study. This blending of a protective milieu with intellectual challenge had a significant influence on Teresa Santa Clara's life; it contributed to her strong sense of trust in herself, enabling her to be open to the many risks she would take in the future.

As president of the university Catholic Action movement in Lisbon, Teresa Santa Clara eventually accompanied Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, then president of the international movement of Christian students, Pax Romana, to meetings in Austria, Switzerland, and Latin America. In the summer of 1957, on their way back from a conference in El Salvador, she and Maria de Lourdes stopped at Grailville, the national center of the Grail in the United States. Maria de Lourdes stayed a few days; Teresa Santa Clara stayed for two months.

While the Catholic Action movement had given Teresa Santa Clara a strong foundation, she was by now looking for more meaning in life. She was impressed at Grailville by this group of women from many different countries not only working together but also striving to live together in a Christian way. This was new to her. She was especially affected by the attention given to the integration of the liturgy and arts in all aspects of daily life and work.

It was at Grailville that Teresa Santa Clara was able to "capture the spirit of the Grail." She realized that through the Grail she could do something meaningful with her life. The fact that the Grail was a women's movement was not the reason for her initial attraction, but she did believe that by women combining their energy and power, they could help to transform unjust conditions in the world and create a more humane society. This was the challenge and the reward for Teresa Santa Clara and the source of her commitment to the Grail. Along with Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, Teresa Santa Clara made her dedication in the Nucleus of the Grail at the Tiltenberg, the international Grail center in the Netherlands, on March 25, 1961, the feast of the Annunciation.

When Teresa Santa Clara returned to Portugal as an assistant professor of the history of Germanic culture, she worked with Maria de Lourdes to start the Grail movement at the university. There was a real desire among university students to study the roots of their faith, which, according to Teresa Santa Clara, had not previously been connected to daily life or social concerns. So she and Maria de Lourdes began by forming small discussion groups for exploring contemporary issues and concerns.

Some of the discussions focused on the role of lay missionaries, a new idea in Portugal. These discussions also attracted students from other countries. The success of these beginnings had a great deal to do with the reputation both Teresa Santa Clara and Maria

de Lourdes already had. They were well known and respected through their previous leadership roles in Catholic Action. Also, they found a great readiness among the young women students for the ideas the Grail was putting forth.

As the Grail grew in Lisbon, there was fear among the clergy about the emancipation of women and apprehension concerning the Grail's lack of visible connection with the official church. The Cardinal of Lisbon told Teresa Santa Clara and Maria de Lourdes bluntly that he did not think Portuguese women were culturally prepared to accept the Grail. He also told them that future Grail activities could not continue under his auspices. Therefore, they started the Grail in two other dioceses, Coimbra and Portalegre. From that time until the late 1970s, the work of the Grail in Portugal expanded beyond the university to programs with rural women. As needs and resources evolved, the emphasis also focused on professional women in more urban areas.

Teresa Santa Clara identified her return visit to Grailville in 1964 as a very significant time in her personal history. She stayed for six months and was much influenced by the ecumenical dimensions of the United States Grail. Her exposure to the thinking of Protestant theologians opened her to an expanded way of viewing other traditions and an acceptance of different ways of expressing the Spirit.

A year later, in 1967, at the age of thirty-one, Teresa Santa Clara was elected to the International Board of the Grail, a position she held until 1971. As a member of this Board she was influential in guiding the international Grail through the years of implementing new structures and guidelines produced by the *aggiornamento* meetings after Vatican II.

At the same time, Teresa Santa Clara remained active in the development of the Grail in Portugal as it, too, went through a time of redefining its mission and direction after the Portuguese

revolution of 1974.⁴⁸ The political parties of the country at that time were seeking stability. In the early 1980s, because she was non-partisan, Teresa Santa Clara was one of the few people invited to put her name on the lists of the socialist party even though she was not a party member. As a result, she was elected to Parliament representing what were called the "progressive Catholics."

As a member of Parliament, Teresa Santa Clara worked on several commissions including the Commission for the Participation of Women in Society and the Commission for Foreign Affairs. Her participation in politics expanded her knowledge of the needs of Portugal. It also made her aware of the growth of nationalism throughout Europe and the world.

In 1988, when Teresa Santa Clara was one of three women elected to the International Presidency Team of the Grail, she brought a rich background from her career as well as her previous international experience in the Grail. In this new role, she was instrumental in helping the Grail acknowledge and work creatively with the increasing diversity in society and in the Grail. She was particularly concerned with attracting new and younger women to the movement. Her encouragement of honest and open dialogue and her willingness to take the risks of breaking new ground helped to build a bridge between tradition and new initiatives. The documents she helped to prepare for the 1993 International General Assembly of the Grail delineate a global vision that speaks to the most pressing issues of the time.

When Teresa Santa Clara found out in the winter of 1994 that she had bone cancer, her response was to continue her work in

⁴⁸ The "Carnation Revolution" of 1974 replaced the longstanding Portuguese dictatorship with a democratically elected government. "The Carnation Revolution," The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, accessed November 18, 2016, <http://adst.org/2015/04/the-carnation-revolution-a-peaceful-coup-in-portugal/>.

government and in the Grail. She talked in the interview below about her growth in the awareness that her own strength had never been enough to sustain her; she was a community-minded person, conscious that her strength came through interaction with others. She remarked that she was not as discouraged by her illness as she could have been; that in fact, she had accepted it quite well because of the outpouring of sincere love and concern from so many friends. It was through these many signs of love that she felt God was being revealed to her.

All of her adult life Teresa Santa Clara believed that life was permeated by the spirit of God that is manifested through humans, through nature, and through organizing and working for justice and quality of life. All of these efforts she believed are "somehow a kind of energy that reaches out into the universe, and that's what sustains us."

Shortly after Teresa Santa Clara's death on October 4, 1996, at a Mass celebrated in her honor in Portugal, a copy of a poem she wrote was shared. The last verse of this poem, "Paradise," speaks to her experience of the mystery of God: "Today? An intimate lure of soul, a sweet touch of tranquillity, the 'unbearable lightness' of experiencing/being entire—in time, in the universe, in myself, in God."

Interview

Grail Beginnings in Portugal

Although all of our work since our beginnings in Portugal has drawn from the international dimension of the Grail, we were one of the first countries where the Grail has been developed by the women of that country. We were inspired by other Grail groups and especially by Rachel Donders, who brought to us what I call the "Grail culture," and who at the same time encouraged us to develop and create our own reality.

The initial stage of the Grail in my country was to help a small group of women students who were living at our Lisbon center create an alternative lifestyle. They were taken by a cause and had a deep sense of doing something worthwhile. Maria de Lourdes and I had brought back from Grailville the idea of integrating faith into all realms of life through community living and group experiences. Therefore community building, rooted in the Christian faith and tradition, was very important. Community meant relationships; it meant exploring things together, and it implied a deepening of the very meaning of the Christian faith and its expression in our lives.

Although we had reflection groups and Bible study, lectures and common prayer, the main source of formation was our lifestyle of working and celebrating together. Symbolic language became very important in our liturgical celebrations, especially during Holy Week, as we reflected on the social problems around us. We used poetry and art appropriate to the occasion. We even chose flowers according to the liturgical seasons. We took great care for these details.

Along with building our own communities, we saw the need to open the students to other dimensions, especially for them to know their own country and its needs. To start, three of the women went to the rural area of Portalegre. The team developed a project to animate circles of women by working with them from their own needs and aspirations. Few of these women had any decision-making power outside the home. We wanted to connect human development and Christian development so that women would realize that being a Christian also meant working for their own needs and rights. It meant getting more involved socially and having a voice in their own communities.

It was a very slow work. Eventually the women organized cooperatives and later they were able to articulate that being part of a Grail circle was a decisive turning point in their lives. Many of them pointed out that the way they related to people

had changed since their own sense of self-esteem had developed. They had always considered themselves inferior but through these circles they could participate in something new; they could discover themselves in new ways. They began to speak out more. One woman who had never been able to express what she had on her mind, said, "I was mute and there I learned to speak." This newfound ability had an impact on how she and other women related to their husbands, to their children, and to their communities.

What we did in the 1960s was quite pioneering; bringing the social, the cultural, and the religious into a rural area was very new. Many university students participated in the fieldwork, spending their holidays with our teams, so there was a lot of interaction that benefited everyone's growth.

This work was mostly for self-development of the women as individuals. However, in the late 1960s, we began a *conscientization* program modelled after Paulo Freire's work in Brazil.⁴⁹ These people were in situations in which they were suffering as victims of exploitation. We formed teams in both rural and urban settings to help the people identify key themes that would touch the core of their oppression.

The literacy program taught people to read and write by building on these themes. They would start with personal and local concerns and gradually, as they analyzed these problems, they would begin to grasp the political causes that were at the very roots of their situations. We had to do this work with great care and discretion because of the political regime that at that time was very

49 Grail teams in many countries around the world have used Paulo Freire's method of teaching literacy, based on learners identifying their own sources of social, political and economic oppression. "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, accessed July 17, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedagogy_of_the_Oppressed.

totalitarian.⁵⁰ People were not used to expressing themselves and fighting for their rights. The police were following all the political and social steps we were taking. As a result of *conscientization*, some of the people became very active in the underground movements and were ready to become a part of the political change in 1974. So although we, as Grail, did not have political involvement up to the time of the revolution, our social work did have political implications.

The Grail After the Portuguese Revolution

After the revolution, there was a lot of social instability—everybody was pulled in different directions that caused a disintegration of many group efforts. People were asking, "Where am I? What is this country going to become?" We, in the Grail, had to rethink and restructure where we were going to put our energies. Even though we did not have clear social models for a socialist society, we were very idealistic. We knew we wanted justice, we wanted freedom, we wanted equal access for all.

We were studying alternative models from the political systems and experiences of other countries and we were very strong in condemning capitalism. It was during this period that we again tried to connect the Gospel to our present reality through mobile teams travelling in new areas as well as in areas where we had worked before. Through parishes and other organizations, we helped to create spaces where women could meet and talk about their role in the changing structure of the country. One of the works I was personally involved with was that of the Bible circles. Each week a Bible reflection relating to a main event in the country

50 This regime was the conservative Second Portuguese Republic, led by the dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar; in 1974, a military coup, led by military officers, ended the regime. "Estado Novo," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, accessed July 17, 2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estado_Novo_\(Portugal\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estado_Novo_(Portugal)).

came out for discussion. This was an attempt to connect life with the Christian faith. I think it was very successful because we used a language that spoke to both Grail women whose formation was more intellectual and with groups of women who had very little education.

As the country stabilized, our programs became more structured and institutionalized. We began to get funding from different organizations so we could have programs we had never had before. At this time, we felt that the formation of women needed more of a framework. Since many women were concerned about what to do with their children, we started a children's pre-school education program. We trained young women for two months, who then went into the communities to work with parents and relatives. By reflecting on what they could do with their children, the mothers were also led to think about their own self-development.

Some of the women who came to the Grail came through these efforts but did not live together as we had done in the past. Also, we experienced a change from our previous orientation. Our discussions were more focused on the specific situation of women in society rather than on the overall economic and social conditions. We began to analyze the sources of oppression for women. Gradually this became more and more an important part of the work of the Grail in Portugal.

There was not as much need for the kinds of pilot projects we had done in the past, so when Portugal became part of the European Union in 1985 and we had access to resources for giving shape to new projects, we developed some cultural and social programs. In Lisbon we opened the Cultural Center where people could meet and create a forum for exchange on national and international issues.

Through this forum, the woman question became more apparent and in 1989, we formed a project called Network Women 2000

that is about women's identity and change. The Network is made up mostly of professional women. It is still very alive and one of the more visible expressions of the Grail in recent years. The program is funded by the European Community for Professional Training. I am responsible for the planning of the projects. We also have women who are paid to organize and do the work.

A core group of twenty-five or thirty women meets regularly to discuss a pre-planned topic. We listen to one another, we share information and talk about what we have been doing; we take away some kind of action which usually has to do with planning seminars for other women. In 1993, we had a program, "Women and Structural Change," and in 1994, "Women and Decision-Making." This latter topic is part of a European program of consciousness-raising for women about what is called the "democratic deficit" that exists in society when women are not adequately represented in social and political institutions.

There has been a good response to these programs. About eighty to one hundred women participate. We have been gathering ideas from all over the world. What is new about these groups is that we go beyond issues of women's rights to issues of structural change. We want to make the connection between women's identity and social change by exploring how women can influence change to shape a different kind of society, not just for themselves but for everyone. We want to question what we can do and how we can reverse what is happening in society.

We have also developed a program called, "Cultural Exchanges: Currents of a Common Future," drawing women from all over Europe. About twenty women, mostly from Central Europe, have come together each summer to reflect on common trends. These meetings have connected women who want to go beyond discussions of the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of the unification of Europe. They have an interest in exploring together the meaning of their lives, the spiritual side of these

realities. Although this is not a Grail network, we have taken on the organizing. These meetings have resulted in the beginnings of a Grail group of young women in Sweden. We are investing a great deal of effort in this young women's network. We may never know all the results of these efforts but I would like to see the impact the Grail has had on women, if meeting the Grail has been a turning point in their lives, whether they are part of the Grail or not.

The idea of women realizing their potential to make a specific contribution to society comes from Father van Ginneken. So for me it is interesting that this terminology speaks to us today. We are not necessarily finding answers but we are at least searching in the direction of women's power that can lead to new ways of viewing global problems, bringing about some kind of change in society.

Change has to begin through more exploration of the meaning of identity. We belong to groups but we are different individuals. Society can be enriched by these differences. For instance, the very view of faith has changed. Now people speak more of a spiritual search. We can say that in Portugal we are a microcosm of these perspectives as they are experienced differently by different people. In such a small country as Portugal, it's interesting to see the great diversity in the way women have come to the Grail, a diversity in our temperaments, ways of living and looking at our Christian roots. There are those women who are still connected to the church and others who aren't, but all identify with the Grail and with the expressions of faith that the Grail creates.

We are also aware that when we come together as women we influence one another. Personal transformation is important but we also have to acknowledge the need to bring about social change. There is a crisis in our civilization. We realize more and more that the existing model has gotten into a deadlock. It is important that new elements are injected into our societies and women have a special potential for introducing change.

International Grail and Government Experiences

In 1965 I was elected a member of the International Board of the Grail.⁵¹ I helped to plan the 1967 and 1971 International General Assemblies. In 1968 we were going through the *aggiornamento* process, a painful time of trying to define who we were and where we were going. As the youngest member of the Board, I was faced with a great deal of complexity as we searched for continuity in the Grail.

However, the 1971 IGA was very affirming. I drafted the document, which came from this meeting, and all the countries present proposed that I be on the International Presidency Team. I didn't accept the invitation because I did not have enough experience. But I felt the vitality at this meeting and I realized how much international meetings mean in terms of giving new breadth and new dynamism to all of us. These IGAs have been marvelous experiences of seeing how women with such diversity of roots and cultural backgrounds and personal histories can come together and affirm one another.

By 1979 I was involved in Portuguese politics and so had less time for involvement in the Grail IGA occurring that year. Since being elected to Parliament I have been on several Commissions having to do with women, culture, and foreign affairs. As a member of Parliament, I have been able to combine my Grail work with political work, since my role on the Commissions have kept me in close touch with the real problems of citizens both in Portugal and in the rest of Europe.

⁵¹ The International Board of the Grail was not established until 1967, at an assembly in Amsterdam. It is likely that Teresa Santa Clara had, however, been involved in International Grail decisions from 1965. (Email to Marian Ronan from Australian Grail member Alison Healey, July 13, 2016.)

Even though this experience has revealed to me the limits of political institutions, I believe that it is very important for women to be involved in political decision-making. As a women's movement the Grail has gained a place in Portuguese society, not just as a church organization but also as one having a voice in the larger society, a voice for creating an alternative culture. This is unique. There are no other Christian groups that combine the elements that the Grail does or that have the same kind of presence in society.

It was in this context that I was elected to the International Presidency Team (IPT) in 1988. The challenge for me was to be able to connect my Grail experiences with those I brought from government. I was aware that nationalism was growing and that it was important to develop an international awareness in the Grail that went beyond nationalism toward greater inclusiveness. I was concerned that the Grail seemed to have reached a certain point of stability without enough effort toward developing new groups and increasing diversity. Differences can enrich rather than hinder. I knew that in the Grail this enrichment is possible because the bonds between people go much deeper than national awareness.

To deepen the cultural awareness of the Grail, we had two subcouncil meetings, one in Kenya and one in Manila, each using sensitive group processes. We really interacted and expressed our feelings, our images and our fears about one another. We discussed the differences in the ways we prayed and celebrated Eucharist, different kinds of commitment to social issues, different levels of community life, different sexual orientations, and different ways in which sexuality is discussed. We also shared memories about the images we had from our mothers and grandmothers, the kinds of women they were and how differently we experience the younger generations.

We came to realize that one thing that binds us is the common experiences we have shared in the past. Our international life is not shaped just by exchanging ideas but by experiencing things

together, which is more substantial. Once we went beyond the intellectual search, we could find each other. We were affirmed in the concern for both the transcendent dimension and the presence of the spirit in our lives. The spirit is the binding force. When you go to Africa, for instance, you find women living a very orthodox Christianity that may be quite different from your own expressions. But the fact of acknowledging this diversity has not split us; this shows a great spiritual strength.

All of this was a great help to the IPT in planning for the 1993 IGA with the input of members through their representatives from different countries. That's how we came to the title of the meeting: "Women Shaping the Future: Building Justice and Solidarity, Facing Cultural Change and Contributing to the Survival of the Planet." These themes had been stated in the 1992 faith document and mission statement of the last IGA. Both have to do with our roots in the Spirit. Although the word "Christian" is not used often, there is a spiritual dynamism in those documents that binds people together. On another level we expressed our belief that planetary awareness and human rights are inclusive of all of the global problems of injustice—of the growing gaps between the rich and poor nations and the lack of basic goods that prevent people from living with dignity. We asked ourselves what we are doing to perpetuate the ways in which international trade is structured and consumption models are imposed. At the IGA we could see the Grail as a real microcosm of the world: women who came from rural areas of the world just now being touched by western consumption patterns, together with women from the sophisticated cities of the First World.

It was a rich international experience. We somehow went beyond the barrier of thinking that differences had to be answered in terms of yes or no. We really moved forward with a sense of mission, a sense that we, as women, have something to bring to the world today, a sense that the Grail is still alive with a future. The meeting brought people together with a great respect for

one another. This Assembly, and my whole experience on the Presidency Team, went beyond my expectations.

I think the difference between the climate of the previous IGAs and this last one was a good barometer to measure the progress we had all made in functioning as a diverse group. It was a time of overcoming fears and resentments and really being open to the Spirit as it speaks to us in our time. The 1993 meeting brought a new trust into the Grail, trust in the future as worthwhile, trust that there is room and there are enough challenges for new people to be incorporated. That's very important. Otherwise we were just a surviving institution, and that was not what we wanted.

It was a privilege to be part of this historic moment where this diversity was confronted and collectively faced. We could say how much we could encompass while making the effort to remain as open as possible. We especially had to affirm what we had in common without levelling our differences, without wanting everyone to do or live in the same way.

These issues were very alive while I was on the IPT. I think I helped maintain the openness and encouraged the inclusion of different trends. I helped develop two trends reflected in the 1993 IGA. First, that the Grail is not just living from the past—there is a future. Outreach and expansion, something we could hardly speak about a few years ago—gained a new impetus. Secondly, this future is not going to be a uniform, predictable reality but will be open in many ways. We just have to let ourselves be transformed by what we live. It is good to see that these seeds are developing. And that is the result of the new wave of spirit in the Grail. We have new groups coming in with their own cultures and personalities.

Another Turning Point

All of this has given my life continuity—the human bonds with the international people I have worked with and my history with

the Grail in Portugal. I have a deep loyalty to this group that has formed me. The other has been my fidelity to my Christian roots; they are so deep down, I can say that I drank them with my mother's milk.

My identity comes from that rootedness in the Christian tradition. My life expression has come from the message of the Grail. For me this personal faithfulness to life, of accepting it and feeling gratitude, is very important, especially now when I am so aware of the limits of life.

I want to get acquainted with death in a new way, as a natural part of life rather than the end. I want now to be prepared for a new stage. I'm leaving my political life and my professional life in one year. Then what? How am I going to use my energies? I don't know what's coming, but this phase of my life is a passage. I have been giving the whole idea of separation a great deal of thought. What will my next stage of life in the Grail be?

I have been on the "doing" side of things in the Grail—providing, organizing, helping. A lot of people depended on me. I was in the Grail in Portugal, so my presence was important for getting things done, for keeping people together, for a certain sense of being useful. I liked that or I wouldn't have done it, but at times it has been a burden to always have the responsibility for the administration of projects.

I'd like to have another kind of experience in the future that would have less tension. I really feel I'm at my last stage and the fact that I got sick makes this more concrete. There are demands that come through this kind of work that have been structured by life. Once these are not there, I may have a feeling of freedom.

This is a major turning point for me; I don't know where it will lead me, that notion of the definitive, the limits of life and facing death. I've never predicted or anticipated my future; I have not

been a person to make plans. I have always been open to what life is at the moment. Therefore, I have never thought very seriously about death.

Now I am more aware. I want to get acquainted with death in a new way. I want to look at it as natural, as a fact of life, as a part of life rather than just the end. I think we have to live life as long as we can. Life is a gift as long as we are alive, so it's that gift we are called to live. It's not to concentrate on death. It is just being more receptive to the idea that we are trying to live it and at the same time know that life will have an end that may be soon. You need to have a reason to be alive, that's very important. After you have more of a sense of the end, you need to have a reason that sustains or leads you into life.

This is a letting go and at the same time I am so aware of life as a gift. What I am experiencing strongly at this moment is a feeling, an awareness of the goodness of God. I find it's a miracle that we are alive.

Many things I just did not see; I have taken a lot for granted. Now having friends, having people who support me, this is an enormous gift. After my operation I realized I was born again to many things. Just breathing the spring air and receiving flowers from my friends, receiving all those signs of generosity and deep friendship from so many people was a fantastic experience.

Through this I became more aware of the goodness of God. I have experienced many important things I cannot put into words. There is a presence of God who sustains, God who nourishes. I sense this presence very strongly at the moment. The signs of deep friendship from so many people have overwhelmed me.

This recognition has extended to all expressions of my life. I am looking at the suffering and goodness of people with new eyes. I see the goodness of people better than I did before. At the same

time I see more clearly the solitude and suffering of others. We can speak of charity but until I had the real experience of dependency, these words did not mean the same for me.

There was a time when I was more Gospel-orientated and now my awareness is of the presence of God, of Spirit, of the unknown. We can use images but this is really about images beyond words; I have experienced this presence of God in many ways.

Today there is a tendency to find inspiration in other religious traditions that speak to the presence of God, each one in its own way. Young people today are looking for something; there is a wealth in the Christian tradition, not just the tradition as it has been lived in the recent past but what has not been explored. The Grail could probe this richness and create possibilities, not being afraid to create new models. I think the prophetic tradition is key when we speak of young people and new ways because young people also have to find the freedom and the openness to do it in their own way. That's not always easy for the older ones like us. What is needed is a real authenticity in the search. New generations are prepared, I think, to be original and authentic in their expressions. If people are authentic when they are searching for God, I think new ways will come.

I also think that women, when facing the complexity of the world, have a more holistic approach, knowing that there are no specific answers to problems, but everything is related. For instance, women generally are more aware of the exploitation of nature, the harmony of all living beings, the way that everything affects everything else in life. They tend to have a sense of the sacred, recognizing that the energy of the spirit renews and transforms life. I would say to younger women, then, be authentic, be true to yourselves; no matter what religious expressions you use, be open to the Spirit and make this Spirit visible in the world.