

## ***Julia Verhaeghe: Called to A New Work In The Church***

**Book Presentation - Sunday 1 March 2020 - St Columba's Parish Hall, Edinburgh  
Mother Margaret Binder FSO**

### **Introduction**

Thank you very much for the warm welcome. It is a real pleasure for me to be with you this morning. I thank Sr. Karin and Sr. Mirjam for their invitation to present to you today a small booklet on Mother Julia, the Foundress of our Spiritual Family. They asked me to talk to you about Mother Julia with whom I have had the chance to live during various periods.

I am happy that today two sisters living and working in Littlemore Oxford are with us, also. I, myself, reside in our international house in Bregenz, Austria. In this convent Mother Julia spent the last years of her life. She died there and is buried in the church of the Thalbach Convent. In a certain sense I can say that I am bringing her greetings as well. I am sure she is with us today, too.

### **Who was Mother Julia?**

Many of you have already heard about Mother Julia. Our sisters may have told you about our Mother Foundress. Some have had the opportunity to watch a short movie on her life. Others have already read *She Loved The Church*, the first volume of a larger biography on Mother Julia and the beginnings of The Spiritual Family The Work. I can say that quite a number of people from other countries have already experienced Mother Julia's help when they turned to her in special need. We hope this booklet will help still more people to come closer to the mystery of a person who was truly a daughter of the Church.

A few years ago we asked three young sisters in our house in the Netherlands to write a short biography of Mother Julia by approaching her from different aspects of her life. They produced two different booklets. One of the two, *Julia Verhaeghe: Called To A New Work In The Church*, has been translated into English and I am happy to present it to you today.

The booklet offers a short reflection on the origins of the charism that God has given to the Church through the calling, life and work of Julia Verhaeghe, the Foundress and Mother of the Spiritual Family The Work.

As I hope you will read *Julia Verhaeghe: Called To A New Work In The Church*, I will only give a short introduction and explanation to help you better understand the life and task of our Spiritual Family—including Srs. Mirjam and Karin—after the example of Mother Julia.

### **What is a charism?**

It was Mother Julia's wish that no biography should be written during her lifetime, and gave clear guidelines for the future. It was also her explicit wish that the story of her life should never be separated from the charism of The Work or the life of the Church. A charism is a special grace granted by God to an individual member of the faithful for the benefit of the Church (e.g. personal charisms: preaching, serving the poor; charism of a religious community: preaching, teaching, nursing).

In the case of Mother Julia this charism was the specific gift to found a new community in response to the needs of the Church: to love and serve the Church as a Family of God, to build up unity by the

complementarity of the different members of the Church as Mystical Body of Christ, to glorify God by a life of adoration and selfless service, to help deepen the faith of the people.

However, the charism belongs not only to members of The Work, but to the entire Church. Saint John Paul II accepted this charism for the universal Church by granting us Pontifical Recognition in 2001. Therefore, we want to make Mother Julia's life and writings more and more known to friends of the community and to people with whom the Lord brings us into contact so that they, too, become familiar with the spirituality of The Work and may be strengthened in their faith and in their love for the Church.

### **Called to a new work in the Church—Where does The Spiritual Family get its name?**

The Spiritual Family The Work. A new work, or Work? Where did our community get its name? Some people do not fully pronounce it because they think "work" implies "labour". But the term "work" means not only "labour", but also "opus"—to create a work of art.

The very name, The Work, which Mother Julia gave to the Spiritual Family, may be surprising and seem unclear or vague. Nevertheless, it was the title that came spontaneously to her. Our Foundress did not choose it after lengthy thought and reflection, she "received" it.

The name The Work refers firstly to the work of Christ, which the Son of God accomplished through the Work of Redemption. "I have glorified you on the earth. I have finished the work which you gave me to do." (John 17:4) He came into the world to glorify the Father and to free mankind from sin and death. His great Work of Salvation continues in the Church. Secondly, the name reminds us of the fact that all the baptized are to participate in this work through a life of faith in Christ. In John 6:29 Jesus says to the Jews: "This is the work of God that you believe in him whom He has sent".

In the United States, in England, Scotland, Ireland and other countries, members of our Spiritual Family do this by glorifying the Triune God in their daily prayer life and by their manifold service at home or in an office, by their commitment and work in dioceses and parishes, by caring for guests on retreat, by teaching at universities or catechizing children, by sharing the faith in personal contacts with priests, families, and single people young and old, and last but not least by working to make the life and teachings of Saint John Henry Newman better known.

The full name of our community is The Spiritual Family The Work. It expresses the importance of being a family because the Church itself is called to be the Family of God. We are very grateful that in 2001 our community received Papal Recognition as a new form of consecrated life, namely as a Family of Consecrated Life.

Let us now briefly turn to some chapters of *Julia Verhaeghe: Called To A New Work In The Church*. They give us a short overview of Mother Julia's life.

### **Called at a particular time**

Soon after Julia's birth in 1910 in the village of Geluwe in Belgium, close to the French border, the First World War broke out. Julia grew up in a time of war. Later in her life she said:

*"I was nurtured and formed in the poverty of Bethlehem, amid the chaos of war. God needs none of the things the world needs in order to form a person. God knows what He gives and what He takes."*  
(Mother Julia, Conversation 23 May 1997)

Mother Julia's life spanned the greater part of the twentieth century. She died on 29 August 1997.

## **Born into a Catholic family**

This chapter points out the importance of Catholic family life and education. Julia spent her childhood in the shelter of a Catholic family as the eighth of eleven children. At that time she was not aware of being different because, according to her own experience, it was normal to love Jesus, to dedicate herself to her family and to obey her parents.

*“When I say something about the security I experienced in my childhood, I do it so that you can recognise how wonderfully, how naturally and at the same time how supernaturally, God guided and prepared me for the Charism of The Work by means of my parents and through the developments in my childhood and adolescent years.”* (Mother Julia, Conversation, 22 February 1996)

## **Called into the world**

Already at the age of fourteen Julia started working as a nanny. This was usual in her country as young people had to contribute their part to the livelihood of the family. But she came into what for her was an unknown world, facing many challenges and temptations. Julia served various families in Belgium and France. She had to undergo a lot of suffering through illnesses. God was preparing Julia for her future calling and task.

*“Unaware of the evil and dangers of the world, I soon had to face them while working as a maid for families in Belgium and over the border in France. I cannot express how much I suffered from this sudden change of circumstances. Now I could no longer go to daily Mass, or receive Communion. Only rarely could I visit Jesus in church, just when I needed Him most.”* (Mother Julia, Notes of Fr. Hillewaere, 1935)

## **Called into the Sacred Heart**

Julia became more and more aware how God guided her soul through the letters of Saint Paul and, later, when watching the film *King of Kings* in a cinema. He granted Julia inner light and insights. A deep love for Christ and His Church grew within her heart. In 1934 she received a special calling to enter into an even deeper union with the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Julia had a mystical encounter with the crucified Lord, crowned with thorns. She experienced His invitation to bind herself even more closely to Jesus as His bride, in complete surrender. This personal call of the Lord and surrender of herself Julia understood as a Holy Covenant with the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

## **Called into the great Family of the Church**

Julia became aware that living out the Holy Covenant was intended not only for her personally, but also for many others. On 18 January 1938 the priest who was her spiritual director, Fr Cyril Hillewaere, gave his life to the Lord for the growth of The Work that God had started in Julia. This day we consider the birthday of our community. The Holy Covenant has become the form of our religious profession as consecrated sisters, brothers and priests and of the commitment or holy bond with the other members of our Spiritual Family.

*“Since 18 January 1938 the Lord has called me and others with me to live this unity in a family, to make His life and prayer our own and to work for Him and with Him for this unity, which is so much under threat in our time. In our holy vocation He has given us a special grace for this task. He wanted it to be sealed in a Holy Covenant and bound to His Sacred Heart.”* (Mother Julia, Letter, 12 January 1983)

Amidst the challenges of the Second World War the new charism of The Work was attracting young women and taking shape in the world through concrete apostolic tasks. After the end of the war, in 1947, community life could start.

A lot could be told about its beginnings—the early growth and development of the young community guided by the wisdom, deep faith and courage of Mother Julia. Some important moments and aspects are mentioned in the booklet.

### **Called and sent**

Mother Julia's faith and trust in God's Providence were so great that already in 1939—one year after The Work's foundation—she wrote:

*“Rome stands before my eyes. The Holy Father must give His blessing to The Work. I think I can ask Jesus for this and aim for it.”* (Mother Julia, 18 April 1939)

This “blessing” of the Holy Father was given to us with the pontifical approval on 29 August 2001, the fourth anniversary of the death of Mother Julia.

Step by step Mother Julia followed God's plan. The community also developed through difficulties and suffering as it grew, spread and became an international community. After a few decades the inner vision of our Foundress was realized—the vision of a “spiritual family” that included consecrated women and consecrated men, married and unmarried lay people, diocesan priests and other members in a single Institute.

There will be occasions to tell you more about the present mission of our Spiritual Family in various countries.

### **Conclusion**

During her long life Mother Julia was patient, but not passive. Again and again she took courageous steps in faith because she was convinced that *“God is the guide and the plan of The Work”*. I am convinced that it was God's Providence that led our community to Edinburgh.

We have started Lent. This presentation was not a usual fit for the First Sunday of Lent. But I wanted to share with you the message given to us through the life of Mother Julia. She has left us a precious spiritual heritage through a huge number of letters, meditations, and conversations. In her letters to the sisters she gave spiritual guidance and helped with the formation of conscience. *Julia Verhaeghe: Called To A New Work In The Church* contains several texts and short quotations of Mother Julia. I hope and pray that reading and meditating on her words will be a source of inspiration for your journey through Lent.

Let us conclude with Mother Julia's own witness:

*“This is the message of my life: to serve the Triune God in unity and joy, with reverence and in the light of the signs of the times, committing ourselves in faith, hope and love to serve the Truth – revealed to us in Christ – for the building up of Holy Church, His Mystical Body, for the praise and glory of God”.*