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Special Issue - EUROPE/ITALY - Mother Julia Verhaeghe and the beginnings of the Spiritual Family 'The Work'

Rome (Agenzia Fides) -The first biography on Mother Julia Verhaeghe, the Foundress of the Spiritual Family The Work, will be presented in Rome on November 8th , 2007 at 5.30 at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, largo Francesco Vito 1. The book is entitled: “She loved the Church. Mother Julia Verhaeghe and the beginnings of the Spiritual Family The Work”. On this occasion we would like to inform you about the life and Charism of Mother Julia, the development and ecclesial approval of the Spiritual Family The Work, and the structure, name and purpose of this new community.

1. Mother Julia and the Founding of The Work

Mother Julia was born on 11th November, 1910 in Geluwe in Belgium. She grew up in a large family of simple means and in the midst of the turmoil of the first World War she learned the harshness of life and, at the same time, the strength of faith. In the difficult post-war years she was unable to continue her education. From the time she was 14 years old she worked as a housekeeper for various families in Belgium and France to help support her family.

Already in her youth God gave her deep interior experiences, especially while meditating on the letters of St. Paul. She testified: “The holy Apostle Paul became an instrument of God for me, a spiritual guide and a beloved brother, whose nearness I came to know and experience. It was, at that time, as if I lived through a second conversion and a turning to the Heart of Jesus, to His Body, the Church.” Later God intervened again in her life. She was touched in the depth of her soul by the greatness of the merciful and just love of the Heart of Jesus and by the supernatural beauty of the Church. At the same time God gave her to understand to what a great extent the faith was weakened in many people and what an affliction the Church was facing. With this light God entrusted a special mission to her and thus planted the seed for The Work in her heart.

After a longer period of suffering and purification she offered herself, by means of a Holy Covenant, to our Lord crowned with thorns, so as to share in His thirst for souls and to participate in his atoning suffering. Her spiritual director, Fr. Cyriel Hillewaere, priest of the Diocese of Bruges, recognised the particular work of God’s grace in her heart. On 18th January, 1938, at that time the Feast of the Chair of Peter, he perceived an interior call to make himself available for The Work in an act of surrender, and to accompany it as a priest, so that his ministry and her charism complemented each other. Mother Julia always regarded this day as the founding day of The Work. From that day on she wished, in union with her spiritual director, to serve that unity for which Christ prayed to the Father in the Upper Room: “That they may be one “ (cf. Jn 17:21-23).

Mother Julia writes about the beginning of The Work: “It pleased God to choose me to be an instrument for His Work according to His will. I feel interiorly impelled to say clearly that I never had the idea, never the intention, to found a Work myself In my life’s situation and in the condition in which I found myself it was impossible for me to let such thoughts and ideas arise. I have founded nothing. Since Christ founded the Church everything has been founded. It is only necessary that people live this foundation profoundly."

During the Second World War a small circle of young women gathered around Mother Julia, attracted by her faith, her zeal for souls and her love for the Church. After the war, deeply touched by the example of the early Christians, they began to live together in community as a family of God and were concerned with strengthening people in the faith and in the love for the Church in the distress of the post war years. Mother Julia accompanied the interior and exterior growth of the young Community with her motherly strength and wisdom, in a spirit of discernment, with a faith-filled sense of reality, and with an astoundingly accurate eye for the positive and negative signs of the times. With lively interest she followed the developments taking place in society and in the

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Church. With faith and virtue she worked for the authentic implementation of the decisions of the Second Vatican Council.
Until her death on 29th August, 1997 she strove to serve the will of God for the Work in total surrender of herself, also in the midst of affliction and trials. It was her wish to lead a hidden life in union with Christ the King, crowned with thorns, and to give herself as a spiritual mother for The Work and for the renewal of the Church. She is buried in Bregenz in Austria.

2. Development and Ecclesiastical Approval
In the 1950s various houses of The Work were opened in Brussels and in other places in Belgium. At the same time The Work took on an ever more definite form in the consciences of the members and through various apostolic tasks. After Fr. Cyriel Hillewaere was freed from his pastoral duties and could give himself entirely to the young Community, Mother Julia saw that the time had come to petition Bishop Charles-Marie Hirnmer (Tournai, Belgium) to establish The Work as a Pious Union (Pia Unio). This was granted on 17th January, 1959.
From 1963 onwards, the Community spread also outside of Belgium in numerous dioceses in Austria, Germany, Holland, Italy, Hungary, Slovenia, France, England, Ireland, and also in Jerusalem and the United States of America. In addition to the consecrated women, the other vocations which God foresaw for the Spiritual Family The Work developed step by step: Priests, Deacons and Brothers, as well as families and single people. From the beginning Mother Julia felt called to serve unity in truth and love, according to the example of St. Paul. This unity should find its expression in the co-operation among the various vocations in The Work for the sake of the Church, above all in the complementarity between the consecrated women and men. An important step which made it possible to live this complementarity was the official approval of the Priests' Community of The Work, which was joined to the Community of Consecrated Women. This was given on 4th August, 1986 through Bishop Bruno Wechner (Feldkirch, Austria).
Bearing in mind the development of the Community after her death, Mother Julia began early to prepare Sisters and Priests to take positions of responsibility in The Work. In selflessness and humility she gave the responsibility for the Community into younger hands already 20 years before her death.
Over the years the specific lifestyle of the members of The Work crystallized more and more. Mother Julia expresses it thus: "It is specific to The Work as a charism for these times, that it unites various elements in itself: those of a contemplative community, those of an apostolic community and those of a community which has to work as leaven in the modern world. "
For many years Mother Julia, Bishop Philip Boyce, OCD (her spiritual director following Fr. Cyriel Hillewaere, professor of dogmatic and spiritual theology, and, since 1995, Bishop of his home diocese of Raphoe, Ireland), and the superiors of the Community, in prayer, study and consultation with experts in canon law, pondered the question of which juridical form of approval was most suited to the charism of The Work. On the one hand, Mother Julia was aware of the meaning of the then current forms of consecrated life in the Church, on the other hand, she was certain that the vocation of The Work had to do with a new form of consecrated life. More than once members of the hierarchy of the Church offered the possibility of an approval within the then existing forms of consecrated life. Mother Julia wished nonetheless to wait in patience and faith until the Church recognised new forms. This possibility opened up with the new Code of Canon Law (1983). In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata (1996) the Pope showed himself favourably disposed to accept new forms of consecrated life (cf. n. 62).
Alter the Church created the possibility for the approval of new forms of consecrated life, Mother Julia saw that the time had come to submit the request to Rome for the approval of The Work. She had already been called to eternity when, on 11th June, 1999, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the Vicar General of the Holy Father for the Diocese of Rome, established The Work as an Institute of Consecrated Life, indeed as a new form. This establishment was preceded by a careful examination on the part of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. In anticipation of future papal approval, the Priests' Community was also given the right of incardination.
Only two years later The Work was granted papal approval. In the Decree of 29th August, 2001 it is written: "His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, having heard the favourable opinion of the Congregation for Institutes of

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Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, approved The Work as a Family of Consecrated Life. Therefore, this Congregation, with this Decree, declares that The Spiritual Family The Work is a Family of Consecrated Life of Pontifical Right and, consequently, establishes that it be recognised as such by all. "
The approval as a family of consecrated life was a special joy for the members of the Community. This expression confirms an essential element of the charism which consists of living, and giving witness to, the mystery of the Church as a family of God.
With papal approval, the Church confirmed by her highest authority that the charism of The Work has a mission in the universal Church. At the same time, The Work strives, in accordance with its specific charism, to be there for people in the various dioceses. Mother Julia writes: "The aim of the charism consists in a mission for the universal Church, that is for her purification and true renewal, which is a gift of the merciful and just God. "

3. Structure, Name and Purpose
The Spiritual Family The Work consists of a Community of Consecrated Women and a Priests' Community to which Priests, Deacons, and Brothers belong. These "members in a strict sense", who form the core of The Work, commit themselves to the three evangelical counsels, among which virginal love has pre-eminence, through a Holy Covenant with the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Priests' and Sisters' Communities have the independence necessary for the authentic development of consecrated men and women, but form one single family and are bound together in complementarity. This principle is also expressed in the structure of The Work: the International Superior of the Priests' Community, together with his Council, cares for the Priests' Community; the International Superior of the Sisters' Community, together with her Council, guides the Sisters' Community; supported by the Family Council (Priests' Council and Sisters' Council), the two International Superiors together are responsible for the good of the whole spiritual family.
With the "members in a strict sense" are other faithful who in one way or another participate in the charism, without living in community with the consecrated members: (1) the "members in the broad sense" (bishops, diocesan priests and deacons; married couples; single people), who make a Holy Covenant according to their state in life; (2) the associates, who seek to renew and deepen their faith in the spirit of the early Christians; (3) the circle of the Evening Blessing, which unites members of the faithful throughout the world from all walks of life in prayer and a daily blessing. Together with the consecrated members these faithful help bring to light the Church's spiritual richness and her supernatural unity and diversity.
The name, The Work, is a reminder of the work which Jesus brought to completion and of which he spoke to the Father in the high-priestly prayer: "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work which you gave me to do" (Jn 17:4). The work of Christ is the glorification of the Father and the work of redemption which leads people to union with God and among themselves. In order to participate in Christ's work of redemption according to their vocation, the members of The Work strive to live a life of adoration to the praise and glory of God and to have a lively faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (Jn 6:29).
Concerning the purpose of The Work, the Decree of 29th August declares: "The purpose of The Work is to be a reflection of the mystery of the Church, in praise of the Holy Trinity and for the salvation of souls, and to give witness to its supernatural beauty as the Body of Christ and the Family of God. Rooted in the Holy Eucharist, the source of unity with God and with each other, and infidelity to the Successor of Peter and to the sound doctrine of the faith, the members seek to help people to more profoundly understand the mystery of the Church and to be strengthened in love for her in view of the signs of the times. In their contemplative and apostolic vocation, and in their mission of sanctifying the world, the members follow above all the example of St. Paul, imitating his love for the Lord and his Body, the Church. As spiritual fathers and mothers, they also look with confidence to the Holy Family of Nazareth as the true model of unity and complementarity. The members work in various countries and in different social classes in pastoral, social, cultural and educational areas.
Characteristic of the spirituality of The Work is its biblical, sacramental and ecclesial orientation. In the centre are the Holy Eucharist and adoration, the Word of God and the Liturgy of the Hours; the love for Mary and for Holy Church; the "three pillars" of faith, hope and love; a renewed devotion to the Sacred Heart; the call to an ever deeper conversion and to a life of joyful surrender and respectful complementarity as members of the Body of

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Christ.
Together with many other Communities, the Spiritual Family The Work, which has now received papal approval, seeks to help with the new evangelisation, in great fidelity to Pope Benedict XVI.

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