On July 25, 2011 our community of Scalabrinian Secular Missionary Women will be celebrating its 50th year of its existence which began July 25, 1961. What is most important to us is to express our own gratitude. This has led to our desire to give ourselves the gift of a special year from July 25, 2010 to July 25, 2011. We will be recalling what the Lord has done in calling us to live his project of life and love. Our celebration will be a praise to God for this gift and for all the gifts we have received in serving the Church and the itinerant humanity.

A Charism wasted?

Like leaven in the world

“We were camped close to a small river in the “mato” where all kinds of plants grew spontaneously including banana trees ... We were protected by a few wooden planks which could be torn away by the wind at any moment, but which fortunately held firmly together. And then a door below minimum security standards. Strangely though we were not afraid. And the drafts during the night in the hot season were quite pleasant. In the colder nights we were able to sleep with a scarf and a jacket. Poor ordinary people lived in that extended periphery: older migrants from Europe and newer migrants from Brazil’s Northeast. We were all on the same level’’.

This was Adelia’s recounting of the first overseas mission (1978) in the Vila Nova suburb of Porto Alegre, Brazil. But why are we recalling this?

You can recognize the tree from its fruits. The tree has roots reaching far and deep. In 1961 a secular missionary Institute was born, within the Scalabrinian missionary family, which has been active in
the world of migration since the end of the 19th century. This new Institute was set to be sent on the roads of the migrants’ exodus and give witness to the gift it had received of following Jesus radically, as all Institutes of consecrated life do, but in the context of a secular missionary dimension.

“Secularity”: it is an abstruse word for most. In the Church, however, the term points to the precise relation between the Church and the world. When attributed to a Secular Institute, it speaks of a total consecration to God through the vows, which introduce us to the life of Jesus poor, chaste and obedient. This consecration is present in many ordinary contexts like salt and yeast. These two elements are effective only when mixed in the dough of the world to ferment it with the Gospel and create communion in diversity.

At first sight this would seem a wasted gift or Charism: it doesn’t have missions of its own nor a particular lifestyle to distinguish it externally. The Charism of “secularity” – supplemented with prayer, contemplation and Eucharistic communion – seeks to be active in and through the person and his/her relationships in the ordinary situations and vicissitudes of life. A little yeast can permeate all reality with the witness of the Gospel and thus help the growth of the body of Christ in the world.

Why are we going to celebrate on July 25, 2011?

July 25, 1961 is the day which we, by reflecting on our own history, have come to consider the beginning date of our Secular Institute. It is a history set in motion by God and which, as it always happens with the things of God, enters into a given moment of human experience, composed of encounters, choices, and entanglements, often apparently casual or even unthinkable.

We, Secular Missionary Women, are particularly grateful for the Scalabrinian formation provided since the beginning and all along our journey, by the Scalabrinian missionaries. Through them we were offered the opportunity to consult a number of experts - in the theological, sociological and juridical field, - who have helped and sustained us in the critical moments in our history. One of them on the eve of the final approval by the Church told us: “When the Church will recognize the authenticity of the Charism of your Secular Institute, then you can identify those who from the very beginning have been the mediators the “project of life” which has found continuity in you and has been growing over time.” As if to say, the past will be harvested in the future.

We will now follow the sequence of events. In the 1960s, due to its economic growth, Switzerland was experiencing a boom in foreign manpower, 50% of whom were Italian seasonal migrants working in construction, in the hotel industry and in many other non-seasonal fields. The Swiss authorities began granting long-term
And the school project didn’t take off. Now it was up to me to make a choice: either go back home or stay on in the Solothurn Mission where there was much to do for the small and the big alike. Actually the harsh reality of Italian immigration and the possibility of family reunification.

The Solothurn Italian Catholic Mission was growing and being organized while seeking collaboration with every element of society, particularly with the Swiss. In 1961 the Mission Director was planning to start a school for Italian children in the city and surrounding areas. To this end he had sent letters to the Scalabrinian houses in Italy (Bassano (VI), Rezzato (BS) and Piacenza) looking for a teacher.

Thanks to Fr. Luigi Tacconi, the invitation reached a young woman in Piacenza, Adelia Firetti, who made herself available to begin teaching in the summer of that same year. She arrived in Solothurn, on Saturday, July 22, 1961 and this is how she recalls those days:

*Our story begins in Solothurn in the premises of the Italian Catholic Mission, which had recently settled in the former Adler Hotel. The building included three floors: one hosted the dining hall, one the day care center and guestrooms for working girls and one was used as office for welcoming and assisting Italian immigrants. That was the year when family reunification was beginning and many school-age children began arriving. The Scalabrinian missionaries, Fr. Livio Zacan and Fr. Gabriele Bortolamai, were engaged on all fronts in providing religious-social assistance and in raising consciousness toward the mission and its projects.*

*That Saturday evening when I arrived at the Solothurn Italian Catholic Mission I was bringing my small baggage with my expectations for a new experience. I was not new to experiences: I had worked with the Catholic Action, in the school for children during the day and for adults in the evening in the Apennine valleys of the Piacenza territory. But that had not been enough for me. I had in my heart a longing to live my faith and to love of God in serving others. The opportunity came to me through a proposal from the Missionaries who were facing the urgent need to begin in Solothurn a school for Italian children. These children were going around with the key hanging from the neck while their parents were engaged in exhausting work shifts. This experience seemed meaningful for me in my life’s search.*

Undoubtedly the missionaries had been working hard on this project, but they had encountered difficulties and even the opposition of the (Italian)consular offices. And the school project didn’t take off. Now it was up to me to make a choice: either go back home or stay on in the Solothurn Mission where there was much to do for the small and the big alike. Actually the harsh reality of Italian immigration...
in those days required a variety of services and there was great need of collaborators for the Mission projects. The vast range of services included catechism, liturgy, office work to handle a large variety of cases, hospital visits, contacts with the families scattered throughout the area. There was work to be done in the Day Care Center and in the dining hall where in one hour and a half over 100 workers had to be served. The Scalabrinian Missionaries were untiring in their effort to build bridges with the host community minimizing discrimination between the Italians and the Swiss, between Italians from the north and those from the south. Their poverty, hardships and solidarity were their passport in overcoming barriers of every type. They were a great witness to me. Though I could not do teaching, I decided to stay on in Solothurn and make myself available in many other ways. I was entrusting myself to the “new” coming way and my own experience as a migrant was growing on me as I was facing the same struggles. I was being lead into the Exodus experience. I was far from home and a foreigner and I felt the pain. But the suffering I was going through was opening wider my spirit for a greater hope, for a life commitment and most of all for a life of communion. Now I realize that Someone was knitting together my history, and was leading me through a sequence of tunnels toward a new land beyond geographical boundaries. For me Solothurn had become mission, it meant Scalabrinian spirit, and the experience of being a migrant. Little by little all this was becoming mine like my own skin.

All of this seems clear to me now. But where was I getting the strength not to turn back? I remember that soon after I arrived, facing an uncertain future where my expectations had all disappeared, I began to realize that my choice had to be rooted in a deeper relationship of faith in God. It was from him that I was awaiting the future to which I was willing to offer my life.

On that Tuesday, a few days following my arrival, before entering the dining hall for the noontime table service, I made a quick visit to the little church of the Holy Spirit, just a few steps away from the old Adler Hotel.

It was July 25. A mixture of feelings, of fear on one hand and trust on the other, went through me. God who had guided me to that point was making me aware, through my own experience, of his faithfulness and his merciful love in his Son crucified and risen. In that prayerful moment I pronounce my yes, handing over to him my whole life. My humble yes to an unclear future had touched a new and solid foundation in the eucharistic dimension. Where there is no way out there is no hope, no future. People then become numbers, objects, things... but Jesus responds by making himself a “thing” in the Eucharist, and with Him we become people to whom the future in Him and in the world is no longer denied.

My yes, this sacred vow, turned into my point of reference and my hope: whatever may happen, and everything could happen to me, I had been handed over to God forever. This light was now my strength, I had placed myself in His hands and I could feel my joy growing within me, a joy that I could share with whomever I was encountering. That joy never left leave me, even when the going got tougher and more complex. In fact, things were turning out much bigger than what I could have imagined. A missionary community was being formed, a journey was beginning thanks to the collaboration of the Scalabrinian Missionaries and of the local Church, which was being particularly open to the migrants and to this new Charism springing up within it.

Along the way there were strong opposition and obstacles, which seemed at times to stand in the way. Hope, however, remained strong and, in fact, provi-
dentially the community was growing with the arrival of other missionaries, Italian at first, Pasqualina, Maria Grazia and Anna, and, later on, from different origins and nationalities. The gift of the Spirit of the Risen Lord, whose presence had been overshadowing our steps, never allowed the “red thread” of our history to be torn, thanks to his love and his faithfulness”.

**Walking down the Exodus roads**

Even though we started out as a small group, our missionary journey on the migrants’ footsteps has taken us from Solothurn to other cities in Europe (Stuttgart, Milan, Basel, Rome) and overseas to São Paulo, Brazil and Mexico City. In every place we live in small international communities.

Our own migration has been leading us to new frontiers. From our presence at first with mostly Italian immigrants in Europe to internal migrants and Latin American “indocumentados” in Brazil; from the Muslim Turks in Germany to European migrant workers (e.g.: the Portuguese), who are exposed to an increasingly volatile labor market, to immigrants from outside Europe in Italy, to refugees and displaced people from every continent, to irregular immigrants and rejected asylum-seekers threatened with eviction in Mexico City as in Switzerland, to Christian minorities fleeing persecution.

*From the beginning, along with the gift of sharing the migrants’ life, we felt a call to live communion in diversity, inspired by Bl. John Baptist Scalabrini’s witness. In the living hope which is at the core of the Easter mystery, we have learned not to separate prayer from mission, contemplation from action, faith from life. On the Exodus roads, the gems we had been discovering in Bl. John Baptist Scalabrini’s life became even more precious to us: the centrality of Jesus crucified and risen, focusing on truth -- charity -- unity; love for the Eucharist and the Church, the extension of the Incarnation of the Word to every man, which makes all of humanity one’s neighbor; the dialogue with all, founded in the Trinitarian communion within which we all live. In a special way, we have drawn inspiration from the wholeness of John Baptist Scalabrini, who saw migration as an instrument for the unification of the human family in Christ. In his untiring activity he knew how to make himself a slave to all so as to win over to Christ as many as possible (cfr 1Cor 9,19-22). “Grateful for the roots which have nourished our history as Scalabrinian Secular Missionary Women, in Europe as in Latin America, yesterday as well as today, our “secular” consecration was and is bringing us into the social and human deserts of migration, penetrating them with a concrete service of love, casting the nets on Jesus’ words: I was a stranger and you made me welcome ... you did it to me (cfr Mt 25, 31-46). Mingled with the Exodus of the migrants and the young, whether they be the small people in the favelas or in the human and geographical peripheries of our large cities and societies, whether or not they have a sod where to rest their feet or a future in which to hope, we glimpse God’s invitation prefigured in Easter mystery: contributing to the creation of a new humanity in which every foreign land is a homeland and every homeland is foreign land” (Adelia).*
Note:

56 years following the death of Bl. John Baptist Scalabrini and in the footsteps of his spirituality, the Institute of the Scalabrinian Secular Missionary Women began in Solothurn, Switzerland. This new Charism, sprung from the world of migration and in cooperation with the Scalabrinian Missionaries, was officially acknowledged within the Scalabrinian family on July 4, 1966 and received the Church’s approval on the day of Pentecost 1967. It was formally established as a Secular Missionary Institute on Easter day, April 15, 1990.

The Editors
Translation: Fr. Pietro P. Polo, cs

From: Sulle strade dell’esodo, magazine of Scalabrinian Secular Missionary Women, XXXV, n. 3, 2010

http://www.scala-mss.net