

June 16th, 2023
The Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

I am writing to you to inform you of my concerns regarding The Sisters of Mary Morning Star (Maria Stella Matutina) – a Public Association of the Faithful with a goal of becoming a Religious Institution. This community was established on July 25, 2014 in San Sebastian, Spain with a motherhouse that continues to reside in Bergara, Spain. They have other priories all over the world, including three in the United States: Ghent, MN (Diocese of New Ulm) – U.S. Novitiate; Madison, WI (Diocese of Madison); and Woodway, TX (Diocese of Austin).

I first encountered the sisters in my home parish in Minneapolis, MN in June 2019 while participating in a discernment program for young women considering religious life. I visited the novitiate in Ghent, MN in July 2019 and was asked to enter the “School of Life” during that first visit. I agreed and moved into the convent with the sisters in September 2019. I officially entered the novitiate on May 9, 2020 and continued discerning with the sisters until leaving for an extended break in November 2020. I returned to the novitiate in September 2021 for a further 6 months of discernment until I finally decided to leave the community for good in March 2022.

During my time with these sisters, I had many apprehensions about their devotion to their founders (Fr. Marie-Dominique Philippe & Sr. Alix Parmentier), their relationship with the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, and the way that they are forming their members; but it was not until August 2022 that I learned the full extent of their dysfunctional history and ongoing actions that I worry are not only in violation of ecclesiastical obedience, but also harmful to the sisters themselves and to the Church as a whole. My encounter with this community was spiritually and psychologically damaging, and my sincere hope is to prevent other young women from needlessly going through similar experiences in the future. I have heard and read too many stories about trusting, faithful Christians who have been hurt by people in positions of authority within the Church. This hurt (which touches the most precious part of a person – his or her relationship with God) so often leads the wounded person to abandon his or her faith in Jesus Christ and the Church that He established for us on earth. Participating in the Sacraments and the life of prayer can unfortunately transform from a source of comfort and peace to a sharp reminder of painful or even abusive experiences.

Despite the ways that my vocational discernment has been damaged, despite how I have been personally wounded by members of the Church, and despite the difficulties and painful reminders that continue to plague me during times of prayer, scripture reading, and theological or philosophical study (activities that only brought me joy up until this point of my life), I have made the decision to remain a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of His body within the Catholic Church. I hope and pray that by sharing my story and knowledge about this infected member of the body (The Sisters of Mary Morning Star), I can help to bring about healing rather than perpetuate the cycle of abuse, pain, sin, and death. Jesus tells us in John 8:31-32:

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Knowing the truth about the community that I once considered to be home – to be the place where I would remain until death has been painful, but still has certainly set me free, and I desire to share this truth with others in the Church. After spending the last 10 months learning the full history and present situation of the sisters and praying long and hard over everything, I now firmly believe that the Sisters of Mary Morning Star either need extreme intervention to make corrections and reforms (especially regarding their relationship and understanding of their founder and founding charism) or the best thing for everyone would be the complete dissolution of the community. To support my claim, I would first like to share the history of this community as I understand it (apologies for restating any facts that you already know), focusing on their connection with the Community of St. John and Fr. Marie-Dominique Philippe, O.P., and finally I will share my seven main points of concern that I have developed from what I have personally experienced and what I have discovered over the past four years through documents and conversations with other people who have also encountered this community.

Although the Sisters of Mary Morning Star claim July 25th, 2014 as their founding date, the vast majority (if not all) of the sisters involved with the foundation at that time were previous members of the Contemplative Sisters of Saint John (founded by Fr. Marie-Dominique Philippe and Sr. Alix Parmentier in 1982, following the foundation of the Brothers of Saint John in 1975). The Community of Saint John (all three branches) as well as independent reports have all demonstrated in recent years (beyond a shadow of a doubt in my mind) that there were many dysfunctions and abuses – including sexual abuse – that occurred within that community. Even the founder, Fr. Philippe, has been accused of sexual, spiritual, and psychological abuse. Deviances in his priestly ministry were known by the Vatican as early as the 1950s in connection with his brother, Fr. Thomas Philippe, O.P. and (as revealed recently by the L'Arche Community) Jean Vanier. In addition, there were four sisters who held a great deal of influence and power in the Contemplative Sisters of St. John who perpetuated unhealthy and abusive

practices amongst the sisters: Sr. Alix Parmentier, Sr. Marthe (Louise) Hubac, Sr. Isabelle Hubac, and Sr. Agnes-Marie Godemel.

In 2009, the Church hierarchy intervened with the sisters and asked these four women to withdraw from the community and relinquish their power/influence. As the Church attempted to enact reform regarding the discernment of vocations and formation for the few sisters that respected and obeyed these aims, most of the sisters were secretly planning a way to continue their way of life – even if that meant leaving the Community of St. John behind. These sisters quite literally ran away from their convents in the middle of the night and rallied behind Sr. Marthe, who was hard at work to maintain her position as the *de facto* head of a community that was utterly loyal to and venerated Fr. Marie-Dominique Philippe and his philosophical teachings. Their first attempt at a new foundation free from any criticism of Fr. Philippe was “The Sisters of St. John and St. Dominic.” This association was dissolved by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012 citing “grave violation of ecclesiastical discipline.” The sisters made a show of obedience at that point by removing their habits, but continued to plan for their next attempt, which was finally successful in 2014 when they received permission under Pope Francis to form the Sisters of Mary Morning Star. My understanding is that this permission was granted with two stipulations: that any reference to Fr. Marie-Dominique would need to be considered and approved by the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and that the four women who had already been removed from governing the community be released from their vows that they took with the Contemplative Sisters of St. John and furthermore be completely dismissed from any form of religious life whatsoever. From my vantage point, The Sisters of Mary Morning Star have never demonstrated any willingness to accept or implement these conditions.

After learning about the changes and reforms that the Contemplative Sisters of St. John (and the entire Community of St. John) has implemented and worked on over the past decade, it is very apparent to me that the Sisters of Mary Morning Star have worked in the opposite direction and stubbornly kept their community operating in the exact same way as it was during the worst periods of sexual, spiritual, and psychological abuse and deviancy. I have no personal experience of sexual abuse, but I fear that the culture of secrecy, isolation, and lack of proper formation that remains could easily breed such events again. A former Contemplative Sister of St. John has aptly described the situation with these words:

“there is nothing new under the Bergara sun...”

I conclude my correspondence to you with a list of seven points of concern if the Sisters of Mary Morning Star are allowed to continue acting as an official association of the Catholic Church or if they are one day permitted to become a Religious Institution. As I stated above - if these sisters are to be a source of light, hope, and truth for a world in darkness and to live a full and true expression of the evangelical counsels in

consecrated life, they will need serious intervention and reform. If however, as I fear, they continue to refuse to make these necessary changes and acknowledge the reality of the weaknesses and flaws of their founder and foundress, then I believe they should be dissolved and encouraged to live out their vocations on a path that is approved and recognized by the Church.

1. **Lack of prudence when welcoming and discerning vocations:** the sisters have no interview or application process in place when considering aspirants. The only question I was ever asked was whether I had any debt (this was asked in a public setting - I had no private meetings with the prioress before she invited me to enter immediately during my first visit). I have heard similar stories from other women. Those who do have debt are quickly enrolled in the Laboure Society to pay it off. The sisters encourage young women to enter the "School of Life" (replaces aspirancy and postulancy) by claiming that it is a time to study theology and philosophy while experiencing religious life before making a commitment. However, after beginning the school of life, there is a lot of pressure to quickly cut ties with the outside world and "plunge" into the life of the sisters. I asked before agreeing to enter whether I could keep my phone and visit my family and the prioress told me yes – that it was not an official entrance into the community. However, after arriving at the convent, I was quickly pressured to give up my phone and to not visit my family. There is also a lack of any sort of orientation or welcoming process when entering life in the convent. I was simply expected to begin following the daily schedule of the sisters as soon as I arrived with no explanation or guidance on adjusting to the new life.

2. **Lack of spiritual, theological, and human formation:** the only formation I received during my "School of Life" and novitiate was philosophical. These philosophy classes are completely based on the writings and teaching of Fr. Marie Dominique Philippe ("The Three Wisdoms") as interpreted by Sr. Marthe (Louise) Hubac who teaches all of the classes, which are recorded and sent to all the priories around the world. There were no other teachers or classes on spirituality, prayer, liturgy, Catechism/Church teachings, religious life, or vows, etc. Once a week, we would listen to a class on the Commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Gospel of John (as interpreted by Fr. Philippe), but otherwise it was only philosophy. I now know that various offices of the Church have investigated the teaching of Fr. Philippe and recommended to the Community of St. John that they incorporate a more varied approach to formation for those entering religious life and to not neglect other topics – especially Church teaching/Catechism – while studying philosophy.

3. **Lack of formal spiritual direction/psychological assistance:** the sisters do not make use of or support the use of formal spiritual direction or psychology during initial entrance, formation, or throughout the lives of the sisters. The sister who was assigned as my initial mentor admitted to me that she had never spiritually accompanied anyone before and that she "had no idea what she was doing." I asked the prioress at one point

why they do not meet with external spiritual directors, and she told me it was due to the fact that external spiritual directors could not understand the vocation of a Sister of Mary Morning Star and that in the past they had often convinced sisters to leave the community. I asked at various points during my novitiate to speak to an external priest trained in spiritual direction or to a psychologist, but I was not permitted to do so while in the convent (I sought the help of a formal spiritual director and a clinical psychologist during my break outside the community and once I discerned out). I was told that the teachings and philosophy (specifically metaphysics) of Fr. Philippe were sufficient for the growth of the human person.

4. **Lack of distinction between internal/external forum:** the sisters do not recognize that there should be a distinction between the internal and external forum of the novice during formation. They instead teach the idea of the “intermediary” forum – which they use to explain why the novice should share *everything* with her novice mistress and no one else – especially not with anyone outside the community. I now believe the extreme dependence on one person (the novice mistress was both my superior and my spiritual director) is very unhealthy and violates the internal forum of the novice. I was heavily encouraged to only speak openly with the novice mistress and to not share any personal feelings or struggles with any other sisters or even my friends and family outside of the community because that would be placing a burden on them that they could not handle. I believe the extreme, affective relationships that are fostered and encouraged between the novices and the novice mistress are very harmful and not conducive to a healthy vocational discernment.

5. **Insular/Isolationist/Sectarian attitudes & disrespect for the wider Church:** the sisters tend to see their community and charism as the only source of true wisdom within the Church and display a certain disregard/disrespect for other communities and even bishops and priests who do not share their spirituality. They see studying the tradition of the Church as incomplete without the insight of Fr. Marie-Dominique Philippe and do not include Catechism or Church teaching in their formation program. They openly mocked the Community of St. John for moving away from the exclusive study of Fr. Philippe and for incorporating the Church fathers into their formation. They also disparaged other religious communities for incorporating psychology into their human formation and for recommending a distinction between the internal and external forum. Following Fr. Philippe's example, they do not regard canon law as very important and see adherence to it as Pharisaical and overly formal. They see themselves as the "community of the last days of the Church - the one that will hasten the return of Christ."

6. **Disobedience of Sr. Marthe (Louise) Hubac and Sr. Isabelle Hubac:** I am now aware that these two sisters were dismissed from religious life in 2014 (declared by edict in 2021), but they are very much still active and influential within the Sisters of Mary Morning Star. They wear the habit and are responsible for all of the intellectual

formation of the sisters. Sr. Marthe spends most of her time at the motherhouse in Bergara, Spain recording her philosophy classes, but she also travels to other priories around the world to give classes in person and visit the sisters. The sisters are extremely devoted to Sr. Marthe and refer to her as "the one chosen by Fr. Philippe and Sr. Alix to continue Fr. Philippe's teaching." Sr. Isabelle resides in Parma, Italy and teaches theology to the professed sisters. When asked about the dismissal of Sr. Marthe from religious life recently, the prioress of the American novitiate (Sr. Aude Renard – a French sister who knew Fr. Philippe personally from a young age) responded that after the 2014 decree was enacted, Pope Francis changed his mind and made a verbal agreement with Sr. Marthe that she could continue to be a sister within the community of the Sisters of Mary Morning Star. She did not acknowledge the existence of the 2021 edict which reaffirmed the dismissal from religious life of Sr. Marthe. Sr. Aude instructed the novices to never share Sr. Marthe's name outside of the community with the explanation that the members of the Community of St. John would be angry if they found out she was still involved with the sisters. When my brother specifically asked me about the status of Sr. Alix, Sr. Marthe, Sr. Isabelle, and Sr. Agnes-Marie (the four sisters who were originally removed from the Contemplative Sisters of St. John during their crisis), I was encouraged by Sr. Aude's assistant novice mistress to lie to him.

7. **Veneration of Fr. Marie Dominique Philippe and Sr. Alix Parmentier:** the sisters consider their two founders to be saints and completely deny any criticism or allegations that have been made against them regarding sexual, psychological, or spiritual abuse. They invoke their intercession at the end of each prayer, their pictures are displayed prominently throughout the convent, and they celebrate the days of their deaths community wide as solemnities. At least half of the convent library is made up of their writings, and the sisters listen to recordings of their lectures and chapters on a regular basis. Every couple of months, the sisters hold a "MDP" day during which they spend the entire day translating writings of Fr. Philippe from French into English so that the American sisters have more to read and study. During the Office of Readings (Vigils) each day, the sisters replace any patristic reading with a reading from Fr. Philippe. His writings and homilies are also used almost exclusively during special prayer vigils and community meal readings. When asked about the accusations of sexual abuse against Fr. Philippe, the sisters say that it is all lies and that he is being persecuted by other Catholics who are jealous of his wisdom and his holiness. Many of the sisters truly believe that Fr. Philippe and Sr. Alix will one day be canonized by the Church. They see the study of philosophy (especially metaphysics) as necessary for growth in holiness and that Fr. Philippe's philosophical insights will lead the Church in the end times and hasten the return of Christ.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my thoughts and knowledge on this subject. If you have any further questions or need clarification on anything I have expressed here, please feel free to contact me at any time.

In Christ & His Most Sacred Heart,

Jennifer Deal