

Towards the XXVI General Chapter

“Jesus himself came near, and went with them” (Lk 24:15)

Dear brothers,

A beautiful retreat house at the outskirts of Rome hosted the customary “convivencia” (get-together) of the General Government before starting our intensive council sessions this year. The COVID limitations obliged us to choose *Fraterna Domus* in Sacrofano. Our small group of eight missionaries in the large retreat complex capable of hosting more than 900 people in big conventions and youth gatherings was like the first sprout of spring after a hard COVID winter.

This would be the last of the intensive councils of this General Government. We made an honest review of the life and mission we have shared in the past years and evaluated our ministry in terms of the action plan of the General Government. It was important to listen to the concerns, joys and frustrations in carrying out the mission of governance entrusted to us. We acknowledged the gifts of sincere fraternal love, openness to share freely, and the mutual trust that enabled us to enjoy the gifts of each another and enduring the limitations with patience. The awareness of our vocation which places the Lord at the center of our lives and our mission as a team to animate the life and mission of the Congregation made it a meaningful journey. We value the big community in the General Curia and the animation of the community by the Superior, Vicente Sanz, which renders the community a place we look forward to return after each visit outside. Looking back, we marvel at the gift of many committed missionaries in each of the Major Organisms and the many wonderful missionary initiatives in the different parts of the world.

Dear brothers, the sight of your committed life lived for the Lord and His People in the various mission frontiers offers us consolation when we have to go through the pain of dealing with issues of brokenness and failures of our brothers and of our communities. Taken as a whole, the seeds of life abound in the Congregation and the task ahead of us is to nurture them to grow.

The preparation for the XXVI General Chapter

After reviewing the situation of the global pandemic and foreseeing a more congenial condition for travel and gatherings during the summer in Europe, the General Government decided to hold the General Chapter as scheduled from 14 August to 12 September 2021 in Rome, God willing. This does not mean that there will not be hurdles or we can go ahead as if the pandemic is no more. It usually takes a few years for a pandemic to be tamed and its effects to be contained. We should responsibly adhere to the COVID protocols given by the civil authorities in each place.

1. Conversations at different levels

The period preceding the General Chapter is a time of prayer, reflection, and growing in the shared consciousness of our life and mission. I hope the conversations at the local, zonal, provincial and continental levels have been enriching moments of becoming aware of our gifts and opportunities amidst the many changes that are taking place. We discover that we are not only what is contributed by our individual and collective past, but we are all the more what we can become as individuals and communities with the power of the Spirit of the Risen Lord who dwells in us and amidst us.

Dreams matter a lot in missionary life. Our vocational journey which entailed leaving our native hearth and home began with a dream!

2. Participants in the Chapter

There are 78 missionaries in the list of the participants for the XXVI General Chapter. Each organism has its own culture and way of thinking which shapes the mindset of its members. When we can jointly own up to the joys, pains and challenges of our life and mission, there arise a new synergy that enables us to become God's partners in co-creating the future to which God invites us. The synergy of the Chapter community cannot be created by onlookers and bystanders of the Chapter events, but by the inner condition of the members, the quality of their awareness and the gifts they bring into the Chapter community from their deepest source. The missionary ethos of the communities which prepares and sends the missionaries to the Chapter will also play its role in the celebration of the Chapter.

3. Commissions to study themes for the Chapter

The General Government has constituted four commissions to help with the Chapter discernment on relevant themes and questions.

- I. A Commission to gather the fruits of the conversations at the provincial and continental levels. It is constituted by Fr. Gonzalo Fernandez (Coordinator), Fr. Henry Omonisaye, Fr. José Cristo Rey García Paredes, Fr. Carlos Enrique Sánchez and Fr. Raymundo Adormeo.
- II. A Commission to study the process and criteria for Independent Delegations to become Provinces, government of Independent Delegations, the proportionate participation in General Chapters, the differentiation of formed provinces and provinces in formation and the criteria for the use of electronic voting in the Congregation. The commission is formed by Fr. Joseph Mbungu (Coordinator), Fr. Elias Ayuban Jr., Fr. Jude Thadeus Langeh, Fr. Rosendo Urrabazo and Fr. V. Lawrence.
- III. A Commission to study the question of territoriality in the Congregation and explore ways to address the questions related to it. Fr. Manuel Tamargo (Coordinator), Fr. Callistus Joseph, Fr. Jose Thenpillil, Fr. Krzysztof Gierat and Fr. Simeon Nwobi constitute it.
- IV. A Commission to study the questions related to the intercultural dimension of our life and mission, sending out in universal mission, preparation for sending and receiving missionaries across the Congregation. The Commission is constituted by Bro. Carlos Verga (Coordinator), Fr. Anthony Igbokwe, Fr. Antonio Llamas, Fr. Fausto Cruz, and Fr. Valens Agino.

4. Facilitators for the General Chapter

In the light of our reflection during the meeting of Major Superiors in Talagante, Chile, in January 2020, and the further deliberation of the General Government, we proposed two facilitators for the General Chapter who will assist the discerning process during the Chapter. The General Government sought the mind of the Chapter participants to pursue this proposal. Two Claretians, Fr. Paulson Veliyannoor, and Sr Jolanta Kafka RMI are presented as the facilitators for the approval of the Chapter.

Our Journey after October 2020

The COVID scenario impacted all the congregational programs in the past year. There was lot of attention to be present to the suffering of people while taking responsible precautions not to get caught up in the chain of infections. COVID contagion fluctuated from country to country creating much uncertainty. In the midst of this reality, most of the Major Organisms organized the local and zonal conversations either in person or online except in Europe where the process was delayed due to the pandemic. General houses in Rome conducted the zonal meeting in a hybrid manner with plenary meetings online and group sharing in the respective communities. The Provincial Chapter of Bangalore was held with necessary precautions in December 2020. Most other meetings during the past months were through video conferences. We are getting adept in organizing online meetings effectively and it could be a good tool for follow-up programs and online formation during “ordinary time” too.

As vaccines have arrived on the scene, our older members in many countries are getting vaccinated. Hopefully, more people will have the benefit of vaccines before the General Chapter. Unfortunately, at present there is an increase of contagion in some places with fatal consequences when the communities began to ignore the measures of protection. I urge you to comply with the directions of health authorities of each place and work together in shared mission to help people face the pandemic with hope.

Suffering endured together is capable of creating effective bonds of solidarity and teach us lessons to upgrade the quality of fraternity. It would be a worse tragedy if we were to return to the same way of life after the power of the pandemic is overcome. Let us welcome the “overflow of mercy spilling in our midst”¹ during this global pandemic and keep it flowing from our hearts to help the “rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity”² as Pope Francis solicits the world. While health measures and the vaccination processes strive to defeat the pandemic, let us not lose sight of the viruses of selfishness and indifference that infect the human heart and soul and desensitize their taste for transcendence. The Gospel love is the vaccine to ward off these viruses; our mission is to make this vaccine known and available to humanity.

Our Congregation in the three Processes of Transformation

The XXV General Chapter invited us to undertake a three-fold process of transformation in the Congregation which would affect all of us in all the dimensions of our life and mission. At the close of this six-year period, it is worth taking stock of our journey and the transformation it has affected in our life and mission. I invite each of you to this introspection.

1. First Process: A Congregation “going forth” (Pastoral outreach)

Each Claretian and each community were urged “to walk forward, to open up new frontiers of all kinds- including ways of thinking- to seek out new pathways” (MS 67). Certainly, the pandemic has opened our eyes and hearts to the agony of mankind before the certainty of human finiteness and limitations and exposed the mundane myth of self-sufficiency. What are the indicators of transformation in our personal and community lives that tell us that there has been a “going forth” out of the comfort zones to be present to the peripheries within the ambit of our ministries? It could

¹ Pope Francis, *Let us dream*, p. 7.

² *Fratelli Tutti*, no.8.

be the persons or families in the margins of our pastoral positions, the children struggling with their brokenness in our educational institutions, the questioning youths in our meetings, invisible consecrated men and women in the frontier missions and the perennially complaining confrere in the next room! The Son of God who came to be with us and shared our lot is the motivation and model for our missionary “going forth”.

There have been several initiatives to be a Congregation going forth to new frontiers in the different platforms of evangelization. The encounter in Guatemala in 2018 was a moment of sharing of experiences and reflections on our presence in the peripheries of human struggles. The encounter of Prefects of Apostolate scheduled to be held in New York in 2020 was held online through Zoom and it was an enriching time of sharing and growing together in our commitment to be a congregation “going forth”.

a. SoMi (Solidarity and Mission)

The Coordination of the Claretian presence in the peripheries through SoMi (Solidarity and Mission) by bringing together the departments of JPIC, Mission Procure and our Presence as an NGO in the UN and work with a common vision has made significant progress. Each of these departments have been focussing on bringing the necessary professional standards to its working and integrate UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) into our work among the poor. Our presence with the people in the peripheries is our strength and hence the success of the coordinating service of SoMi for the integral development of the peoples in poorer contexts is the ground support through effective SoMi units in our Major Organisms. The SoMi training programs conducted in the continents and the encounter of Mission procures were very helpful.

b. Education ministry

The Claretian schools and universities offer a big platform of evangelization of the youth and participation in their integral growth. There are many initiatives of collaboration and collective effort at national and regional levels to give a Claretian vision of education. The exchange program between continents has been a concrete step towards mutual support and learning the best practices in education ministry across continents. We have much to gain for our missionary service through closer contact and collaboration among the centers of education. We have also received the civil licence for the establishment of the Claretian University, Nekede-Owerri Nigeria.

c. Pastoral ministry through parishes, popular missions and retreat centers

Most of our pastoral ministry is carried out through parishes in both urban and rural settings. They offer a valuable platform of evangelization of Christian communities and especially families. Our presence in the local Churches as “steadfast helpers of its shepherds in the ministry of the Word” (CC6) will enrich the respective local Churches if we bring out the charismatic treasures that our Founder bequeathed to us. There is a renewed interest in popular missions and retreat preaching by Claretians in different parts of the world. The different Claretian retreat centers around the world are also platforms for the new evangelization to proclaim the Good News creatively in the world today. As missionaries we cannot walk forth if we operate on a “survival mode” of living. The crisis of our times is a wake-up call “to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel” (EG 11) and upgrade to the “generative mode” of living.

d. Youth Ministry and Vocations

An important focus of this six-year period was to enhance and coordinate our presence among the youth and facilitate their vocational journey to be stakeholders of the mission of the Church in the world. The Prefecture of Youth and Vocations worked hand in hand with the rest of the members of the Claretian Family and promoted this ministry at the level of the Conferences. Most of the Major Organisms have created corresponding structure in their organisms. A world-wide Claretian youth network, *Claret Way*, was initiated on 24 October 2020 on the 150th anniversary of the death of our Founder in Vic and a team at the level of the Claretian Family is now working on the project to launch it on 24 October 2021. During our meeting we appointed the representative of our Congregation to integrate the Global Coordinating Commission of the Youth Network. This commission will also be integrated by other representatives of the Claretian Family and four young representatives of each continent.

e. Biblical Apostolate and Publications

Since the General Chapter of 1991, the Congregation has given attention to the place of the Word of God in our life and mission. In recent years, we have made efforts to bring together the experiences in different parts of the Congregation and coordinate the biblical apostolate at the level of continents. In spite of the shifts in reading habits of people and the competition from others, the ministry of the word through the publication of Bible Diaries has grown to 28 languages and over a million copies each year. The meeting of the Claretian publishing group offers mutual support to navigate through the hard times that the publishing ministry is going through in our times. Social media is opening the door for the ministry to venture into new avenues to fulfil its mission to be servants of the Word.

f. Evangelization of Evangelizers

Our commitment to “multiplication of evangelizers for a Church *going forth*” was related to renewing and coordinating our places of education and formation specially Institutes of Consecrated life (MS 67.3). We have six institutes of Consecrated Life in four continents which offer us a wonderful opportunity to support and accompany a population mostly serving the least of society: consecrated people. The General Government created a commission presided by the General Consultor, Fr. Henry Omonisaye, to explore possibilities offered by the apostolic letter of Pope Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*. It is clear that our Institutes of Consecrated Life with their limited scope at the moment requires audaciousness to make its service accessible to Consecrated people or other agents of evangelization of our times. We had a few meetings with the Congregation for Catholic Education to have greater autonomy to coordinate all our centers under the Institute in Rome and to offer interdisciplinary courses with academic degrees that empower Consecrated people in their life and service. At the ground level of the Institutes, we need to work hard to offer relevant and professionally competent and inculturated courses.

2. Second Process: Being a community of Witnesses and Messengers

This process affects us with regard to our style of living in community, influencing one another with our different roles and administering our resources at the service of the common good.

a. Community

The repeated observation from our missionaries in the surveys and reports is the malady of individualism that debilitates our commitment to create missionary communities which are houses and schools of communion (MS 70). Hope you benefit from the yearlong reflection on community life based on the twelve prepared modules available at <http://www.claret.org/en/our-congregation/community/>. We need to improve the art of weaving our community-mission out of the wisdom of the differences and the wealth of resources that each of us bring into our community.

b. Governance

Governance of our Congregation by making sure that “those who exercise the service of authority discern and act according to God’s heart” was the commitment we made during the last General Chapter (MS 72). Lapses in the exercise of authority at local level (community, school, parish, Institutes etc.) cumulate and multiply damages and carry forward to the Provincial and General levels obliging the higher superiors to take on the role of firefighters. The two programs organized for the new Major Superiors emphasized the need for the formation and empowerment of Major Superiors and their teams and, in their turn, care for the local governments. The process of transformation in the area of governance is not the emergence of a single leader who would fix all problems of the life and mission of all the others rendering them not responsible for their lives. Governance according to God’s heart as a witnessing community is made possible by the collective effort of all to create a congregational culture where co-responsibility, accountability and transparency are natural principles governing the conduct of members. It is the higher expression of synodal nature of our congregation protected by the principles of hierarchy and collegiality. It needs a greater level of personal integrity of the members and those exercising authority to render our communities as schools of communion credible witnesses of the joy of the Gospel.

c. Collaboration within the Claretian Family

There has been significant advance in the consciousness of being a charismatic family on the part of the different Institutes and lay Claretian movement who trace their missionary spirit to the charism of St. Anthony Mary Claret. There are different initiatives of collaboration at different levels especially in youth ministry and Solidarity-Mission. A significant step of a joint mission to begin a mission in Madagascar, Claret 150, is to name a group of six missionaries (3 each from CMF and RMI) and to prepare them to start the mission when the pandemic subsides and allows immigration to the mission. The Claretians who are chosen to be sent are Zbigniew Łaś (Polska), Justine Kuzhippalayil (St. Thomas) and Eusebius Toda (Indonesia).

d. Administration of our resources for common good

The General Government dedicated time during the March session to study the balance and budgets of our Major Organisms. Though we are affected by COVID, the Major Organisms have shown the audacity to continue the spirit of sharing of goods and it has kept a certain balance to navigate these hard times. Some have even contributed from their fixed assets so as not to disrupt abruptly the congregational economic balance, though it cannot go on for long. Behind the numbers and bills the spirit with which each Claretian contributes to the community treasury and spends from it, marks the community/province as a credible witness of the Gospel.

Irrespective of where we are, rich or poor surroundings, the needs of a Claretian are limited as we live simple lives everywhere. We grow as a Congregation because of the gift of generosity in us which enriches the heart and enhances growth of an Organism. On the other hand, when members withhold resources for themselves, they impede the growth of the Organism. The effort of the Congregation to support the growth and self-sufficiency of the new Major Organisms has success stories. By the end of this six-year period two Major Organisms, East Nigeria Province and Northeast India Delegation, could reach a stage of growth to take care of their sustenance. The Kolkata Delegation at its birth as an Independent Delegation could reach a stage of self-sustenance, even though most of its missions are situated among the poor. Collective efforts from the efforts at the local levels and generosity in sharing of goods together can achieve a healthy Claretian-ecological equilibrium with regard to our economy.

e. Communication within the Congregation

The training of secretaries has borne fruits in getting data updated in time, though bulletins from several Major Organisms are still wanting.

The organization and coordination of communication of matters pertaining to our life and mission both within and outside the Congregation was studied by a commission which presented its report and proposal of a communication plan to the General Government. In the light of it we reformed the communication department which needs further consolidation with prepared personnel. A group of “cyber missionaries” was formed with persons proposed by the Major Superiors to assist the communication department in its different sections when needed. We have different pastoral initiatives in the communication media and it is time to coordinate them for effective ministry of the Word in the different countries and continents.

3. Third Process: Men who adore God in the Spirit

This process of transformation was to overcome the dichotomy between spirituality and activity, interior and exterior and have a unified personal and community system centered in Christ. Fidelity and perseverance are possible when we build the house on rock (Mt 7:24). For us Claretians, our ministries flow from our missionary identity.

a. Spirituality

There were several programs organized by the Prefecture of Spirituality with the team of CESC in Vic and The Forge in Los Negrales in Madrid to help our members discover the beauty of our missionary vocation and joy of living it. We were blessed to have 109 blessed Martyrs in 2017. We prepared for the 150th anniversary of the death of our Founder through the *Claretian Year* program. Due to the pandemic, The Forge courses of the first half of the year have been suppressed, but The Forge in English could be held from October 2021 onwards. Various activities of spiritual animation have been carried out online in collaboration with various Organisms (spiritual exercises, retreats, ongoing formation, etc.). There have been two new assignments, Fr. Rohan Pereis from Sri Lanka and Fr. Felix Kouamé Ketoglo from the mission of Ivory Coast to the Teams of the CESC in Vic and the Forge Centre in Los Negrales. You can now make use of a new Claretian App for songs and prayers, *Fussimanya* which is prepared in view of the General Chapter.

b. Formation

The fragility of a Major Organism is first felt in the formation of missionaries both initial and ongoing just as a dysfunctional family takes its toll on its children first. Our Congregation has given priority to the formation of its members and prepared helpful documents to assist the formative journey. The digital version of the General Plan of Formation (GPF) is made available to all. GPF 2020 treats formation as a transformative journey till the end of our life and emphasis is given equally to ongoing formation. Holding a map is not the same as walking in the territory. I invite all Claretians to make use of this document to accompany our formation at each stage. Formation of formators is a priority that we should never overlook and it is imperative that those in formation ministry update themselves with the many available programs in each place. Due to the pandemic, the next course will have much of its contents online and the rest of it *in situ* in Spain when it is possible to visit the Claretian places.

The year of St. Joseph and the Claretians Missionaries

On March 19 we celebrated the feast of St. Joseph, the patron of the General Curia and co-patron of the Congregation. The Pope, in his apostolic letter *Patris Corde*, highlighted the need to recover the Father's love in the pastoral ministry of the Church. From the time of our Founder, our missionaries were sought for spiritual direction by people of all walks of life because they perceived in us the "Father's heart". People lovingly call us, "father". Loss of the sensitivity of the Father's heart in a ministerial setting can lead to abuse of power and allied abuses and "-isms" (sexual abuse, financial abuse, clericalism, etc.). In various instances our presence in many places began with the care of many seminaries³ such as Pouso Alegre in Brazil (1901), the new diocesan seminary in Madrid in Spain (1906), Cochabamba in Bolivia, Lima in Peru (1910), Banapá, Malabo in Guinea Equatorial (1912), Tortozendo in Brazil (1920), Santander in Spain (1922), Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic (1923) and San Miguel in El Salvador (1926) where St. Oscar Arnulfo Romero was formed. We were invited to the seminary of Kaiffeng in China (1928), Imaichi in Osaka (1951), and the Maronite seminary in Lebanon (1964). We need to recover this charismatic gift to accompany people with the "Father's Heart". A missionary will be able to communicate the Father's Love to the people only when he is first a "son" of the Father and a "brother" to others. I wish that our missionaries are sought by people for spiritual accompaniment in their lives to help them discover and nurture the presence of the Risen Lord in them and in the world.

I wish you a very happy Easter!

Rome, 5th April, 2021

Fr. Mathew Vattamattam, CMF

Superior General

³ In many cases it was to take care of both study and formation.