

CIRCULAR LETTER
Convocation of the XXVI General Chapter



“Stay with us Lord, for it is almost evening”
(Lk 24: 29)

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Rome, February 2, 2021

Dear brothers,

1. After the announcement of the XXVI General Chapter on 30 May 2020, we continued to face the crippling effect of the global pandemic Covid-19 on humanity at large. As missionaries we felt the call to share the anxieties and sufferings of our sisters and brothers around us with the joy of the Gospel. We felt the pain of millions of people when our own confreres and near ones succumbed to the virus infection. We also experienced the joy and the grace of recovery of our brothers after massive infection in some communities. It was also an opportunity for deep faith-based reflection on the meaning of the pandemic which aroused genuine concern for the well-being of all humans and our common home. Many of our brothers, communities, and ministerial platforms bravely responded to the situation of poverty and hunger of the most vulnerable in the society by pooling human and material resources in shared mission with other people of good will. Several Major Organisms took earnest efforts to economically support the staff and the dependents of our institutions during the lockdown. Indeed, in health and in death, we proclaim the hope and joy of living in Christ our Lord (cf. Rom 14:8).
2. Although at present some countries are going through a third wave of the pandemic, there are signs of hope that we are close to the end of the tunnel of uncertainties and panic. The arrival of vaccines to defend against the virus is promising. However, the abysmal differential among countries in getting access to vaccines reveals the ugly face of the old logic of humanity and the need to dream together for our common future as one human family on the planet. The post-Covid era calls for greater attention to the common good and to the concerns of millions of people living on the edges of the society, to avoid a catastrophic situation of inequality, famine, and poverty in the world. Let us take the pandemic as an invitation to bring out the best in humans to create a just and fraternal world¹.

Making sense of the Pandemic in our life and mission

3. The approach of the biblical authors and the Fathers of the Church about human failures, natural calamities, diseases and plagues was very different from the mundane and esoteric interpretations of their contemporaries. Everything has a divine meaning, a sign value for the people of God, pointing to the road of conversion and liberation. God brings about good out of suffering and evil. The flood in Noah's time (cf. Gen 6-9) is presented as a moment of re-generation of humanity and a new beginning for the earth. The plagues of Egypt were read along the narrative of the exodus event (cf. Ex 1-10). Jesus refused to adhere to popular interpretations about unfortunate events

¹ Cf. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* [encyclical, 2020], ¶54-55.

and calamities such as the fall of a tower that killed many people in Siloah (cf. Lk 13:1-5) or the cause of the blindness of a child born blind (cf. Jn 9:1-3). Jesus would rather see in them a call to responsibility through conversion, and an opportunity to manifest the power of God's love. The growth of Christianity in the Roman empire was favoured by the witness of Christians who stayed on to care for the sick during plagues (for example, Antonine plague during 165-180 AD and the plague of Cyprian during 249-262 AD) when healthy Romans fled from the scene. In the spirit of the Good Shepherd, a missionary does not run away leaving the sheep to its fate when the wolf comes to attack (cf. Jn 10:12-13).

4. I invite you to see the impact of the pandemic on the General Chapter in a much broader vision than whether we will be able to hold it as scheduled. Following the Christian tradition, how do we read the present scenario as a sign and a call to conversion and collective responsibility for the integral good of humanity and refuse to indulge in futile interpretations? As Pope Francis observes, we are going through a time of crisis or a trial like a kiln testing a potter's handy work². Amidst this global pandemic, our own integrity as disciples rooted in the Lord and audacious to be sent in mission is also put to the test. In the world we cannot be passive spectators, but rather, we should be co-creators of the emerging future. The pontiff also points to the global visibility of the current Pandemic and asks: *"How will we deal with the hidden pandemics of this world, the pandemics of hunger and violence and climate change?"*³.
5. The General Chapter and its preparation cannot be indifferent to what the global pandemic is exposing about human co-existence in an interconnected world and to the havoc the pandemic has been causing on all spheres of life. We cannot live as if the pandemic did not exist and remain unaffected in our attitudes and style of life when millions of our brothers and sisters are suffering. In keeping with the prophetic spirit of our missionary vocation, we embrace the present period of trial in the light of the Gospel. Among the many contributions that people make towards addressing the pandemic and its consequences, our role as missionaries is to help people find meaning and hope in a situation of panic and helplessness and join hands with all efforts to build a just and fraternal world where human dignity is respected and our planet is responsibly protected from being ravaged by biological, moral, and spiritual viruses. During the itinerary of the General Chapter, we shall explore together what is the call of God for us today and how we assume our place in the Church and the world as a missionary congregation. *How do we participate in the co-creation of the future of humanity and the planet together with all the other collaborators of the Holy Spirit, the architect of the history of the world?*

² Cf. Pope Francis (in conversation with Austen Iverigh), Prologue, in *Let us dream: The path to a better future* (London: Simon&Schuster, 2020).

³ Ibid.

The Magisterium of Pope Francis in our congregational journey

6. Our congregational journey after the XXV General Chapter followed its guideline to undertake three processes of transformation as the path to follow in this six-year period⁴. The Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) and the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015) offered the foundations for a transformative missionary journey. In the course of this six-year period, the magisterium of Pope Francis shed light on the different processes of transformation that we have been pursuing. The synods of Bishops and the Apostolic Exhortations on family (*Amoris Letitia*, 2016) and on Youth and Vocations (*Christus Vivit*, 2019) have given impetus to the first process of transformation to be “a congregation going forth”. The renewed coordination of the mission Procura, JPIC and our presence in UN as Solidarity and Mission (SoMi) received a new impulse from the reflections of the Synod on Amazonia and the post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (2020).
7. The apostolic exhortation on holiness *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018) was a timely support for the third process of transformation to be progressively conformed to Christ, the missionary of the Father. The recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) gave us a holistic vision for weaving together the fraternal coexistence of all humans and of all God's creation. The second process of transformation is this art of weaving together our communities at all levels and taking care of our resources at the service of our life and mission. We have become more conscious of the value of collective discernment, teamwork, and a synodal approach to safeguard the exercise of authority as service to our brothers and to prevent it from any kind of abuse of power and resources. Each of you knows how your way of living your missionary vocation has allowed you to embrace the three processes of transformation in you and in your communities. Now is the time to gather their fruits and discern further steps on our journey.
8. The history of our General Chapters shows how closely we journeyed with the Universal Church assimilating the Magisterium of the Church and integrating the impulses of the various ecclesial events into our life and mission. Pope Francis announced the *Year of St. Joseph* starting from 8 December 2020 in honour of the 150th anniversary of the saint's proclamation as patron of the Universal Church⁵. This is an opportune time to recuperate the credibility of ministerial life and consecrated celibacy which the scandals of abuses in the Church have called into question. As Pope said,

“Our world today needs fathers... It rejects those who confuse authority with authoritarianism, service with servility, discussion with oppression, charity with a welfare

⁴ Cf. *Missionarii Sumus*, Declaration of the XXV General Chapter (2015), ¶64-75.

⁵ Pope Pius IX proclaimed St. Joseph as the patron of the Universal Church through the Decree *Quemadmodum Deus* on December 8, 1870.

mentality, power with destruction. Every true vocation is born of the gift of oneself, which is the fruit of mature sacrifice. The priesthood and consecrated life likewise require this kind of maturity”⁶.

Spiritual fatherhood is an essential dimension of our missionary life and celibacy, and we shall joyfully live it. On 19 March 2021, on the feast of St. Joseph, Pope Francis will inaugurate the Year “Famiglia Amoris Laetitia” which will conclude on 26 June 2022 on the occasion of the X World Meeting of Families in Rome. Both events will greatly enhance the quality of our community life and missionary commitment to the people of God. Let us welcome the spirit of these two events to enrich the Chapter preparation and celebration.

Let us dream God’s dreams

9. I would like to share the importance of dreaming together our missionary future which is a key factor in the preparation and celebration of the Chapter. Pope Francis has invited the Church time and again to dream God’s dream for humanity⁷. “Dreaming” as we understand here is different from the wishful thinking of an idle person. It is also different from the nightmares during sleep at night which our unconscious mind knits from the accumulated fears and anxieties of the day. Dreams in the Bible are related to signs and directions about the future course of events which generate trust in the living God. I think of the dreams of both Josephs in the Bible: Joseph, the son of Jacob, in the Old Testament and Joseph, the husband of Mary, in the New Testament. Dreaming here is participation in God’s project of salvation. The force and beauty of our missionary vocation is a dream of our hearts, the dream to follow Jesus closely which our Founder dreamt for himself and shared with his companions. Our dream, as Pope Francis says, is a “*dream whose name is Jesus, planted by the Father in the confidence that it would grow and live in every heart. A concrete dream who is a person, running through our veins, thrilling our hearts and making them dance*”⁸.
10. The future of our Congregation depends on how we keep alive in each of us the founding dream to proclaim the Gospel. We are around 3000 men in the Congregation to keep alive the founding dream, along with the whole Claretian family and so many people with whom we share the charism of Claret. How wonderful a team we would be in the Church and in the world, if we are able to dream together

⁶ Pope Francis, *Patris Corde* [apostolic letter, 8 December 2020].

⁷ The theme of dreaming is very present in the teachings of Pope Francis: in *Evangelii Gaudium* (6 times), *Amoris Laetitia* (13 times), *Christus Vivit* (54 times), *Gaudete Exsultate* (3 times), *Querida Amazonia* (16 times), *Fratelli Tutti* (13 times).

⁸ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* [post-synodal exhortation, 2019], n.157.

God's dream for us! Let us apply to ourselves and the Chapter processes the call of Pope Francis:

“How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together. Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all”⁹.

When we cease to dream together Jesus' dream for humanity for which he gave himself, we no more have any relevance in the world as a missionary Congregation. The Chapter is a time to dream together the dream of Jesus as did our Founder in his time.

The Preparation for the General Chapter

11. The XXV General Chapter asked us “to explore new methods and ways of organizing our general and provincial chapters in their phases” (MS 72.3). Thus, the preparation for the XXVI General Chapter is designed to unfold at the level of communities, zones, Major Organisms, and Conferences through discerning and generative conversations. The commissions assigned to accompany the process in each Major Organism creatively adapted the encounters to the situation of the pandemic, though in some places they are delayed a bit. I appreciate the creativity of our brothers in adapting the meetings to respect the civil regulations for the control of the virus while ensuring fidelity to the spirit of the Chapter preparations. The presence and contribution of the Claretian family, our collaborators and friends in this phase of the Chapter have been awesome.
12. The dynamics of the preparation of the Chapter precludes the formation of a commission to prepare a pre-chapter document based on a particular theme. The fruits of the conversations at different levels will be the data to help the discernment of the Chapter. These contributions will be synthesized by a commission appointed by the General Government, to be presented in the Chapter.
13. Our experience of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, the source of unity in diversity and the ground of the interconnectedness of all creation, is at the core of our generative conversations and discernment at different phases of the Chapter. When we gather in the spirit of the Risen Lord, our meetings become events of Pentecost rather than a gathering of friends or elites, and our conversations become

⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n.8.

generative of the new humanity rather than gossiping chats or divisive debates. We come out of such gatherings as spirit-filled evangelizers¹⁰.

The motto for the Chapter: *Rooted and Audacious*

14. We reflected on the conversations that Jesus had with the disciples on the way to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24) in my letter of announcement of this General Chapter. I invite your attention to where their conversations with Jesus led them. When Jesus opened the scriptures, the hearts of the disciples were also opened to welcome him personally into their obscurities, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the daylight is nearly gone" (Lk 24.29). Jesus went in to stay with them. That stay was to take them to the summit of the journey, the eucharist, when he gave himself to them as food. Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him certainly as the one whom all the scriptures referred. As men on fire with God's love, they were ready to return to Jerusalem to join their brothers. This time also Jesus was with them, unseen, as Eucharist in their heart, illumining their way forward. Staying with Jesus is to be transformed by God's love and it is a condition to go out to proclaim the Gospel. Being "rooted in the Lord and audacious for his mission" is a unified reality in the life of a missionary and his community.
15. In the meeting of the Major Superiors in Chile in January 2020, we took this theme *Rooted and audacious* as the motto for our itinerary¹¹. The image of the compass that our Founder used to illustrate his vocation and mission helps us to understand this motto from a Claretian key. One pole of the compass is fixed at the center point and the other is free to move around. Claret knew well that, in the measure that his heart was deeply rooted in Christ, he could freely and boldly move out to proclaim the Gospel where God sent him. In this time of epochal changes, we need the integrity of life rooted in Christ and the freedom of the spirit to explore new frontiers of mission if we want to live our missionary vocation credibly.

Participation in the XXVI General Chapter

16. The General Chapter is an event of the whole Congregation in which no Claretian should remain a mere spectator. Neither should the Claretian family and our collaborators be kept out of the journey. Walking together is constitutive of the way of the Church and the Congregation. In our meetings, we celebrate the synodal nature

¹⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* presents Spirit-filled evangelizers as "evangelizers fearlessly open to the working of the Holy Spirit" (n. 259).

¹¹ The work of Cardinal Aquilino Bocos *Arraigados y Arriesgados* has inspired the choice of the theme, though the term *audaces* was preferred by the meeting to *arriesgados*.

of the Church by listening together to the Holy Spirit who speaks to us in manifold ways. When we listen with the ears of the heart and speak from its fulness, our encounters open space for the creativity and newness of the Spirit of the Risen Lord. I thank each of you for your active participation in the generative conversations in your communities and the other meetings. Your contributions are very valuable. Collective visualization of our future as missionaries in the Church and in the world already sparks motions of change within each of us. Thus, the Chapter process which we have already started will gather momentum as a transformative event, building the bonds of fraternal love and missionary commitment. We should keep the fire of God's love alight by upgrading our everyday life by installing healthy habits of communication and collaboration that enhance the joy of our missionary vocation and uninstall habits that erode our apostolic zeal.

17. The election and designation of the participants of the XXVI General Chapter are completed in keeping with the norms of our legislation. There are 78 participants in this Chapter including the six members appointed by the General Government making use of the faculty granted to it by the previous General Chapter. From a worldly perspective, the participants of the Chapter may be perceived as privileged, holier, more gifted or as the best of our Congregation. You know that it is not true. There are many saintly, gifted and committed Claretians who do not form part of the Chapter community constituted by our brothers by virtue of their office, election by the respective Major Organisms, or designation by the General Government. The delegates participate in the Chapter to discern together for the whole Congregation. From a charismatic perspective, it is a responsibility and a trust before God, the Church, and the Congregation rather than a privilege or merit. The participants should therefore assume this responsibility and prepare themselves for the Chapter through prayer, listening, reflection, and study. The Chapter community born in the womb of the Congregation finds its nourishment from the whole Congregation which prays for, prepares, and accompanies this community for a meaningful celebration of the Chapter. I am deeply grateful that the Claretian family, our collaborators, and friends continue to journey with us accompanying the process of the celebration of the Chapter as an ecclesial event in which they too have a role to play.

Convocation of the XXVI General Chapter

18. The purpose of this letter is the convocation of the XXVI General Chapter to be celebrated from 15 August 2021 and foreseen to be completed by 12 September 2021. Hence, in accordance with our legislation (CC 154; Dir 499), I convoke the XXVI ordinary General Chapter of our Congregation which will be held, God willing, at *Centro Ad Gentes* in Nemi, Rome, starting on the 15th August 2021, assuming that the global situation of the movement of people will be favourable to hold the Chapter

as scheduled. All the participants of the XXVI General Chapter are to be present in Rome on 14 August 2021 so that we can start the Chapter in the morning of 15 August. If an eventual postponement of the Chapter is warranted due to the global pandemic situation, it will be informed by the end of April. Anticipated travel arrangements should take this possibility into consideration.

19. With this convocation, every community is asked to begin to recite the Prayer for the Chapter in one of the moments of their common prayer. I also urge each of you to reinforce or re-install (in case you have abandoned it) in your daily routine the practice of spending an hour in personal prayer which our Founder made his own in his life, and our Constitutions recommend us strongly (CC 37). Many unfortunate situations of our brothers compel me to reiterate it here and, I am sure, it will bear great fruits in the Chapter.

The Congregational webpage (www.claret.org/xxvi/) has many materials for you to follow the spirit and the progress of the Chapter. I invite you to benefit from them. We hope to make the Chapter as participative as possible for all of us by availing the means of communication during appropriate moments of the Chapter. As part of our commitment to the care of our planet, we will do away with the use of papers as far as possible and use digital versions during our meeting.

20. In this year dedicated to St. Joseph, one of the patrons of our Congregation, let us commend ourselves and our Chapter to his fatherly care. Let us also learn from the Heart of Mary who joined the community of disciples and dreamed together with them God's dream for humanity which her Son embodied in himself. We also commend our journey to the intercession of St. Anthony Mary Claret and the martyrs of the Claretian family.

Feast of The Presentation of the Lord
World Day for Consecrated Life

Mathew Vattamattam, CMF
General Superior

Prayer for the XXVI General Chapter

We thank you, Father,
because you have called us
to follow your son Jesus Christ
and you send us, like the apostles
and our founder,
Saint Anthony Mary Claret,
to announce the Good News of salvation
throughout the world.

Rooted in You
and in the love of our neighbors,
we ask you to send us your Spirit
so that we may discern your will
for our Congregation
in this twenty-sixth General Chapter.

As sons of the Heart of Mary,
we entrust you with our pilgrimage so that,
our life-mission being transformed,
we may be daring and credible
messengers of the Gospel.
Amen.