

INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF XXVI GENERAL CHAPTER

Dear brothers,

Like the disciples walking to Emmaus with the Lord beside them (cf. Lk 24:13-35), we have been journeying towards the 26th General Chapter. The storm of the global pandemic took all of us by surprise and there were times of darkness, anxiety, and uncertainty which haunted many of us. From the perspective of faith, it is wonderful to walk forward even in darkness knowing that the hand of the Lord holds us, like a loving father who holds his child closely while crossing a dangerous path.

Our Congregation is a gift of the Spirit to the Church to share her mission through the charism of our Founder. Our reason to exist as Claretians can be found only in our fidelity to the Charism and its ongoing updating and renewal in different epochs. Let us situate ourselves in the present moment of our history to assume responsibility for living our charism today knowing that the past generations ran a good race and bequeathed a great charismatic heritage to us. Now it is our turn to live up to what we are called to be at a time of epochal changes and pass on the light of our charism to the coming generations.

Six years ago, in a similar Congregational event, the Lord was asking us to embark upon a journey of transformation to be able to be relevant in our times. We know how the short meeting with Pope Francis and his words, “adore, walk, and accompany”, have impacted the last General Chapter and its deliberations. During these six years we focused on the three processes of transformation: *To be congregation going forth, to be a community of witnesses and messengers, and to be men who adore God in Spirit.*

The General government took the call to transformation seriously and made it the base of its service of animation in the Congregation.

I am grateful to the Lord for the team of General Government who are endowed with different gifts, competencies, and personality traits. We could create a bigger holding space for the differences to enrich our ministry because the gospel values and the good of the Congregation guided the process of discernment rather than the particular interests and likings of any members. To a large extent the wisdom saying, “we must be the change that we want to see happen”, was present in our work ethics.

I am thankful for the accompaniment received from my predecessors especially Mons. Josep Abella and His Eminence Aquilino Bocos. I valued their insights when we had to take difficult decisions. Late Fr. Gustavo Alonso was present in our journey through his mails of wishes on important occasions until he passed away last June.

The free flow of charismatic energy within the Congregation that nurtured our presence in the Peripheries depends very much on the quality of relationships celebrated within the Major Organisms and the Organisms with the General Government, keeping Christ at the center of everything and the tender love of the Heart of Mary qualifying our manner of loving.

Each Claretian is a precious gift to our charismatic community. When I see how parents take care of their babies, I imagine how each of us was cared for by our parents with much sacrifice and they let their sons leave home to be part of our missionary community. They did it because of their love for God and the Church. Our missionary vocation, God’s project for us in the Church within his masterplan for humanity, is the only reason for all the efforts and sacrifices involved in our life

and mission. Our vocation is the source of our joy and meaning of life, communion in community, and life-giving dedication in ministry.

Each of us lives our call experience, fraternal life, and ministry at different levels of maturity and integrity. How proud I am of my brothers when people speak of how grateful they are for their ministry! Our brothers who endure hard realities to be true to their vocation are treasures of our Congregation. On the contrary, it is heart-rending to know of situations when the limitations and sins of our brothers hurt people or cause suffering and division in community. However, our limitations, failures, and sins can become blessings due to the paschal mystery when we are willing to learn from our experiences, and allow the Lord to act in us.

We can be a truly prophetic community in the Church when the values of mutual trust, fraternal dialogue, mutual accompaniment and spiritual discernment become part of our everyday life at all levels. In the Church we have the three principles to guide our common life: synodality, collegiality and hierarchy. Synodality boosts collective ownership of our life and mission and prevents burn out of persons in responsibility; collegiality assures teamwork and prevent abuses and excesses of individuals; hierarchy helps maintain unity and direction, and prevent dispersion and anarchy. The principles of subsidiarity, subordination and collaboration in our life and mission guard the legitimate boundaries of the freedom of action and promote creativity in shared mission. The right balance of these principles is possible only if we are anchored in the Gospel love.

We are said to be at another great turning point in history marked by epochal changes. Ecclesial life and particularly consecrated life is experiencing the heat of this change in many ways. We know how change is disconcerting for many people. One can choose to be blind to the changes around and remain with nostalgic memories of a glorious past or fall into cynical attitudes which breed depression, or welcome the path of necessary renewal and transformation that the Spirit of the Risen Lord evokes in the Church.

Our Congregation is born during an epoch of political crisis and has lived through hard times of persecution and hostility to the Church and her institutions. Our martyrs endured their ordeal by being anchored in God's love and faithful to the Church just as our Founder remained rooted in the Lord and proclaimed the Gospel with audacity. Rootedness and audacity are essential components of our charism and we need both of them all the more today.

In many ways, this General Chapter is different from what we have been used to in the past in the way we have designed it in the Major Superior's meeting in Talagante in January 2020. It takes time and effort to change our mode of thinking and acting. There can be some initial hurdles to get used to electronic and online media avoiding the use of papers. When we share our struggles and walk together to make the path, the very journey will make the pilgrimage a beautiful experience of walking in the Lord.

Dear brothers, you have participated actively in the preparation for this Chapter through the generative conversations that we have had at different levels in spite of the limitations imposed by the pandemic. Honest conversations water the seeds of hope within us and empower us to face hard times by embracing a process of transformation. There are certain symptoms of discomfort in our congregational body that we should not ignore. Statistics show a decline in the number of Claretians after about 20 years of stability. Even after strenuous reorganization, many of our Organisms are not able to continue for long with their important ministries. We still have a number of Claretians who ask for dispensations and secularizations after many years of Claretian life. Long years of economic dependency of Major Organisms for ordinary expenses also raise questions about responsibility and empowerment. We have concerns about how we celebrate unity in diversity of age, of personalities, and of cultures. We wonder what is happening in the young men in the course

of a decade of exclusive dedication to their initial formation in view of their future life and ministry and how every Claretian takes care of the unfolding of his own unique mystery as he grows in age. Above all, the crucial question is how our personal lives, community, and platforms of evangelization make Christ known and radiate the joy of the Gospel.

A General Chapter is an event of congregational Pentecost. It is a special moment of the Holy Spirit and us (Acts 15:28) in a beautiful time of co-creation. It is not a closed event, but a transformative phase in the life of a Congregation. It is helpful to distinguish two layers of changes that we should be open to during the chapter process. One is through strategic planning to address many issues identified as important. For example, we may consider giving more attention and energy to vocation promotion, greater coordination of the apostolate of education, or better schemes for old age, etc. Strategic planning is necessary to address issues, but they do not suffice in times of epochal changes.

A deeper dimension of change is the dynamics of transformation. It is something more than planning for adaptive strategies. How do we become courageous, new, and actualized expression of the joy of the Gospel in our times?

I am convinced that we need to open ourselves to a serious inner work of transformation as individuals and as communities which cannot be replaced by cosmetic changes in external behavior. What does this transformation entail? People can perceive it from the effects it has on persons and their communities. It is catching the fire that burns within without burning us out and spreads that fire wherever we go. It is this transformation that people perceived in the small group of the disciples who went about preaching the Gospel after Pentecost. It is this transformation that people saw in Claret and his companions as they went out preaching missions. For us Claretians, the transformation entails being men on fire with God's love and spreading its flames wherever we go. Nothing would doubt us... Let us visualize this definition of the missionary that Claret gave us coming alive in our personal lives, interpersonal relationships and ministry. When that inner fire is ignited, it will light up our way forward.

Numbers are important. Institutions are necessary. When our numbers dwindle and institutions are to be closed, it is a matter of normal concern. However, I would worry more if the fire of love that burns in our members and in our institutions goes out. Claret wanted us to live and love as Jesus did. The transformative process in individual lives and our community living is a progressive, spiral journey which should align with the journey of our fellow-humans in the one pilgrimage of humanity towards the fulness of life and love. Can we envision it together with Pope Francis who has called us to work for a new world of all brothers and sisters in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*?

I invite you to enrich the Chapter through your active and responsible participation through honest conversations. I wish that you return to your communities after the Chapter with a transformative experience as it happened in the life of the disciples who were on the way to Emmaus.

Dear brothers, let us open ourselves to the outpouring of the Spirit into our hearts and into the heart of our Chapter community. The rest is the surprises of the Spirit of the Risen Lord.

I declare the XXVI General Chapter open.

Fr. Mathew Vattamattam CMF
Superior General
Nemi, August 15, 2021

