

Rome, 25 December 2015

Beloved Confreres,
Dear Associate Members,
Dear Staff Members and Volunteers,

This year, which we will soon bring to a close, was quite a special year for the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity. The Holy Year of Mercy, which was celebrated in the Church, was also a terrific opportunity as a congregation, from the uniqueness of our charism, to reflect on the place of mercy in our lives and our work, and especially to ascertain whether this mercy, in both of its dimensions, viz. as compassion and forgiveness, adds colour to our actions in a meaningful way. Although the Holy Year of Mercy is now closed, we, as Brothers of Charity, are still called to have mercy resonate in our daily lives. And this will manifest itself in the way we engage with our patients and students, how we allow ourselves to be moved by the degrading living conditions of those having great difficulty to survive in this society, how we, as a living and working community, give forgiveness a place of honour in the way that we interact with each other. If mercy is another word for charity, we could call our community ‘Brothers of Mercy’, or at least give mercy a permanent place of honour in our lives.

Every year, Christmastime calls us to remember that wondrous event of the Incarnation. “God became man that man might become God,” as a Doctor of the Church said. Indeed, the Incarnation is an important turning point in our history as human beings. Through the Incarnation of God, our human nature was made divine, was upgraded so to speak. Man is so important to God that He deigned to descend into human nature, and thus lift up human nature. Let descending and lifting up also be our movements toward the neighbour. That is the continuation of the Incarnation. Brothers of Charity and all those who work with us are called upon to have a particular sensitivity for those affected in their human dignity. We need to descend as it were to look these people in the eye so to lift them up and restore their dignity. With great gratitude, I think back to those many times I witnessed the Incarnation over the past year: how people’s human dignity is respected and restored by our very real commitment. Thank you, brothers, associate members, staff members, volunteers, for your contribution to and restoration of the human dignity of so many people who are struggling to survive in today’s society. It happens in the classroom when we have a special concern for the student who is struggling to follow, or on the ward when we make time to allow a patient to have some breathing space. It also happens when we, as those responsible, keep the person in mind in our activities and our decision-making, and beware not to become a slave to bureaucracy or commercialization. It also happens when we take a walk and do not close our eyes and ears to those who reach out their hand, asking for our help. And it can also happen when we, as a community, ask what we can do extra for the poor in our local neighbourhood. Let us fully be ‘Hospital Brothers of Saint Vincent’, worthy of the name we received from our beloved Founder Peter Joseph Triest.

Our original name can have some extra attention in the next year, because in 2017 it has been precisely 400 years since Saint Vincent de Paul gave shape to the charism of charity in a very concrete manner. His care for the spiritually and materially poor became the keynote of his life. It is a call to all of us to face these two aspects of poverty in our world: spiritual and material poverty. For our Founder, who was very meaningfully called the Belgian Vincent de Paul, these two forms of poverty were never separated. “Ensuring the spiritual and physical welfare of these children and sick people, for the good of their souls and their bodies,” was a well-known expression of our Founder. This does not tolerate heavy theoretical or theological considerations, but a fundamental attitude and concrete action. That is part of our absolute respect for the inviolability of all life, which today is sometimes put at risk, and our willingness to spare no effort to be near to our neighbour on our path in his physical and spiritual need. “You never shun them,” our Rule of Life says, and that should be our concrete implementation of the Vincentian spirituality which we share as a congregation. We can never go far enough in our care for others. Again, we can repeat a word from our founder here: “Love gives us the power nature cannot provide.” It is Vincent’s “Davantage!”, always more, when it comes to our commitment to the neighbour in need.

Beloved Confreres, dear Associate Members, Staff Members, and Volunteers, it is my sincere wish that mercy, which was the keynote of the year that is drawing to a close, may remain the keynote in our life and work every day. It is also my wish that the concern for the respect and the restoration of human dignity would remain a priority in our concrete commitment to our neighbours. And it is my hope that, through the boundless attention to the spiritual and physical welfare of others, we may make a small contribution to a better world, which we must not push aside as a utopia. It is with a particularly grateful heart that I send you my best wishes for a Merry Christmas and a blessed New Year, grateful for what you mean to the Congregation as one big family of charity. And it is my hope that, in it, you may also find a lot of support, encouragement, and joy.

Fraternally yours in the Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bro. René Stockman". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Bro. René Stockman,
Superior General
Brothers of Charity