



FRATELLI DELLA CARITÀ . BROTHERS OF CHARITY . BROEDERS VAN LIEFDE . FRÈRES DE LA CHARITÉ



*"Be radical in prophecy
in the mission of charity"*

Even after 210 years, we, as Brothers of Charity, remain dynamically faithful to our charism. The General Chapter of 2018 wants to remind us of this as well as encourage us. May 2018 be a blessed year for all who share a bond with us!

The love of God has descended upon us!
May He enlighten you every day of the new year
and bring you true joy.

Br. René Stockman
Superiore generale

Fratelli della Carità | Brothers of Charity
Broeders van Liefde | Frères de la Charité

Rome, 25 December 2017

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

May I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a blessed 2018. This time of year is a good opportunity to reflect on Christmas and ask ourselves what it means for us today. It would be a pity that, in the bustle of the holidays, we ignore the essence of this celebration and let ourselves be swept away with commercialization, which has a firm grip on Christmas.

First of all, we should dare to ask ourselves what is on our mind when we wish each other a Merry Christmas. On 25 December, as Christians, we commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ, who thoroughly changed our human condition with his Incarnation. This is the reason we started a new era, starting from the birth of Christ, realizing that humanity took a new start, as it were. While the origin of man and the whole of Creation are hidden in the mists of time, this is not the case with the re-creation of man, for that is what we call the Incarnation. God himself assumed the human condition and deified our human nature. That is why we may now call ourselves children of God. Church Father Athanasius put it very powerfully when he said: "God became man that man might become God." It is a new impetus for our being human. While, in the Creation, the image of God was placed inside of us, God himself enters our being to remain there in the Incarnation. Man is so

valuable in the eyes of God that God himself became man. The immediate result is that we should see and respect God's presence in man, in every man. It makes our respect for every human being absolute and brings it to a divine level, for to love man is to love God, but to harm man is to harm God in man! Father Triest, our beloved Founder, understood this very well when, in the days after Christmas in 1807, he started a small group of young men, whom he called the Hospital Brothers of Saint Vincent, and sent them to the Bijloke in Ghent to look after the elderly who were deprived of all care. Even in their elderly neighbour, our first brothers had to meet God himself and love God in them. To meet and to love God in the neighbour was a recurrent theme for our Founder. "It is an honourable vocation to nurse and to serve the sick. As you fulfil that service, you become a helper and a servant of God's providence regarding the sick. You must also realize that it is Jesus Christ himself whom you are serving when you serve the sick. It is He who benefits from your kindness, from your help. It is His limbs that you nurse with your hands" (text from 1833).

When we consider our ministry within the Congregation today, this aspect will always have to be there as an essential element of this ministry. Our commitment to the neighbour becomes 'charity' when we recognize, see, meet, and love Jesus himself in the person we serve and when we allow ourselves to be guided by the concrete love of man in this ministry. Without this loving basic attitude and recognizing and loving the incarnate God in the neighbour, our ministry threatens to deteriorate to mere philanthropy. Christmas is therefore an ideal time to evaluate our ministry and to ask ourselves in all honesty what the place of love is and whether we meet and love Jesus in those we serve.

Christmas brings us to another reflection. Mankind, every single person, is looking for meaning in his or her life. We, brothers, associate members, staff members, and volunteers, search for meaning as well, and receive meaning in our Christian spirituality. For us, Christ gives us and Christ is the meaning of our lives, He is the way to the full life with God, whom we call Father. No, our spirituality that we experience is not some vague search for something that transcends us, but a clear way to a living encounter with God, and this through Jesus who is the only way to the Father. After all, He said: "I am the Way; I am Truth and Life" (Jn 14:6). He called himself the gate in his story of the shepherd who leads his flock to good pasture. "I am the gate of the sheepfold. Anyone who enters through me will be safe. Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate is a thief" (Jn 10:1,7-9). And when Philip asks Jesus to show him the Father, He answers in all clarity: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). We must testify to this search for God with Jesus in the world, in our apostolate, by word and deed. In a world that suffers from an eclipse of God and where the name of Jesus is barely spoken, we must have the courage to bear witness to Jesus being the unique way in the search for meaning in life. No, there is no need for us to turn to Eastern mysticism or all sorts of mindfulness-type practices. When we are full of Jesus Christ, and come to the Father through Him, and receive the full meaning of life there, we cannot keep silent about Him, all of our words and actions will testify to Him. Once again, we are invited to take a very specific look at our ministry, at the education we provide in our schools. Is the living person of Jesus Christ the driving force of our ministry and of our education, and is He the one we offer as a Guide in life? Is Jesus the pre-eminent reference in our ministry and in our education, and are we bold enough to bring the full message of the Gospel, of His Word? If we want to further develop and expand our facilities and our schools based on a Christian heritage, even in a secularized environment, this cannot be based solely on a historical past, nor should we allow ourselves to be tempted to talk about the Christian faith indirectly or in veiled terms. With courage and in a creative and joyful way, we need to let Jesus be present and let his Word ring fully. Once again, we may quote our Founder, who took it as his special mission to proclaim the Word of God in all clarity, even during the time when he was forced to live in hiding. "If I were to keep silent or if a single soul were to be lost through lack of

instruction, I too would be lost. It is my duty to teach you, to encourage you, and to bring you back from your wanderings. Woe to me and woe to you if I do not proclaim to you the word of God or if I did it only rarely. Oh, my God, grant to my voice the strength to touch their hearts" (spoken in Ronse in 1802, when he was allowed to preach in public for the first time).

However, it is not just by word that we should bring Jesus' message. First and foremost, it is by our living of the Good News. Are we living witnesses of a life that finds its fulfilment in God and God alone? Is our life infectious to others? Father Triest made a powerful statement about this, as well: "You resemble God through your love and charity. All the poor people whom you help bless you, and because you recognise in them the person of Jesus Christ suffering, they recognise in you the person of Jesus Christ, the Saviour and Consoler. You cannot imitate Jesus Christ more perfectly than by coming to their aid and giving them our love, his love" (Letter to the Sisters of Charity, 1827).

Beloved Confreres, dear Associate Members, Staff Members, and Volunteers, 2018 is the year of the General Chapter, a perfect moment to contemplate our vocation and mission today as a congregation. For the theme, we chose: "Be radical in prophecy as consecrated men in the mission of charity". I think that the reflection we have just made fits very well with the Chapter's theme. It is an impelling call to live and experience our charism as Brothers of Charity radically and prophetically, in the service of charity. We are prophets only when we are guided by the Lord. He is the One who calls us, who sends us, and who gives us the power to live, experience, and proclaim His Word. We therefore pray during this Christmastime that, with His mercy, we are able to prepare well for this important moment that a chapter really is in the history of the Congregation.

To you all and to all who are dear to you, a Merry Christmas and a blessed 2018.

Fraternally yours in the Lord,



Bro. René Stockman
Superior General
Brothers of Charity