

GENERAL CHAPTER 2018 BROTHERS OF CHARITY OPENING SPEECH

Beloved Confreres Capitulants,

“Be radical in prophecy as consecrated men in the mission of charity.” With this theme, the 23rd General Chapter of the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity was convened. With this call, we would like to welcome you all to our chapter.

A chapter is a unique moment in the life of a religious congregation. It is not just a general meeting like other associations have, where it is legally established that they hold at least one general meeting of members every year.

Perhaps the three most important moments of a chapter are comparable to an association’s general meeting: looking back and making an assessment, there is an election of who will carry on leading the association, and a strategy for the future is outlined. But this is where the comparison ends.

For the main difference with a general meeting is the openness and the working of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who should guide, steer, and inspire a chapter. That is why we specifically prayed for the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharistic celebration this morning. And for several months now, the brothers all over the world have been saying the prayer for the success of the General Chapter, which invokes the Holy Trinity in a very special way: the Father, to send us out into the world as prophets; the Son, to allow his Word to be the source of our life; and the Holy Spirit, to inspire us to live and experience our charism of charity in a radical way.

When we take a look at the photo gallery in the stairwell and see the photos of the previous chapters, we will find that the new photograph that will be taken and added to the gallery will look different from the previous ones. Indeed, a change has taken place, leaving a special mark on the life of the congregation. The internationalization of the congregation was a growing phenomenon before, but now it has made a complete breakthrough. It is in this new state of affairs that we hold our chapter. In the words of Pope Francis: with great gratitude for the past, with a great openness to the present, and with a hopeful look to the future which presents itself as new.

Indeed, as a congregation, we must remain grateful for everything our brothers have achieved over the past 211 years. We need to cherish our history, starting with our beloved Founder and very specifically our first brothers who embarked upon this adventure of charity with an almost blind faith. The Holy Spirit offered us a special charism through our Founder, the Servant of God, Peter Joseph Triest. We are fortunate to have had a founder who left us a great deal in terms of writings and deeds that have more than just historical value. He gave the congregation a direction that we must faithfully preserve, faithfully in an active and creative way. During the thirty years that he lived and worked in



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Ghent, the period that our congregation was founded and was given its original form, he showed us how to be fundamentally open to the many requests that we receive and how to develop our lives as consecrated men. Father Triest translated Saint Benedict's *ora et labora* in a special way based on his Vincentian sensitivity, and by doing so he redefined contemplative life in the world for both his sisters and his brothers. How fascinating it is to browse the history of the congregation and see how the brothers continued this dynamic of openness to reality after our founder. They have worked very hard to give shape to the charism of charity in new forms and in ever-changing situations. Granted, it was always in line with the initial period; the work of service in the education of working-class children with a specific focus on the poorest of the poor, in the care for people with mental illness, and in the support of people with disabilities. Over time, these three apostolic fields remained the preferred areas where our charism of charity could take shape and continue to take shape. The care for young people, who barely have access to education due to all kinds of circumstances, the care for people with mental illness, who are still not accepted by society due to stigmatization and marginalization, and the support of people with disabilities who would not get any opportunities at all in society without our professional help, will remain areas to which we want to remain faithful as a congregation because in so many places these needs are still very much present. That continues to be our mission of charity, without cutting ourselves off from the new needs that we face and to which we try to give positive responses with the capabilities that we have at our disposal.

Open to the present, as consecrated men. It is striking how the Church is calling us today to take our vocation as consecrated men very seriously. Perhaps, in the past, we have looked too much and too exclusively at what we did, and too little was said about who we are. In a recent meeting with several religious, Pope Francis spoke about the three 'Ps' of religious life: prayer, poverty, and patience. I would like to dwell briefly on these three 'Ps' of consecrated life with the added request that we make them heard in our chapter.

The first 'P' is **prayer**. Prayer, says Pope Francis, is always returning to the first calling, it is a return to the One who called us to be close to Him. Returning to Him, to He Who looked into our eyes and told us: "Come. Leave everything and come." We all left behind a great deal: our families, our careers, our individual future plans. We have placed ourselves in the project of the Lord. What is the place of prayer in our lives? Is it our life's bearing force, the source of our spiritual life? We rightly pay a great deal of attention to this aspect of our lives in the formation of our young people, based on the firm conviction that prayer is the only source where our lives as consecrated men can grow. The Pope is very clear here. "Without prayer, we would not be able to be good consecrated persons. We would perhaps be good people, Christians, Catholics engaged in many works of the Church, but the consecration has to be renewed continually, in prayer." It is striking that he takes Mother Teresa as an example, as her charism very closely resembles ours. "Mother Teresa even went 'in search of problems', because she was a machine for searching for problems because she went here and there... But the two hours of prayer in front of the Most Holy Sacrament, no-one could take away from her," the Pope added. We must dare to ask ourselves about our prayer life and about how we can pay more attention to this vital part of our consecrated life as a congregation.



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The second 'P' is **poverty**. The Pope quotes his own founder, Saint Ignatius, who said: "Poverty is the mother, the perimeter wall of consecrated life." Without poverty, there is no fruitfulness in consecrated life. And poverty defends us from the spirit of worldliness, certainly. The little temptations against poverty are wounds to our membership of the

body of consecrated life. Without poverty, we will never be able to discern well what is happening in the world. “Leave everything, go to the poor,” said the Lord to that young man. And all of us are that young man. According to the Pope, there are three dangers that destroy consecrated life and make us slip unnoticed into a religious worldliness.

The first danger is attachment to money and wealth. It is being overly concerned to survive, to build up reserves. Will this be the first concern of our consecrated life? Is there any room for Providence still? The Pope invites us to look into our own hearts, into the heart of our communities, and into the heart of the whole Congregation. Incidentally, we know that this is a very relevant and delicate issue in our congregation from which we should not shy away.

The second danger is vanity, the Pope says. What are we really doing as a congregation? Is it about power, about having large structures, or about really serving the poor? Every brother, every community, every region, every province, and the entire congregation should indeed wonder whether we are too preoccupied with structures, with which we can do something in the world, even though we do not need that many structures to really serve the poor. Is our first concern as brothers how we can serve the poor, the actual poor people in our close environment? Above all, it is about that spirit of service.

The third danger, according to the Pope, is that of arrogance, of pride. Here, we are invited to look into our own hearts and ask ourselves whether we really have the disposition of Jesus inside of us, the disposition of self-denial, of kenosis. “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” Self-denial is the only remedy against the greatest of all vices, pride. And pride breeds jealousy, envy, and arrogance. Pride is the death of every community.

Finally, the third ‘P’ is **patience**. We must learn to be patient as consecrated men and as a congregation. We all know that this is not an easy virtue, and that it is particularly hard to exercise patience these days when everything goes so fast.

The Pope refers to Jesus who had great patience in proclaiming his message. He was very patient with his Apostles. He patiently accepted his suffering. We too must be patient with each other. Patience in finding common solutions. Patience with brothers who are struggling or who are making things difficult. Patience if vocations remain forthcoming. Let us use the example of Abraham who was old and still did not have offspring. The Lord told him: “Be patient. You will have a son.” Therefore, we should not choose an ‘ars moriendi’ too quickly, based on the conviction that there will not be any vocations anyway. The Pope gives us the telling example of two congregations that were in the same situation, but where one set out on the path of the ‘ars moriendi’, while the other retained the openness to new life. The second indeed survived. We also need patience when we are overwhelmed by all sorts of problems, continue to be patiently and faithfully open to the miracle of Providence. Let us also be patient during this chapter, if things do not go as quickly as we would wanted them to.

Let us look to the future starting from this consideration that Pope Francis presented to us, and let us do so with hope. Let it remain the keynote of our lives, of our life as consecrated men, of our life as a congregation, and thus of this chapter. That is why we must not close our eyes to reality, to the problems, and we are not asked to be artificially optimistic. However, we must not let ourselves spiral into negativity, but on the contrary we must continue to hope, because that is a divine virtue in addition to faith and love. The congregation is more than a human enterprise, it is a gathering around the Lord. He needs to be our orientation, in difficult times, as well. That is why we must continue to believe in the miracle and pray for it. It is a miracle how the congregation arose, from



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nothing, as it were. It is a miracle how the congregation could grow ever further, in very difficult and humanly hopeless situations at times. It will continue to be a miracle to remain radical as a congregation in the future, as consecrated men in the mission of charity.

Beloved Confreres, let us start this chapter in this spirit and trustingly place it in the hands of God. And we repeat what we have been praying over the past few months: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless this chapter, that it may be a time of grace, a time of renewal, a blessed time for all.

We hereby declare the 23rd General Chapter of the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity open.

Rome, 2 July 2018

Bro. René Stockman
Superior General



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