

BROTHERS OF CHARITY



R.S. 101

Rome, 29 November 2020

Beloved Confreres,
Dear Associate Members,

For us believers, the experience of the liturgical year offers a unique opportunity to give church celebrations a meaningful place in our lives. They are not just historical celebrations, but like the entire Gospel and the life of Jesus Christ himself, they remain invitations to bring them up to date for our time and for the places where we live and work.

The season of Advent, for example, which we are entering now, is an ideal moment to look back and ahead at the same time. We reflect on the civil year that is coming to a close and on the new liturgical year that is about to begin.

The theme of our General Chapter of 2018 remains more than impelling in many respects. “Be radical in prophecy as consecrated men in the mission of charity.” At the end of 2020, we have to ask ourselves whether we have indeed been sufficiently radical in our prophetic task as Brothers of Charity and specifically in our mission of charity.

However, before we go into that, we should take a moment to look at the extraordinary situation in which we found and still find ourselves and with which the year 2020 will be remembered in history: a global shock caused by the Covid-19 pandemic that has thoroughly disrupted all plans. People in the care sector have faced, and continue to face, a more than serious challenge and therefore deserve our full appreciation for their tireless efforts. But our thoughts are also with all those who were infected, who fell gravely ill, and who even died, often in utter loneliness in a hospital surrounded by medical devices. Compulsory isolation continues to put a heavy strain on the psychological experience of many, especially the elderly, people with mental illness, and people with disabilities. And, of course, we must not forget the economic and financial impact that this has had on many people. Teachers were asked to experiment with new forms of education and we cannot deny that, for many young people, the remote education that was provided was not always conducive to their development. One of the major difficulties continues to be the lack of social contact that we were used to and which is now severely restricted. Working from home is compulsory and the Skype and Zoom meetings that replaced the physical meetings may well be efficient, but somehow we are still missing actual, real-life contact. In some places, all religious services were banned, so that people

were deprived of the sacraments when they needed additional spiritual support.

Looking back at the year that is coming to a close cannot be done without putting it in the context of this global pandemic that we have all faced and continue to face in one way or another. Many of the plans we had had to be put on hold, and at the same time we were suddenly faced with totally unexpected challenges and new questions. Nevertheless, we must dare to ask ourselves whether, despite and also during these special times, we have sufficiently made God's love shine through in our closest environment through our mission of charity. Have we, even more than before, allowed ourselves to be called upon to show greater solidarity with those who are in need and who are counting on our charity? There was no part of the Congregation that was not affected by the pandemic. Did we support each other enough in this and really manifest ourselves as a congregation, or did we leave too much to an 'every man for himself' mentality? Certain regions were hit even worse by floods and devastating typhoons. Here, I would particularly like to mention our group of 'Friends of the Brothers of Charity' from Belgium who were immediately willing to help financially. It is a great pleasure to experience this solidarity from third parties outside the Congregation.

We have all experienced this time of uncertainty, of greater isolation, of not being able to continue our planned activities in our own personal way. It was a time of greater depth, of growing awareness that we are not so powerful after all, in which our pride was dented, but at the same time of greater trust in God's grace and Providence. Did we use more time for contemplation, for prayer, yes, to open ourselves even more to God's love, to let

ourselves be shined upon even more by God's love, and gradually to allow the words of Jesus to enrich us that he spoke as a storm came up on the lake: "Do not be afraid, O you of little faith." And have we shared this growing confidence in God and his Providence with others: our confreres, our associate members, our staff members and co-workers, those we serve, and those we meet? Have we been able to invest more in our community life and, in so doing, have we perhaps rediscovered the great value of being able to live together as brothers? In Rome, this was one of the great positive experiences during the almost three months of lockdown in which we lived together with 25 brothers and priests in a truly innovative way and also developed joint activities that were previously unthinkable. Fortunately, we were able to continue our joint liturgical celebrations which have helped us tremendously. Let us use this season of Advent that has been given to us to face up to these questions and respond honestly to them.

However, we also look ahead, and Advent prepares us for the greatest event in the history of mankind: the incarnation of God himself, which radically changed the face of the earth and gave man a divine status. How can we bring this totally renewing incarnation into our lives, into our community, into the whole Congregation, and thereby really breathe new life into the Congregation and through it into the world?

It is a moment when we are invited to experience our charism as Brothers of Charity in an even more powerful and intense way, all without compromise. "Be radical in prophecy" was the first part of our last chapter's theme. Let us fully live up to this in the new year. The world has no use for hangers-on, but expects people who speak clear language and take actions that inspire, and, perhaps, in

certain circumstances, also create opposition. That is the fate of prophets, however. The words of the recently beatified 15-year-old Carlo Acutis are very dear to me in this regard: “Everyone is born as an original, but many people end up dying as photocopies.” Our charism of charity gives us the opportunity to find original answers to the many challenges we face today and we must not shy away from these answers because of potential opposition. Our charism will continue to be about defending and protecting the human dignity of the most vulnerable in society. We must continue to contribute to the advancement of their ‘incarnation’. Our mission will continue to be to ‘break chains’ with people who are victims of discrimination, of marginalization because of extreme poverty, disease, disability, vulnerability. “You never shun them,” to quote a sentence from our Rule of Life.

The financial difficulties we are facing both externally and internally during these unusual times should prompt us to show even greater solidarity. Let us shoulder our joint responsibility for the further growth and expansion of the entire Congregation, and let us share it with those who have to make do with far less. Let it be our strength as an international congregation and let any exaggerated concern for self-preservation be subordinated to a justified concern for the life of the entire Congregation. Overcaring for the financial can be a dangerous trap presented to us by evil so that we overlook what is essential, which is the primary concern for our religious and spiritual life. Let us not forget the radical words of Jesus: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Lk 16:13). People who are exclusively concerned with money very quickly lose sight of God. Let us also be thankful that, as a congregation, we are blessed with new vocations, and let us take good care of them so that they are well prepared, both spiritually and

professionally, to further the mission of charity in an authentic way. The future is in their hands, and we are now jointly responsible for it.

Our mission of charity must continue to be embodied by human closeness. Charity cannot be arranged but it needs structures and forms of organization in which it can be developed. Any form of management and working with structures must therefore always have in mind that we can create a better space for charity to grow and flourish. However, those who are mainly concerned with administration and management still need to keep an eye on the fact that they themselves also stay in actual contact with the sick, with the poor, with people in need. We always need to know whose service we are in! I am reminded of Saint Vincent, our patron saint, who would invite a poor person to join him for lunch every day as a reminder that these were the people for whom he worked very hard for the rest of the day.

So let it be Christmas every day of 2021, where we allow ourselves to be seized by the incarnation of God and where we continue God's incarnation ourselves in the way that we give Jesus a place in our lives, yes, the place of honour, and that we bring Jesus into the world, to the people for whom we care, who we support, and with whom we set out. We can do this through a more intense prayer life in which we strengthen our bond with Jesus. We can do this by living together with each other more closely and allowing fraternal love to grow. And we can do this through an even greater consideration, respect, and love for those we serve by meeting Jesus in them. Let us quote our beloved Founder Father Triest who said: "We are to see, meet, and love Jesus himself in those we care for, and at the same time they should see and meet Jesus in us and that through our love for them."

Beloved Confreres, dear Associate Members, I sincerely wish you a holy season of Advent in preparation for Christmas and a happy continuation of the Christmas joy that brought us the incarnation, and this throughout the new year 2021.

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 that extends to the right.

Bro. René Stockman
Superior General
Brothers of Charity