



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

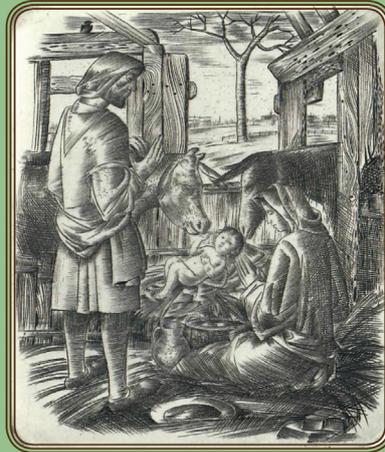
*Che l'evento natalizio ci dia luce
per far risplendere l'amore di Dio
attraverso la nostra missione di carità
per tutto il nuovo anno*

*May the event of Christmas bring us light
to let God's love shine
through our mission of charity
throughout the New Year*

*Moge het gebeuren van Kerstmis ons licht geven
om heel het nieuwe jaar
Gods liefde te laten schijnen
doorheen onze missie van de caritas*

*Puisse l'événement de la Nativité nous éclairer
pour que l'amour de Dieu brille
à travers notre mission de la charité
tout au long de la nouvelle année*

Fratelli della Carità
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I Fratelli della Carità vi augurano
un Buon Natale e un anno 2021 benedetto

The Brothers of Charity wish you
a blessed Christmas and a happy 2021

De Broeders van Liefde wensen U
een zalig Kerstmis en een gezegend 2021

Les Frères de la Charité vous souhaitent
un Joyeux Noël et une Bonne Année 2021

Bro. René Stockman
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Rome, 1 January 2021

Beloved Confreres,
Dear Associate Members,

It has been repeated ad nauseam over the last few days that 2020 was a disastrous year and that we can only hope that things will improve in 2021. We all know exactly to what we are referring, and we do not want to revisit it. Others have already amply done so.

The compulsory working from home, the restrictions imposed on us up to and including a quasi house arrest, have not allowed us to visit the different parts of the Congregation in the past year and to keep our finger on the pulse of the health of the Congregation. We had to do so through reports, Zoom sessions, and e-mail messages. Like many people, we missed having direct contact, pleasant meetings with confreres, and visits to those we serve as a congregation.

At the same time, it became a more intense life in our own communities and we got extra time to reflect more deeply on our identity as a congregation, our charism, and our mission. It was also a time of additional study, reading, meditation, and prayer. It was as though we were given an opportunity to see from a distance and from the outside what we were used to experiencing very closely and from the inside. We had a chance to sort it all out, to evaluate, and even to examine our conscience. Perhaps we should be grateful for the space that we were given over the past year, against our will, and now try to reap

the benefits. For, in a way, this time was useless, but it was certainly not meaningless. In fact, it reminded me of our beloved Founder who had to live in hiding in Ronse for five years, and in hindsight it was perhaps the most fruitful time of his life, a time when good seed was planted in the soil that yielded much fruit later on, fruits of pure, purified charity as a reflection of the love of God that had deepened him so much.

I read the following in a book by Jozef De Kesel, now Cardinal and Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, admittedly written almost thirty years ago, which attempts to provide an analysis of the Church today, an analysis which has certainly proved its validity in the following years: *“Church is mission: its reason for existence. It is proclamation. In all of its actions, in both word and deed, it is a sign of God’s humanity and of his grace, which he revealed to all and to all of creation, once and for all, and sealed in Christ Jesus. The church is a sacrament of salvation for the world, a sign of God’s deliverance. It is ‘a city set on a mountain’ (Mt 5:14) and ‘a lamp set on a lampstand’ (Mt 5:15), as well as ‘a signal for the nations’ (Is 11:10). It is not reclusive, withdrawn, as if in a ghetto. Even where it remains silent or where it is being silenced, it proclaims the gospel of God’s grace by the very fact that it exists. A church that shuts itself off and closes in on itself loses its own substance. A church that no longer missionizes, no longer shines outwards, and no longer attracts new members is a church that is withering on the inside and dying in the long run. So, there can be no doubt: the Church will always proclaim, will always missionize. The only observation we would like to make is this: it will not always be able to proclaim in the same circumstances. These circumstances are historical and therefore variable. ... The Church must be present in the centre of our world as a sign, as a sacrament. But it does not coincide with this world. There is a boundary between it and the world that we must respect. In the third Eucharistic prayer, the Church is said to be in exile for as long as the world lasts. It always lives in the diaspora, scattered. ... In this sense, the Church exists in the centre of this world, with heart and soul, in solidarity with the people. And yet: it is not at home, it is in exile. There is a profound union between it and the world, but also a boundary. ... It is of the utmost importance that the Church really matters in society. It needs to be a sign and an instrument of God’s grace, a messenger of the gospel of God’s humanity. It is therefore first and foremost by presenting itself as a church and as a Christian community in society that it fulfils its missionary task” (Jef De Kesel, *Omwille van zijn Naam*).*

This profound reflection on the Church as a whole can also be transposed to our congregation. Can we say the same about our congregation? That it is and remains mission in the different circumstances and cultures in which it finds itself? It fits wonderfully well with the theme we want to use this year for our animation, which is the third part of the theme of the past General Chapter: “In the mission of charity”.

In the text, Cardinal De Kesel starts from an important premise: that we are all missionaries in the place and in the circumstances where we live, where we work, where we live and grow our vocation as Brothers of Charity. This was already clearly formulated in the dogmatic constitution *Perfectae Caritatis*: *“The missionary spirit must under all circumstances be preserved in religious communities. It should be adapted, accordingly, as the nature of each community permits, to modern conditions so that the preaching of the Gospel may be carried out more effectively in every nation”* (No. 20). The questions we can ask ourselves right away are as follows: What is our congregation doing to respond to the call to make the name of the Lord and his message known to all children of men to the

very ends of the earth? Are we, as baptized people, fully aware of our missionary duty, and of the fact that we cannot leave this to those who go abroad for it? Let us not be too discouraged and paralysed by all sorts of views imposed on us by a highly secularized environment or by dealing with a missionary past, so to speak, and therefore prefer to crawl safely into our shells?

These questions raise a number of reservations that may encourage us to clarify the missionary dimension of our lives, not to be paralysed but, on the contrary, to strengthen it and to live our mission with greater conviction and joy. I would like to distinguish four pathways.

First of all, one missionizes by what one is, individually and in community, before evangelizing by what one does or says. Seneca said that we do a lot if we do nothing more than set an example. For our Founder, too, setting an example was the first element of his mission. The bond between mission and inner life of the Christian community is expressed very strongly in the Gospel of John, where it says: *“This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (Jn 13:35). Returning to *Perfectae Caritatis*, community life is described after the model and example of the early Church, *“where the body of believers was united in heart and soul”* (No. 15). We should honestly ask ourselves whether our mutual love, which we, as members of a community, have for each other is of such quality that it naturally refers to the supernatural fountain from which it springs and arouses the thirst of others to drink from the same water. Or should we confess, on the other hand, that our religious communities have aligned their organization and interactions with those of the surrounding world, allowing ourselves to be seized by discord, jealousy, rivalry, greed, thirst for domination, and the desire for power? No, when that becomes the keynote of our community life, it will not shine brightly throughout the environment, but rather give a counter testimony of what real Christian life is. No mission can come from such a community. If, however, we are faithful to our name and give love every chance to animate our community, then it will shine in the world as a reflection of the divine love that is its true foundation.

A second element that we want to introduce is the vertical dimension of our lives, which the world so desperately needs, and which we must not put under a bushel. Let us read the words of *Lumen Gentium* in which it says: *“Religious should carefully keep before their minds the fact that the Church presents Christ to believers and non-believers alike in a striking manner daily through them. The Church thus portrays Christ in contemplation on the mountain, in His proclamation of the kingdom of God to the multitudes, in His healing of the sick and maimed, in His work of converting sinners to a better life, in His solicitude for youth and His goodness to all men, always obedient to the will of the Father who sent Him”* (No. 46). It is therefore vital that we, as religious, remain faithful to our prayer life, to our sacramental life, both for our own spiritual equilibrium and health and for the apostolic fruitfulness which we thereby bring to our surroundings. In many places, we are valued for our social commitment, but do we also provide spiritual nourishment through our inspiring prayer lives to the people we live and work with? From a broader perspective, why is it that in so many places sects are developing rapidly, while apparently the necessary spiritual oxygen is no longer found in the Christian churches? In places where our direct charitable activities have been reduced to a minimum due to the old age of the members, it must remain our missionary task to make God’s love shine through our prayer. No matter how small our community has become, let us keep that fire burning

in which the presence of God can be experienced and where others can come to warm themselves by it.

A third element, of course, is our charitable commitment, which is at the heart of our charism and which stems from our relationship with God who is love. Are we sufficiently open to what is happening in the world, do we allow ourselves to be confronted with the needs, and do we ask ourselves, individually and in community, what our answer can be as Brothers of Charity, in line with our charism? Are our communities hotbeds of dynamism where the concern for our suffering neighbour is constantly present and put into action, thereby bringing a salutary infection, so to speak, to our environment, which feels more encouraged to become compassionate neighbours to those who are suffering? Are we doing what we can to support and promote the cause of justice, peace, and love with all our might? Are we prepared to use our resources to do this, out of a well-understood solidarity, in order to carry out this mission and make it possible throughout the world, knowing that by doing so we store up treasures in heaven where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal (cf. Mt 6:19-20)? Or are we mainly concerned about our own survival and do we shrug our shoulders when the word 'Providence' comes up? We are not called upon to erase the last trace of human suffering on this earth. But we are expected to alleviate as much suffering, remedy as much injustice, dry as many tears as we possibly can.

Do we still dare to take actual risks, are we prepared to head to the periphery, to leave our safe zones, to be there where people are suffering, and to offer them consolation? Are we prepared to go against the tide when necessary from the prophetic dimension of our religious life, or are we going to get caught up in trends that nip the message of the Gospel in the bud? *Caritas Christi urget nos* is the subtitle of this third theme of the last General Chapter. If we really allow ourselves to be seized by the love of Christ, we will be able to handle this and dare to continue to shine in charity.

The fourth and final element is the question of our effective proclamation. Some will instantly respond that this is not our mission as Brothers of Charity after all, and that, above all, the first part of the answer that Jesus gives to the disciples of John with regard to his mission should be considered our mission. *"The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them"* (Lk 7:22). Let us consider *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, in which Pope Paul VI is in favour of never dissociating the works of Christian charity from a clear and unambiguous proclamation of the Good News (No. 22). The mission of the Church, and that of the Congregation, must not be reduced exclusively to works of humanity. With Jesus, it forms one whole in his mission; this must also be the case with us. Of course, *"a Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak"* (Pope Benedict XVI, in *Deus Caritas Est*, No. 31). At the same time, our words need to be in line with our own example and our testimony in service. Father Triest, in his mission, put proclamation after his own example and let it culminate in service. *"Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses"*, to quote Pope Paul VI again.

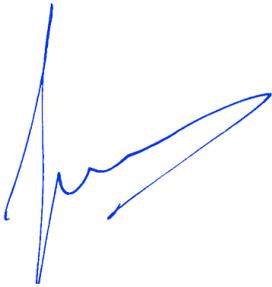
At the beginning of this new year, from the perhaps somewhat restrained energy that we have had to save over the past year, let us set out with enthusiasm and conviction on these four pathways in which we can make our mission as Brothers of Charity shine

in a world that really needs it: from our own example as brothers living in a community, from our praying presence in the world, with a charity that always manifests itself in new forms, and without hesitation to make the Good News shine through. Let us do so within the scope of our own possibilities, in our own community and in the places where we live and work, with the talents that we have been given, but always open to God's grace that is bestowed upon us and through which our own efforts may receive unexpected encouragement. Let us support each other in this when we sometimes feel overwhelmed and tired by the headwind we encounter.

In the year that the Church has dedicated to Saint Joseph, we want to count on his intercession to receive, like him, the strength to continue to listen to the Will of God in our lives, in the lives of our communities, in the lives of the whole Congregation. And above all, to continue to have the confidence that when we try to discover and follow God's Will, we are not abandoned by God, even if we do not immediately see the prospect of a bright future with our human eyes.

We wish you God's blessing for this new year, so that charity may shine like a diamond through our being, our prayer, our actions, and our words.

Fraternally yours in the Lord,



Bro. René Stockman
Superior General
Brothers of Charity