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*As brothers, faithful, trusting, and generous  
in the service of charity, in the footsteps of Father Triest*

The Brothers of Charity  
wish you  
a blessed Christmas  
and a happy 2023

**Bro. René Stockman**  
Superior General  
Brothers of Charity

Rome, 25 December 2022

Beloved Confreres,  
Dear Associate Members,

True to tradition, on the occasion of Christmas and the coming New Year, we would like to wish you all peace and joy, the kind of peace and joy that is meant to grow in our hearts and shine forth in the places where we find ourselves every day. For it is in these places, which are unique to each of us, that we are to fulfil and live the message of Christmas.

We cannot say that, today, we truly have peace. The world suffers from the violence of war and ethnic conflict in so many places, including where we are as a congregation. We often cannot but look on helplessly and only try to heal and reach out to those who are, in one way or another, victims of these multiple forms of violence. But even in our own midst we often experience how difficult it is to live peacefully with each other. When visiting communities

all over the world, it often strikes me how much energy is lost by exacerbating disputes that threaten to become full-blown clashes. No, life in community is not always easy, but it requires everyone to make an effort to accept one another's differences, to deal with them in a positive way, and above all to help each other to live together peacefully as brothers. We should not focus exclusively on the negative things in others and in ourselves, or allow these things to paralyse us. Instead, we should always try to see the good that each of us carries within. It is also important to ask ourselves honestly what we contribute in a positive way to make our community more liveable, to allow love to grow, and to really help each other on our way to holiness. Yes, on our common path to holiness, that is what our life is about, that is our common vocation and mission.

Between Christmas and New Year, we commemorate the foundation of our Congregation, now 215 years ago. It is a story we should cherish, how Father Triest and three ordinary young men started what would one day become the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity. Although his aim was to provide better care for the elderly in Bijloke Hospital, he explicitly chose to entrust this to religious brothers and put the pursuit of personal holiness first. They would sanctify the world around them starting from this personal holiness, make it more whole, truly heal it. They were called to give themselves exclusively to God and, from this exclusive bond of love, to radically live the love of neighbour. Exclusive as far as God's love was concerned in order to radically live charity. It is not without reason that he gave us the motto 'God is love' as an invitation to really let this become the basis of our life towards personal sanctification and the sanctification of our neighbour and the world around us. It is having God's love that we receive shine forth into the world. That is the story that has been going on for 215 years and of which we are now part. Let us try to live in such a way that this story may continue to shine and be told in ever fresh ways. That is also our task, our vocation, our mission for today. If we try to shape our lives in this way, we will involuntarily work for peace around us. May that be the message for us this Christmas in 2022.

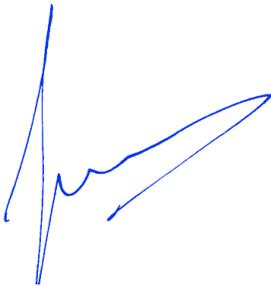
When we are at peace with ourselves and with those around us, we will be able to experience profound joy. There are plenty of reasons to feel sad and sorrowful. Not everything we wish for is fulfilled, and sometimes we face problems that really worry us and over which we might even lose sleep. There is grief for the loss of loved ones, and even in the Congregation we have not been spared on that front in the past year. Young brothers left us because they had apparently lost the joy in their lives or lost faith in the Congregation. It pained us that we had to say goodbye to a number of brothers who were cut down by illness far too young and quite unexpectedly. There were tensions within the Congregation too, which made us feel dejected at times and plunged us into a sense of hopelessness. Every one of us will be able to give their very own interpretation of events that hurt us, saddened us, and seemed to take away our hope. But perhaps it is precisely these moments of seeming hopelessness and despair that make us confront more deeply what really should and can inspire us as human beings, as believers, as religious. These are trials we have to go through that can either break us or purify us. The choice is ours! When we truly build our lives on that trust that God loves us, that God carries us and never abandons us, then a fire remains burning in our hearts that nothing or no one can ever extinguish. It is that fire that is the source of true joy in our lives. Sometimes we know only two ways to deal with difficulties: fight or flight. I once met a confrere who, at 80 years old, was still banging his fists on the table because, as a young brother, he had been treated unfairly by one of his superiors. It had made him a bitter man and he had actually allowed it to torment him for the rest of his life. It was a fight he had never been willing to give up. Others flee and lose themselves in a double life, in a life dulled

by alcohol, in a life lost in cheap pleasures. Neither fight nor flight are the paths to choose. The only path is the one of honest confrontation with our reality and to stand before God with and from this reality and ask for his blessing over it, day in and day out. How rich we are to be able to build our lives on that trust that God is there for us and never abandons us. What an advantage we have to be able to give time and space to this relationship with God every day and receive profound joy in it. We can never be thankful enough for our vocation and the grace we have been allowed to receive to be faithful to our vocation and particularly to remain faithful in the most difficult moments of our lives. That is not man's work, but that is God's work in us and with us. Let us remain truly convinced of that. In this, our true joy may take root and shine through our whole life and become and remain the true keynote of our life.

Wishing each other a peaceful and joyful New Year is not a cheap wish and sounds different from 'Happy holidays' or 'Merry Christmas'. Perhaps it is the deepest and most beautiful thing we can wish each other: peace and joy. Both are precious gifts, for which we have to make an effort ourselves, of course, but which are ultimately the fruit of God's grace. This is the spirit in which we want to enter the new year and wish each other God's blessing.

A peaceful and joyful 2023 to you all!

Fraternally yours in the Lord,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a vertical line on the left, a small loop, and a long, sweeping horizontal stroke that ends in a small hook.

Bro. René Stockman  
Superior General  
Brothers of Charity