

**CALLED TO RADIATE
THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL
IN THE WORLD TODAY**



**CIRCULAR LETTER OF FR. MATHEW VATTAMATTAM CMF
SUPERIOR GENERAL**

Rome 2016

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ABBREVIATIONS

- Aut.* - ANTONIO MARÍA CLARET, Autobiography.
- CC* - Constitutions of the Congregation of Missionaries who are called Sons of the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Claretian Missionaries (Rome, 2000).
- Dir.* - Directory of the Congregation of Missionaries
Sons
of the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Claretian Missionaries (Rome, 1999).
- EG* - POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world (Rome, 2013).
- LS* - POPE FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Sí* on
care
of our common home (Rome, 2015).
- MS* - XXV General Chapter Declaration *Missionarii Sumus* (Rome, 2015).

*“I often wondered how it was possible for so much peace, joy and harmony to reign for so long a time in such a large group. I always end up saying the same thing, **Digitus Dei est hic**¹. – St. Claret*

“For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. – Rom 14:27

Our Congregation was born in the Church in order to evangelize. When we witness and proclaim the Gospel, there is joy and peace. Where there is joy and peace, there is Good News. Joy is the fragrance of our missionary spirit. When we live our profound missionary identity, our hearts will be flooded with joy in the Spirit, our communities will rejoice in the gift of each other, and our missions will radiate the joy of the Gospel. The words which Pope Francis used to describe Religious² will then be true about us as well, “Where there are Claretians, there is joy”.

Each of us is called by God to form part of a community of disciples of the Lord with the mission to proclaim the joy of the Gospel in the style of Claret. We can certainly say that the Lord worked with us and confirmed his word by accompanying signs (Mt 16:20) in the course of our history of 167 years. The Congregation constantly kept renewing itself in accordance with the changes in the Church and in the world. The renewal Chapter of 1967 and the subsequent Chapters marked the direction of our Congregational journey in the post Vatican II period. We affirmed

¹ Ex 8:19, “This is the finger of God”. Aut. 609.

² POPE FRANCIS cited the saying, “Where there are Religious, there is joy”, in “Letter to all the consecrated on the occasion of the year of Consecrated life”. (II.1). 21 November 2014.

our identity as “servants of the Word” (1991) “in prophetic mission” (1997) “that they may have life” (2003). Like our Founder, our missionary commitment in the Church and the world flows from our being “men on fire with Love” (2009) and we are called to be “witnesses and messengers of the joy of the Gospel” (2015). These titles of Chapter documents are not slogans for each sexennium to be used and discarded, but are essential charismatic aspects, which illumine our life and mission as Claretians.

I want to reach out to all the Claretians through this circular letter in which I try to present some reflections to facilitate our congregational journey in the spirit of the XXV General Chapter. This letter is the fruit of a joint discernment of the General Government. It has four parts:

Part I. What is the Lord asking of us in our times.

Part II. Opening ourselves to the process of Transformation.

Part III: Temptations and spiritual ailments that afflict our life and mission.

Part IV: Competencies and gifts to live and proclaim the joy of the Gospel today.

This letter aims at provoking reflection and action that help us to respond to the call to be witnesses and messengers of the joy of the Gospel. The different sections are arranged in a way that you may even consider them separately for your reflection, prayer and discernment of action steps that support our congregational journey into the future. There are a few questions for introspection at the end of each section.

I

WHAT IS THE LORD ASKING OF US IN OUR TIMES?

1. The XXV General Chapter (2015) was an occasion for the Congregation to listen to the challenges from God in our times (MS 5-33), to take a good look at our charismatic traits (MS 34-63) and open ourselves to the Spirit to transform our life and mission to be witnesses and messengers of the joy of the Gospel today (MS 64-75). We shall imbibe the thrust of the General Chapter together and carry out the mission in the style of Claret but suited to our times.

1. One year after the celebration of the XXV General Chapter

2. During the period of one year after the celebration of our XXV General Chapter, we have celebrated twelve Provincial Chapters, ten assemblies of Independent Delegations and one assembly of the Mission under the General Government. The main thrust of these Congregational events was the implementation of the XXV General Chapter deliberations in the life and mission of the respective Organisms. The General Government had an encounter with the Major Superiors in the Congregation in Sri Lanka from the 10th to the 22nd of September, 2016. It was a fruitful time of fraternal sharing and planning the implementation of the resolutions of the XXV General Chapter as concretized in the action plan of the General Government. The General Government also took time to evaluate its life and mission in order to learn from the experiences of the past one year.

3. We have many reasons to rejoice and be grateful to the Lord. We rejoice in the gift of our Founder who exemplified the beauty of a missionary vocation in his own personal life and bequeathed to us a magnificent charism that unifies us as a congregation of missionaries in the Church. Joy fills my heart when I think of our committed missionaries present in various frontiers of life especially those who carry out the mission in difficult situations. The Congregation exists for the mission of the Church and, therefore, we rejoice wherever we are sent in mission. We rejoice in the missionary ardour of the elderly and the sick in our communities who share in the mission by uniting themselves to the passion of the Lord. It gives us joy to see the gift of many young men in formation who ardently desire and prepare themselves for the mission. Joy wells up in our hearts for the gift of thousands of men and women who join us in shared mission to proclaim the joy of the Gospel.

For Introspection: How do you keep alive the joy of being a missionary?

2. The gifts of two important ecclesial events for our missionary life

2.1. Year of Consecrated Life: A time to deepen our Missionary Vocation

4. The year of consecrated life celebrated in 2015 called for a radical living of the prophetic dimension of consecrated life. As Pope Francis pointed out, this radical living in the context of our times requires that we go beyond the mundane horizon and *wake up the world* by being witnesses of a different way of doing

things, of acting and of living³. How can we wake up the world if we ourselves are asleep or half-awake? For Claret, the biblical image of the prophet as sentinel keeping watch to alert the people of any impending danger (Ez 3: 18-19; 33:7-9; 21:8)) was an affirmation of his calling to go forth and preach⁴. We need to be constantly in touch with our missionary call in order to be God's response to the cry of His people (Ex 3:7-10). Our form of life has its inherent beauty and joy because of the centrality of Christ in our lives. The reflections during the year of consecrated life highlighted the importance of being witnesses of communion in communities and the need to go forth to the peripheries with the message of the Gospel. We were challenged to be authentic today by following the footsteps of the Founder and past generations, and by imbibing the vision and values that inspired the Founder⁵.

2.2. Jubilee Year of Mercy: Entering through the door of God's Mercy

5. Our missionary life is further deepened during this Jubilee year of Mercy, which we are celebrating in the Church. It is a precious moment for us to discover our true identity in the merciful love of the Father by gazing upon the face of Christ and radiate that mercy in our life and mission. The merciful love of the Father is at the core of our call and our mission is the flow of God's merciful love through the love of Christ that urges us. Often the fragilities and fragmentation in our members and communities reflect our own need to open ourselves to the transforming love of God before we dare to proclaim it to others. Without the experience of the mercy of God, we tend to harbour many hurt feelings and in

³ POPE FRANCIS, Address to the General Superiors, 29 November, 2013.

⁴ Aut. 120.

⁵ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, Letter to the Consecrated, 21 November 2014.

turn, keep hurting others. We should not take our own need for conversion for granted. How much I wish that we, as a Congregation, enter through the door of God's mercy and let our mission be a natural outflow of God's merciful love that we experience! When we are healed and restored to our missionary fervour, we radiate the joy of the Gospel more credibly in the world.

6. The Synod of Bishops on family celebrated in 2015 on "*The vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world*" and the forthcoming synod to be held in 2018 on "Young people, the faith and the discernment of vocation," invite us to walk closely with families and the youth in their faith journey and their vocation in the Church.

***For Introspection:** What impact did the Year of Consecrated Life and the Jubilee year of Mercy have on you and your community? What difference did it make in your life and mission? How do the various ecclesial events affect our missionary reach out to the people of God?*

3. Called to walk forward as missionaries "with Spirit" (MS 39)

7. We find ourselves in an era of amazing changes in the world, in the Church and in the Congregation. We experience different reactions to these changes in different parts of the Congregation. It is important that we not be dispersed in the midst of these changes, but rather unite ourselves in the spirit of our Founder to be an available instrument of God in the world. We may not be experts in strategic planning to reach any technically formulated objectives. But, we need to learn the art of discernment to know

the movement of the Spirit in us and walk with the Risen Lord who guided our Founder to fulfil his mission, raised our Congregation in the Church, and continues to guide and nurture us. Here is an illustration, which contrasts missionaries with Spirit and without Spirit using the definition of a Claretian:

A Missionary with Spirit	A Missionary without Spirit
A man on fire with God's love, who spreads its flames wherever he goes.	A man on fire with worldly passions, who succumbs to them wherever he goes.
He desires mightily and strives by all means possible to set everyone on fire with God's love.	He desires mightily and strives by all possible means to satisfy his ego needs and meet his personal agenda.
Nothing daunts him.	He is easily daunted.
He delights in privations,	He delights in acquisitions,
Welcomes work,	Welcomes leisure,
Embraces sacrifices,	Embraces pleasures,
Smiles at slander,	smiles at admirations,
Rejoices in all the torments and sorrows he suffers,	Rejoices in all kinds of gifts and donations and keeps them for himself,
And glories in the cross of Christ.	Glories in his career and performance.
His only concern is how he may follow Christ,	His only concern is how to impress others,
And imitate him in praying, working, enduring	And prove his grandeur by feigning holiness, showing off and revenging adversaries.
And striving constantly and solely for the greater glory of	And strive constantly and solely for his own glory and

God and the salvation of humankind.	expects others to serve him.
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8. As “missionaries with Spirit”, we shall journey into the future that emerges as God’s gift to the Church which we co-create with the Holy Spirit. It is the hope for the future finale in the fullness of Christ rather than past patterns that should determine our unfolding in history. In this “emergent journey”, the details of the trip are given only piece-by-piece as we progress. It is like a child on his first trip to a distant sanctuary with his parents, holding the fingers of his dad or holding the mantle of his mom. He is not worried about the route. He knows that he is on the right path as long as he walks in the presence of his parents and listens to their directions along the way. In a pilgrimage, the very journey is as exciting as the destination. It is true also about us as a congregation “going forth”. Without the trust in the Lord of history, we easily predict a gloomy future when our numbers decline or members leave. This is not to undermine the value of adequately planning our missionary activities. A holistic vision of life and mission can hold both the aspects of trustful walking with the Lord and careful planning of activities in a beautiful harmony.

***For Introspection:** Resonate the definition of a missionary with your own life and imagine what would Claret ask of you today?*

4. Called to be Credible witnesses of the Gospel

9. We need to fix our attention on the purpose for which we are in the Church and strive to be faithful to our vocation. We can get lost in formulations about our identity and role in the Church if we do not check whether we walk the talk. John summarizes the apostolic experience, “The word became flesh and dwelt among

us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father” (Jn 1:14). Witness and proclamation of the Gospel flow from our encounter with the person of Christ⁶.

10. The six Charismatic traits⁷ enumerated by the XXV General Chapter confer the Claretian fragrance to our life and mission. We fulfil our mission anchored in the Spirit, ignited by the word of God, missioning together in community, reaching out to the poor with the joy of the Gospel, and joining hands with others in mission with an openness to the whole world. Without these traits, our activities are odourless like plastic flowers.

11. It is helpful to check out how people feel about our presence in the Church and in society. Does our form of life evoke curiosity, attraction and surprise in our fellow humans about the beauty of living the joy of the Gospel? Do people come to us to know about the Word of God, to share about their longing for God, to find out the secret of the joy of missionary life?

12. We will do well to look at our individual and collective concerns that occupy our conversations when we gather to share. Are they about the suffering of people? Spiritual struggles of fellow humans and ours? The preoccupations in our community meetings speak of where the compass of our life is directed. The call to conversion to which the General Chapter invited us is to set our heart where it belongs, that is, to the treasures of the Kingdom of God.

⁶ Cf. EG 264-267.

⁷ Cf. MS 34-63.

***For Introspection:** Imagine how you and your community come across to the people whom you serve. What do you think could be their definition of a Claretian? What do you discover about yourself from their perspective?*

5. Joy of Being a Missionary in the Style of Claret

13. We have inherited the charism of the Founder to continue the same mission in the Church. The word “missionary” is used differently in different contexts. In many places, a missionary is a messenger of the Good News, a person close to the poor in their suffering, marked by the Gospel simplicity and openness. In some places, it is a suspected term with connotations of proselytization. Others allude to it to speak of active apostolic life in contrast to contemplative life. We need to trace our missionary identity to the life of our Founder and to the way the Church understands it.

14. The title “apostolic missionary” qualified the life and mission of Claret. It was a title conferred on him by the Holy See, which “synthesized his ideal of life according to the style of the apostles”⁸. Claret’s experience of God’s love and the tenderness of the Heart of Mary moved him to reach out to others with the message of God’s love using all means possible. At the core of a missionary vocation is the outpouring of love and joy that fills one’s heart and the deep attraction to follow Jesus, the missionary of the Father. This love yearns to connect to the most afflicted and marginalized and to communicate the consolation of God through words and deeds. When there is any dichotomy or competition between inner life and outer works, contemplation and action, community life and apostolic works, certainly the gift of God’s

⁸ Dir. 26.

love is contaminated by some form of selfishness and spiritual worldliness.

15. Lack of joy in missionary life is a manifestation of an arid heart. Even the best of apostolic activities carried out with a funeral face robs them of the fragrance of joy. Joy radiates through thousands of little acts done out of love in our daily lives. It could be the gift of a smile, an understanding look, a helpful word, a consoling touch, a silent sitting beside a sick brother, helping in the kitchen, visiting an ailing family, saying “sorry”, and so on. These little acts can ease tension and spread joy in the lives of people preoccupied with many projects and programs. Joy is the fragrance of a conscious living of the Gospel of love. We remember people for their simple acts of love and goodness rather than their enviable feats at the end of their earthly journey. A joyful Claretian missionary is like a flowing river of love and goodness watering the lives of all who pass by. He does not collect any dirt thrown at him, but the flow of love from the spring of grace washes it off.

16. It is helpful to distinguish the joy in the Spirit (related to living the purpose of life) from happiness (related to psychic well-being) and pleasure (related to physical well-being). This distinction is important to avoid confusing joy in the Spirit with social and physical gratifications. At the level of the spiritual self, we can meaningfully accept and integrate the pain and pleasure of our physical self, and the happiness and sadness of our social self without falling into the abyss of meaninglessness and depression. This integration is possible when we learn the deeper meaning of love and suffering from the mystery of the cross and turn the painful events of life to the purpose of life (vocation). Claret could go through the ordeals of his life because he remained rooted in the Lord and committed to his mission with serene heart until the

end. He rejoiced in sharing his charism with others, in working tirelessly to proclaim the word of God, and in suffering for the cause of Christ.

17. The joy of the Gospel coexists with pain of growth, and the crisis of unfolding which are necessary milestones in a human life. Growth enhancing suffering is different from biting pessimism that disregards faith and does away with hope. Love does not deny the cross, but embraces it with dignity. On the contrary, a missionary who settles down on the cushion of comforts is tempted to domesticate the missionary charism and tame the Gospel to serve mundane motives. A mission born of love endures in times of trials and tribulations. Our prophetic stance of announcing the Gospel values and denouncing sinful structures in the society usually meets with rejection and takes us on the road to Calvary. The decisive test of credible missionary life is the presence of joy and love that endures amidst trials, but suffers at the sight of the misery of fellow humans. Self-pity, aggressiveness, complaints and defiance are loud cries for God's merciful love to restore love at the center of life. It is our joint responsibility to take a hard look at our common reality, warts and all, in the light of God's merciful love and go forth as missionaries "with Spirit" to fulfil the mission of the Congregation in the world.

For Introspection: *What gives you meaning in your missionary life? How do you deal with your trials and difficulties?*

II

OPENING OURSELVES TO THE PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATION

18. The XXV General Chapter sensed the urging of the Spirit for a pastoral-missionary and ecological conversion in the Congregation⁹ which Pope Francis invited the whole Church to embrace¹⁰. These conversions are not separate movements in our life, but rather a single transformative process that the encounter with the person of Christ effects in the whole person, in our community and in our relationship with everything around.

19. Jesus began his public life with a call to conversion as a condition to receive the Good News (Mk 1:15). Constant ongoing conversion (transformation) is necessary for us, missionaries, to be witnesses and messengers of the joy of the Gospel. We shall respond to the call of the Chapter by welcoming the process of conversion that the Spirit is working in us. I will present the three processes of transformation within the framework of the three conversions beginning with the ecological conversion to situate all processes within the larger picture of our very existence in the world within a large network of interconnections.

1. Ecological Conversion

20. Inspired by the call of Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato SÍ*, the XXV General Chapter reiterated the need to initiate “a process of ecological conversion” which should redefine our

⁹ Cf. MS 8, 32, 65, 67.1.

¹⁰ Cf. EG 25-33; LS 216-221.

mission and life styles¹¹. The Chapter did not treat it as a separate theme, nor propose concrete action steps to initiate such a process. However, the theology and the vision of *Laudato Si* runs throughout the Chapter document. I consider it important to situate our missionary presence in the Church and in the world within the integral ecological vision that Pope Francis proposes to the world. It also gives us a creative approach to strengthen the network of relationships within the Congregation to fulfil our proper mission in the Church.

1.1. Claretian mission within an integral ecology

21. The term “ecology” from the Greek “oikos” (house) invites us to look at the world as a house and study the relationships that constitute our planet as a veritable home for all including animals and plants. We shall highlight the following basic affirmations to situate our life and mission within the framework of an integral ecology within which human beings have a specific mission.

- 1) Our faith in one God in Trinitarian communion opens our eyes to see the whole of creation bearing the imprint of the Trinitarian God in the web of relationships among all creatures. God has weaved the whole of creation into a seamless web of beings where everything is interconnected¹². The wonder of unity in diversity is beautifully manifested in the integrity and biodiversity of the whole of creation. Love sustains the fraternity of humans and the unity of all creation while sin fragments them. For us Christians, creation is the primordial

¹¹ Cf. MS 8, 60, 65.

¹² Cf. LS 138.

cathedral where God's artwork evokes an attitude of wonder and awe, gratitude and praise to the Creator.

- 2) We need to situate our mission in the Church within the vision of a “truly integral ecology in which all creatures receive the respect, protection and care they deserve, while the human being occupies a position that is consistent with the infinite dignity given by God”¹³. True experience of God “awakens in us a new ecological and cosmic awareness that leads us to feel solidarity with the whole of Creation and respectful of the dynamisms that the Creator himself has established”¹⁴.
- 3) An authentic “ecology of man” accepts and respects human nature in all its dimensions especially our body as God's gift, which has direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings¹⁵. In fact, we are nature. Nature made us possible after millions of years of evolutionary journey and nurtures us with its intricate network of life-support¹⁶. We become humble and grateful when we know how much we owe to others and the environment to be alive.

¹³ Cf. MS 7; LS 81, 137.

¹⁴ Joseph M. Abella, *Missionaries*, Circular Letter to the Congregation, 13 August 2012, 2.1.

¹⁵ Cf. LS 155.

¹⁶ JOSÉ CRISTO REY GARCÍA PAREDES, in his Blog *Ecología del Espíritu*, 27 May, 2015: <http://www.xtorey.es/?p=3276#more-3276>

- 4) A fragmented ecological vision sees human beings as lords and masters in the world who, wounded by sin, violate their own true self as well as nature and the environment¹⁷. Unbridled human greed and selfishness leads to the manipulation of human body, exploitation of environment and glorification of an unjust socio-economic system that makes money the master of everything¹⁸. Sin insulates the human heart from seeing the plight of the growing number of the poor and the outcastes in human society and the spread of contamination in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life¹⁹.

- 5) We need a change of heart, new way of looking at things, a “bold cultural revolution”, an “ecological conversion” in which we see the intimate connection between God and all beings, and more readily listen to the “cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”²⁰.

- 6) Commitment to an integral ecology by the Church becomes credible only when there is an “ecclesial ecology” that keeps a healthy balance between hierarchical and charismatic dimensions of the Church together with the many charisms and gifts through which the Holy Spirit adorns the Church. We need to recognize the imbalances in the “ecology of the Church” resulting from the failure to respect and benefit from the diversity of charisms and gifts, and the lack of cohesion in working together to fulfill the mission of the Church in the world. Therefore, we should strive to contribute to the life of the local church

¹⁷ LS 2, 8, 66.

¹⁸ Cf. LS 2, 8, 11, 66, 106, 116, 224.

¹⁹ Cf. LS 2, 16.

²⁰ Cf. LS 3, 49, 114.

from our charismatic gifts and appreciate the beauty of other charisms, and collaborate with them in the work of evangelization and the promotion of peace and justice in the world.

- 7) Integral ecology is best expressed in the Holy Eucharist through which we celebrate the Paschal mystery of Christ. The bread and wine, part of creation, is transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist invites us to live in communion with the Lord, with our fellow humans, and with all of creation. “The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation”²¹.

22. The Claretian mission in the Church and the world needs to be understood within the broad vision of an integral ecology so that our life style and mission are at the service of the Kingdom of God. This integral vision will prevent us from making fragmented and isolated efforts to proclaim the Word of God.

1.2. Caring for a “Claretian Ecology”

23. Within the body of the Church we are a “congregation small enough to know each other and big enough to do wonderful things in the Church”, as our late Superior General Fr. Peter Schweiger once commented. We journey through history together with our fellow humans and the all of creation towards the fullness of Christ. Our Claretian vocation grounded in our intimacy with Christ necessarily shapes the way we relate among ourselves, with others, and with the world. Therefore, we should painstakingly care for the “ecology of Claretian life” which attends to the

²¹ LS 236.

network of all our relationships and the fraternal and missionary environment that binds us together and keeps the Congregation in a state of readiness to serve the universal Church²². I would like to highlight some important aspects of an “integral Claretian ecology”:

- 1) Our Congregation is a charismatic family bound together by the Claretian charism and mission which keeps us in communion with the whole Church and with other charisms and forms of life. Therefore, there is no place for provincialism, tribalism or nationalism within the Congregation or isolation from other agents of evangelization in the Church and in the world. The Claretian ecology suffers imbalance when individual and group interests smother the fire of God’s love in the missionaries and act against the integral good of the Congregation. The more charismatic and healthy the whole Congregation is, the better it enables the members to live their life and mission to the full. The more formed and committed its members, the greater the capacity of the Congregation to contribute to the Church and to the world.

- 2) Integral Claretian ecology urges us towards a balanced distribution of personnel and resources within the Congregation. We cannot be indifferent to the suffering and weakness of one part of the Congregation. Weakness or an illness that afflicts an Organism debilitates the whole Congregation just as members who are sick in their missionary spirit weaken the missionary caliber of their communities and provinces.

²² CC 86.

- 3) Diversity of cultures and traditions among the Claretians adds to the richness and beauty of the Congregation. We need to value and promote the cultures and traditions of the people to whom we are sent in mission (inculturation) and allow space for authentic intercultural community living (interculturality) in order to enhance our missionary presence in the world today.
- 4) Our communion with the Lord cements our mutual relationships and urges us to welcome others in shared mission to strive for the wellbeing of all humans and for the care of Mother Earth.
- 5) Concern for Claretian ecology urges us to “walk forth” towards existential peripheries and new frontiers bringing with us the message of the Gospel. As missionaries with Spirit, we cannot be indifferent to what is happening in the human and natural environment. Ecological conversion opens our eyes to see the perils and the lures of inordinate consumerism, the culture of waste, and the manipulation and debasement of the human person especially those who happen to be poor.
- 6) Claretian ecology also expresses itself in the appreciation and preservation of the beauty of nature in our surroundings and in keeping an esthetic ambience in our houses, parishes, educational institutions and mission centers. It also includes the health and hygiene of every Claretian in his physical, mental and spiritual dimensions that render him a man of integrity and erudition.

24. The vision of the world as a common home in which every part of creation has its proper place helps us to assume our

humble role within the seamless web of all creation with joy and gratitude. The ministry of each Claretian forms part of the contribution of the Congregation to the mission that the Lord has entrusted to the Church in the world. We shall situate our charism and mission within this larger picture. The maxim “think globally and act locally” is valid also in missionary work. The missionary programs of each Claretian and each community in every Major Organism must be orchestrated within the mission of the whole Congregation in order to be “one body with different members in mission”²³. It is through a collective transformation that we reach a holistic vision of life and mission which excludes no one from the bond of our love and service.

***For Introspection:** How did the encyclical *Laudato Si* affect your vision of the world? What are the important reflections of the Pope that you find enlightening? How would you apply them to the Claretian mission? What steps do we need to take to support a healthy “Claretian ecology” in the sharing resources and personnel to revitalize our missions?*

2. Pastoral conversion: A Congregation going forth

25. The clarion call of Pope Francis in his apostolic letter *Evangelii Gaudium* was for a pastoral conversion to inaugurate an era of a new evangelization. The Pope states:

“I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably

²³ MS 47.

*channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself".*²⁴

26. The change of heart regarding apostolates happens when we realize that our vocation is not about us, rather it is about the Lord and his project for His people especially the most marginalized. The center of gravity then shifts from oneself (seeking success, popularity and positions) to the Lord and His people.

27. The immediate consequence of pastoral conversion is the availability for the Lord's mission. It is expressed in the readiness to "obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zones in order to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel"²⁵. It reminds me of the adage, "A ship is always safe in the harbour, but that is not what ships are made for". A missionary who nests himself in a comfort zone tends to suffer like a ship that rusts and rots when left in the harbour too long.

2.1.Going to the peripheries

28. The term "periphery" has become a slogan today in church circles, often without going into the depth of its theological meaning. For us, it gives a strong missionary thrust and direction

²⁴ EG 27.

²⁵ EG 20.

for our apostolic ventures. The clue to understand the depth of its meaning is to look at Jesus, as did Claret, and learn to go forth to the peripheries. The kenosis of incarnation itself (Phil 2: 6-11) and the options of places he lived (Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth), people he associated with (fishermen, sinners, publicans, tax collectors) or persons he dialogued and confronted (Pharisees, scribes, rich young man) are images of Jesus going forth to the peripheries. Jesus sent the twelve in a vulnerable way (no shoes, no purse, like sheep among wolves). The vulnerability of the apostles created free space for God to act. We need to go by the logic of incarnation that teaches us that freely chosen vulnerability is capable of knowing the condition of those rendered vulnerable by injustice and exclusion, and allows us to walk with them on the way to true liberation.

29. The image that comes to me is that of a stream flowing down to replenish the parched low-lying lands. Once Claret found his apostolic vocation, he went forth to reach those peripheries to which he was sent to nurture the parched human hearts that longed for the Word of God. We know how Claret went around the Canary Islands, Catalonia, Cuba, Madrid and all of Spain to proclaim the joy of the Gospel.

30. The “going forth” has three important elements: the first is the love of Christ that urges us on which presupposes an encounter with the Lord; the second is the destination, the human heart that is created to know, love and serve God, and the third is the “how” of going forth which we learn by being open to the creativity of the Spirit. A missionary is the friend of the bridegroom, not the bridegroom himself. He is sent in mission to bring the bride to the bridegroom. The virtues that Claret practiced and invited us to practice (humility, obedience, apostolic zeal, discernment poverty,

docility, modesty and mortification²⁶ are necessary to truly “go forth” to the peripheries.

31. All our apostolic positions invite us to go forth to the peripheries where people long for the words and deeds of consolation. It can be those existential peripheries of suffering, unbelief, doubts and conflict by using platforms that best serve the purpose. We do not go to the peripheries just by abandoning existing apostolic positions uncritically, and looking for new exciting platforms for the sake of novelty. There are peripheries in every apostolic platform. We need to honestly listen to the call of God in each context and to respond to the deep cry for God hidden amidst the clamour of the world. The key is the spiritual art of discernment.

32. I rejoice at seeing initiatives of Claretians who dare to reach out to new platforms and peripheries to witness and announce the joy of the Gospel. Initiatives for the promotion of justice and human rights among defenseless people, pastoral initiatives to attend to the most vulnerable in society, new efforts to promote peace and reconciliation in conflict-ridden social contexts, and initiatives to accompany youth and families are some of them. We have to explore the different peripheries in need of our evangelizing presence especially those situated near the traditional platforms of our parishes and education institutions.

2.2.Reaching out to the Youth and the care for vocations

33. We have made an option to give special attention to youth and vocation ministry in this sexennium. Often the youth are left out

²⁶ Aut. 192, 340-453.

in the peripheries to seek their heart's desire all by themselves. The minds and hearts of many of them are easily preyed on by market ideologies and their illusory offers until they come to their senses. A good number of missionaries are hesitant to work with youth for not knowing their unique language or how to speak to them. In fact, the language to speak to the youth is the language of authentic love and sincere attention to their quest, knowing that we ourselves have gone through that stage of critical thinking and searching for the meaning of life. Often beneath the rebellious and even resentful attitude of many youth to "God talk", there is a restless human heart seeking the beloved of their souls, the Lord of life. Like John the Baptist, our role is to facilitate their encounter with the Lord. We shall give a privileged place for the youth in our hearts. Wherever possible, "we shall go forth to meet them, to walk with them and to help them to be attentive to Jesus' call"²⁷. Let us not keep youth ministry any longer in the peripheries of our pastoral care.

34. We shall gladly promote and welcome those men and women whom God calls to join our Congregation and to the other branches of the Claretian Family. A young person begins to raise vocational questions when he is attracted to the beauty of Claretian missionary life lived joyfully and faithfully by a Claretian. Therefore, every Claretian either promotes or dissuades vocations by the quality of his missionary life. Vocation ministry is not so much about techniques and strategies to get people to join us, but rather about "helping someone meet the Lord and answer the Lord's call" and hence we need to "step out of the sacristy and take seriously the questions and concerns of the young"²⁸. We shall learn the art of encounter from Jesus who met

²⁷ MS 68.

²⁸ POPE FRANCIS, Address to the Conference on Promotion of Vocations, 21 October 2016.

the disciples in their living situations and launched his invitation without giving false promises. Persons like the rich young man (Mk 10:21-22) found Jesus' invitation too demanding and so he turned it down. Others no longer followed Jesus when it meant risking their lives for him (Jn.6:66). As the Lord instructed his disciples, we shall daily ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to into his field (Lk 10:2). I invite the Major Organisms to reinforce their efforts to reach out to those who show signs of a vocation to our Congregation. In the ministry of Vocation Promotion, we should be careful not to accept candidates indiscriminately into the formation program without serious discernment.

2.3.Evangelization of evangelizers

35. Claret gave special attention to the preparation of the agents of evangelization to multiply the fruits of evangelizing mission. The founding of the Congregation was one of his many initiatives for this purpose. In our historical trajectory, Claretians were often sought after for spiritual direction of priests, seminarians, religious and lay leaders. The Institutes of the Theology of Consecrated life which we have in different continents offer us an opportune forum to empower and support the evangelizing force of consecrated people in the Church. The missionary platform for accompanying and qualifying evangelizers, especially religious and lay missionaries, is a periphery where we must be present with due preparation.

36. We need a renewed vision of lay people as real or potential co-creators in evangelization. It is important to realize that every home is a school of faith and love. The dining table in people's homes are all altars in themselves, which offer parents the podium

to spread the gospel. We can say the same about classrooms and playgrounds where teachers and coaches can be apostles in these new 'areopagi'. We shall welcome and form them as co-creators of the young generation in the Church. Our program of biblical schools should focus on the training of these evangelizers in the homes, schools, playgrounds and on the streets.

2.4. Evangelization in the digital continent and publication ministry

37. Another evangelizing force of the Congregation are the missionaries engaged in publications and communication media who reach thousands of our brothers and sisters whom we never meet face to face. Claret was particularly keen to use such means to spread the message of the Gospel. In the context of revolutionary changes in the reading habits and means of information, we shall go forward with resilience and willingness to adapt to the changes. We also need to unite our forces in this field and support the new initiatives in the young Organisms of the Congregation.

***For Introspection:** What are the existential peripheries of human need for the consolation of the Lord that you should reach out to in your context? What do you need to do to grow in your capacity to be available to be sent to any mission in the Congregation? How are the youth in your missionary ambience connected to your ministry? How prepared are you as a man of God to accompany others in their spiritual unfolding?*

3. Personal and community Conversion

38. We shall consider both personal and community conversion together because they act as leaven of transformation mutually. The personal ongoing conversion of a missionary is the core of his missionary vocation. An evangelizing community facilitates personal conversion while conversion of members transforms our communities. On the contrary, a dysfunctional community dampens the process of growth and conversion in members, just as dysfunctional members can cause great difficulties and apostolic inertia in our communities. We shall strive to create conditions for our missionaries to experience the flowering of their vocation wherever they are planted. We have wonderful men in our Congregation and some of them remain entrenched in their personal growth issues for a long time. How I wish we could help them unveil the best of themselves for the Lord, like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon!

3.1. Being a Community of Witnesses and Messengers

39. The process of transformation implies radical changes in the way we live our relationships in community, exercise authority and administer temporal goods. This requires transforming relationships that facilitate a shift from ego-system awareness (which focusses on the wellbeing of oneself) to community consciousness (which focusses on the wellbeing of the whole community, which naturally includes oneself). This shift is possible through open communication, dialogue and collective creativity²⁹.

3.1.1. Creating Community-Mission

²⁹ Cf. MS 70.

40. The Claretian communities which Claret promoted for the purpose of evangelization were mission-communities (casa mission). The characteristic of this community is that its members lived together strictly in a community and went out regularly to work in the sacred ministry.³⁰ Claret prepared a group of young priests “to respond to the great desire of people to hear the Word of God”³¹. The primitive Claretian community was organized in such a way that they had time together for their spiritual, intellectual and fraternal nourishment for themselves and then go out to preach the Word of God to the people. We should preserve the holistic vision of the Founder regarding community organization in order to be effective in missioning. We have very many beautiful communities that give inspiring witness of fraternal love and effective missionary service to the people.

41. Sometimes certain naïve community dynamics prevent us from being credible witnesses of Gospel love among those associated with us. One of those is related to transfers. When a new superior does not use his unique gifts and talents to build on the past, he may tend to impose his personal preferences and differences on the community and mission. In such cases, the mission is shaped and reshaped to suit the change of personalities of the superiors. There are also communities where personal differences of members lead to unfortunate “friendly fire” that scorch the life and mission of the community. We must achieve the collective maturity to make use of the personal differences and talents of each of our community for the good of the community-mission and to continue building upon the achievements already made by their predecessors.

³⁰ Cf. Aut. 491.

³¹ Cf. Letter of Claret to the Apostolic Nuncio, 12 August, 1849.

3.1.2. Transformation in the Governance of the Congregation

42. Most of the missionaries are in various responsibilities of governance and leadership both within the Congregation and in our institutions. I think of local and provincial superiors, their consultors, directors of institutions, parish priests etc. Personal conversion directly affects the way we understand and exercise authority and leadership. All positions of authority in the Congregation are service positions to enhance communion and unity among our members in the service of the mission³². We need to learn the art of tapping the capacity of members to offer responsible and co-creative contributions towards shaping the future of the Congregation.

43. The General Chapter invited all those who exercise the service of authority to discern and act according to God's heart, to accompany persons and to foster creative apostolic commitment³³. Many Major Organisms have reached a reasonable level of collective maturity which maintains the right blend of the four principles of governance, viz. subsidiarity, subordination, collaboration and fraternal correction. When the principle of subsidiarity is not affirmed enough, creative fidelity of members to carry out their responsibility suffers. When the role of superiors is trivialized or overlooked, the mission of the Congregation is reduced to a collection of individual ministries without the organic unity of our life and mission. Unfortunately, there are contexts where missionaries fail to be witnesses of communion because of their lack of religious maturity in accepting the role of superiors. Collaboration of various assigned roles in community and the

³² CC 103; 113.1; 136.

³³ Cf. MS 72.

practice of timely fraternal correction are also important to assure participative and compassionate governance in the Congregation.

44. We are used to letting our past to determine our present actions. We evaluate our experiences, learn from our mistakes and work hard to improve our “performance” in the present. Often we overlook an important dimension of spiritual governance which implies opening ourselves to be guided by the unknown future which we co-create with the Spirit of the Lord. This requires that we move beyond the patterns of the past and connect with the contemplative space and source of creativity within us where the Spirit of the Lord brings forth new and creative impulses of new evangelization. As Meister Eckhart has rightly stated, “What we plant in the soil of contemplation, we shall reap in the harvest of action”.

3.1.3. Transformation in the use of money and temporal goods

45. Authentic transformation into Christ is most visible in the way we treasure the values of the Kingdom and relate with temporal goods in the spirit of religious poverty. All the material and spiritual goods we have are for the good of the community and the people of God. Therefore, the sharing of resources, responsible administration of goods for taking care of the needs of the brothers and the missions, and openness to share our resources with the poor and needy are fundamental to our missionary life. Personal and collective simplicity of life, which welcomes the coming of the Kingdom and forgoes any adherence to the things of the world, makes us to live our consecration to the Lord with joy and freedom. We do not need most of the things people long to possess. Simplicity of life keeps us out of the circle of greed

where others cannot buy us off or control us by money, parties, rewards, positions and promises. Simplicity of life protects our prophetic freedom and keep us close to the people of God of all social categories. When we live truly poor both in reality and in Spirit³⁴, we can identify with every human being as Jesus did through his self-emptying love. It is inspiring to witness so many of our missionaries returning to the home of the Father joyfully after living simple and poor lives without any acquisitions or possessions of their own.

46. When we withhold the resources available to us for ourselves at the level of provinces/delegations, communities or persons, we are moving on the track that leads to greed, possessiveness, status, envy and bitterness. The maxim “no money, no mission” often betrays the poverty of apostolic zeal. No amount of money can do what a zealous missionary heart can do for the Kingdom. I think of Mother Theresa and many founders who did great things in the Church because they handed themselves over to the Lord and the lord provided for the needs of the mission. Our Founder was particularly detached from money and was able to enjoy the freedom to use whatever he received for the spread of the Gospel³⁵. Excessive concern about financial security is a sure symptom that the Gospel is not the light for our steps. Our solidarity with the poor becomes true when our spending on ourselves has reasonable resonance to the life of the ordinary people around us.

47. The Claretian way of relating to personal and community resources (time, talents, money and materials) is to consider them as means to carry out the mission by sharing them for the common

³⁴ Cf. CC 28.

³⁵ Cf. Aut. 133, 200, 360, 361, 771.

good and the care of the poor. Even when we undertake projects to generate income for the sustenance of our missionaries and for the support of needy missions, we must undertake these economic activities with a spirit of service to the Church and to the Congregation. Transparency, accountability and responsible use of goods are hallmarks of a joyful missionary.

***For Introspection:** What gifts do you offer to the community to enrich fraternal life and enhance its mission? What changes need to happen in the leadership style and the administration of temporal goods in order to be witnesses of the Gospel values we proclaim? How do you want to contribute to this?*

3.2. Men who adore God in the Spirit

48. Pope Francis invited the Claretians to be men who adore the Lord³⁶. He clarified that it was not just making prayers or even giving thanks, rather just being in front of the Lord. As Claretians we need to create that collective contemplative space in our lives where we can be totally transparent before the Lord of love, and move out to the peripheries to give witness to the joy of the Gospel. Claret lived this art of adoration in a heightened manner when he received the special gift of Eucharistic presence in his heart³⁷. We are invited to grow in our awareness of the presence of the “God with us” when we are praying, working and suffering. As missionaries, our first contribution to the mission of the Church is to deepen the spiritual dimension of our lives³⁸.

³⁶ POPE FRANCIS, Address to the participants of the General Chapter, 11 September 2015.

³⁷ Cf. Aut. 694.

³⁸ JOSEPH M. ABELLA, Missionaries, 2.1.

3.2.1. Cultivating our missionary spirituality

49. Claretian spirituality is about *who we truly are*, as God sees and loves us. We are awakened to our missionary identity when we discover that the Lord had called us to be with him and to be sent to his mission (Cf. Mk 3:13). We begin to radiate the joy of the Gospel to others when we discover the joy of God's love within ourselves. If we are stuck at the level of our illusory ego self which only identifies to physical and social characteristics (physical beauty, race, popularity, status, performance etc.) it is difficult to see the image of God in oneself and others, and the mission is reduced to mere philanthropic social action. We need to know and love our Founder and our charism more closely in order to love and live our own missionary vocation. The program of the "Claretian Year" is being prepared by the General Prefecture of Spirituality as a congregational initiative to help us deepen our knowledge of the Founder and our spiritual heritage more deeply.

50. There are milestones on the path of ongoing conversion to the Lord. At different points of our journey, scales fall off, clearing our vision to see others and the world through the eyes of God. Many walls of separation collapse, many labels on people vanish and our missionary heart begins to see their true face, the face of the crucified Lord. Missionary commitment is a necessary outcome of our God experience. Claret's life has set a model for our ongoing spiritual journey. We shall take care of our Claretian vocation and grow in our missionary identity and belongingness to the Congregation as a transformative process. I strongly recommend that each Claretian take care of his own spiritual unfolding and avail himself of the help of spiritual directors and

other means available in the Church³⁹. The Forge program has been offering opportunities for Claretian renewal in the life for our missionaries who look for a renewal experience after many years of active ministry. We shall endeavour to make it possible for more Claretians to avail this experience as part of their ongoing formation especially in the year of their silver jubilee of profession.

3.2.2. Missionary Vocation as a transforming call of God

51. Our vocation itself begins with a conversion experience. Encounter with Jesus and his Gospel followed by experience of his call to follow him. For many of us, this call has completely upset the earlier projects of our life that we ourselves and our dear ones at home were preparing for. However, it has also opened up an entirely new horizon for our lives. Many of us experience what Blasé Pascal stated, “Our heart has reasons which reason does not have”. The rest of our lives needed to accommodate to the new direction of life and follow what our hearts perceived. Our vocational journey was to know the length, depth, width and height of God’s love (Eph 3:18) and learn to look at ourselves, others and the world through the lenses of the Gospel. Each of us has a unique vocational story of breaking and building, uprooting and planting. Many of our companions dropped out on the way, but something kept us going on in the chosen path. The processes of discernment of vocations and formation of candidates need to take their experience of God’s call and its progressive unfolding in a missionary commitment seriously.

³⁹ Cf. CC 54.

52. Personal conversion through encounter with the person of Christ and a reasonable level of awareness of the call of God to missionary life is necessary for embarking on a formative process in the Congregation.

3.2.3. Formation, an ongoing journey of Transformation

53. Missionary formation is the process of becoming a new creation in Christ. The fulcrum of the formative journey is the call of Christ and one's generous response, aided by grace. We have the model of our Founder whose life shows the transforming power of the love of Christ in a young man whose whole life turned out to be a powerful witness of the joy of the Gospel.

54. Each formandus who enters the portals of our formation centers is a precious gift of God. We shall welcome him and accompany his formative journey with the heart of the Lord who formed the disciples to be with him and to be sent out to His mission (Mk 3:13). When we ask a formandus to leave the formation program after due discernment, we shall do so out of love for the real good of the Congregation and the formandus himself. In ongoing formation, we have the model of Jesus who walked with the disciples on the way to Emmaus engaging them in a soul-searching dialogue. It helped the disciples who were giving up on Jesus' mission to rediscover their vocation and return to the apostolic community (Lk 24:13-35).

55. We know that a predominantly information-based rational approach to missionary formation fails to help dig out the treasure within ourselves which is hidden from the wise and learned and revealed to little children (Lk 10:21). There is no transformation without being present to the one who is present in the depth of our

hearts, the Spirit of the Risen Lord who calls and accompanies us in mission. Formation is to be a lifelong process of transformation into Christ uplifting the heart, head and hands of the missionaries. Our formation programs should facilitate the processes of both “growing up” in all dimensions of personality to achieve a holistic growth (Lk 2:52) and “waking up” spiritually to put on the new self (Eph 4:24; Col 3:9-10; Rom 8:12-13; Mt 9:17). This process is about breaking and building, dying and rising, and embodies the Pasqual mystery of Christ.

56. Formed by the Pasqual mystery, we learn to see the sufferings of our brothers and sisters through the eyes of God and love them with a compassionate heart. We will then bring the joys, sufferings, sadness, challenges, the real faces and lives of people into our personal/communitarian prayers and to our celebrations. Our pastoral activities would radiate God’s mercy to His people. Thus, our formation is oriented to mission by overcoming the false dichotomy between contemplation and action, initial formation and ongoing formation. We become mystics in mission.

57. Many of the community issues and personal struggles of missionaries are related to ego issues that have not been transcended even after years of formation and pastoral experience. We seem to fail to break through the ego trappings to reach the fountain of love within. It is, perhaps, because we do not care enough for the contemplative space within us where this discovery happens. Many of us fail to hold on in times of storms and tempests in relationships and ministry, and spiritually evolve in and through those struggles. Instead, they give into acedia and some choose to “save themselves” by abandoning the Congregation. Our formation processes need to help the missionaries deal with the crosses, sufferings and shadows of life.

We shall not shy away from presenting a Gospel devoid of cross and joyful renunciation.

58. An important path we are obliged to take in our congregational journey is that of interculturality⁴⁰. It is a prophetic witness in the world which struggles for unity in diversity. In this sexennium, we shall make special efforts to grow further in the path of interculturality.

***For Introspection:** What are your priorities in your life as a missionary? How do you keep your first things first? How do you accompany and care for the continuous unfolding of your missionary vocation?*

⁴⁰ AQUILINO BOCOS, La obligada via de la interculturalidad, Paper presented to CEC, 11 December, 2000.

III

TEMPTATIONS AND SPIRITUAL AILMENTS THAT AFFLICT OUR LIFE AND MISSION

59. On several occasions, Pope Francis pointed out the temptations and illnesses to which many missionaries and pastoral workers succumb and suffer the loss of missionary zeal⁴¹. It is pertinent to identify the temptations and illnesses that drain our missionary zeal and joyful commitment. We shall consider some of the principal ones here:

1. Spiritual Worldliness

60. Pope Francis has warned about the menace of worldliness that afflicts the Church and robs her of her true mission in the world⁴². When worldly attitudes and values motivate our ministry and service to the people of God, we are under the spell of the virus of spiritual worldliness. Human glory and wellbeing is sought under the pretty facade of glorifying God. But, what actually counts is performance, status, esteem, gains and comforts, but not dedication, self-donation, truth, goodness and the cross of Christ. Spiritual worldliness prevents us from valuing and celebrating the goodness of the created world with the freedom of the children of God. It sheds its usual angelic garb and comes out in true colors in the hour of trials and suffering because worldliness slices away suffering and obedience from the Paschal mystery of Christ. There are many vestiges of spiritual worldliness within us under various guises:

⁴¹ EG 76-109. See also the Christmas Greetings of the Pope to the Roman Curia, 22 December, 2014.

⁴² EG 93-95. Henry de Lubac coined this word to indicate the most damaging element in the missionary Church.

1.1. Clericalism

61. It tarnishes the beauty of priestly vocation by using it to augment self-glory and superiority over other forms of life in the Church rather than laying down one's life in the service of others. It can also denigrate sacred orders by abusing the ecclesiastical positions to boss over others or to devalue vocations to the Brotherhood in the Congregation. It is all the more difficult to retain the true nature of priestly vocations in cultures that accord higher status to priests in society. The challenge is to rise up to the trust and love that people have for priests and consecrated persons by becoming authentic shepherds and servants after the heart of Christ.

1.2. Careerism

62. Another form of worldliness is in seeking self-glory by eying for positions of governance of institutions, pushing for self-promoting specializations, and lobbying for leadership positions in the Congregation. Covert or overt coalitions of members based on linguistic, regional, and ethnic affiliations and consequent conflicts in some parts of the Congregation often underlie the desire to promote individual and group interests, and never the glory of God nor the salvation of souls. Without awareness, some fall into the trap of worldliness and sacrifice their time, energy and life itself on the altar of their greed for power and positions, and consequently remain in perpetual discontentment. The joy of giving oneself to Christ and his people is alien to those who try to fill the void of the heart with power, position and things. Careerism avoids facing the void in the human heart which only God's love can fill.

1.3. Vain glory

63. Another form of spiritual worldliness is the false pride about one's own ministerial efficiency or the prestige of the Congregation in contrast to other agents of evangelization. Affirmation of our charismatic identity in comparison to that of others may temporarily boost our "collective ego" with regard to achievements, numbers, international presence etc. Nevertheless, it robs us of the capacity to appreciate the beauty of the unique action of the same Spirit in each person and in each charismatic reality in the Church and to celebrate the fundamental unity that binds us together into one family of God. Vain glory is different from the legitimate pride and happiness which a missionary naturally feels about the good the Congregation does in the Church and in the world.

1.4. Pessimism

64. It is a form of worldliness found in many missionaries who glory in the past and see the dwindling number of vocations, closing of pastoral positions and aging of members with a very pessimistic mind. They look at the statistics and sociological predictions and foresee a slim future for the Congregation and for consecrated life. For them the blessing of God can come only in the way it used to be in their younger days. They are confused as to why God has let the Church down by allowing all that is happening in the world now. We miss the whole faith perspective of human history when the present history is sliced out from salvation history and looked through sociological lenses and predicts a gloomy future. Pessimism closes the heart and mind, and prevent us from welcoming and co-creating the emerging future that the Lord asks of us.

1.5. Business mentality

65. It is an approach to apostolic activities from a managerial perspective as if we are a company running projects for profit. Certainly, we need the wisdom of social sciences and the principles of management and organization to run our institutions and manage projects in a proper way. But, the purpose of all our missionary positions go beyond managerial excellence and institutional gains. The challenge is to stick to the foundational purpose of our being missionaries in the Church and in the world. We should value fidelity to the Gospel more than the social prestige in running first-rate institutions. It will be evident in the gospel mystique that gives life to our works and the attention we pay to the holistic wellbeing of the recipients of the mission and the empowering relationship we develop with our collaborators.

1.6. Social status

66. In contexts where a missionary is held in esteem and is in great demand for “decorative presence” during functions and celebrations, one may get lost in appearances, meetings, parties, dinners and receptions. When these functions are given priority, there is little time and space left for the primary responsibility to proclaim the Gospel of love and mercy to the people of God, especially the poor. Another instance is that of letting the fear of public opinion and media-blackmail us and imprison our convictions and prophetic role in the world. Worldliness promotes a “comfort culture” in our life style. Consequently, joyful renunciation of comforts and carrying the cross of Christ are not part of the good life a “worldly missionary” dreams for himself after his initial formation.

2. **Activism and lethargy**

67. It is a virus that afflicts a missionary when he progressively abandons his prayer life to give more time for his busy apostolic activities. It was a surprise for many when Pope Francis asked the Claretians to adore the Lord as the first priority. He also mentioned that it is a deficiency in the Church today. We run the danger of engaging in many apostolic activities with an empty heart when we do not spend time before the Lord. Unless the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in our hearts, we cannot be missionaries full of fervor, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction⁴³. Pope Francis reiterated the need to recover a contemplative spirit to appreciate the divine treasures entrusted to us, which we share with others⁴⁴. The virus of activism has cost many Claretians their own Claretian vocation. Action without contemplation is like a firework that, after a fanciful show in the air, falls down on the ground as a charred empty shell.

68. Perhaps, a more dampening impact on the missionary spirit of a community is from the laid-back missionaries who settle with the minimum and deride the hardworking members of the community. When a missionary succumbs to lethargy and settles with mediocrity in life and mission, it is likely that amusements and addictions occupy his heart and turn him away from the joy of missionary commitment. When it happens, we should do all means possible to help the missionary recover his 'love for the Lord he had at first' (Cf. Rev 2:4). Commitment to excellence and quality in all that we do is a personal way of expressing joy and gratitude to our Claretian vocation.

⁴³ Cf. EG 261.

⁴⁴ Cf. EG 264.

3. Digital Worldliness

69. The new continent of the Internet and media offers us a wonderful platform for evangelization and joint action to work for the common good of humanity and the planet. Without proper media education and personal integrity, we may fall for what Pope Francis termed as “digital worldliness” that is opened and closed by a simple click⁴⁵. Instead of using this platform for building up fraternity and evangelization, some have become addicted users of the Internet for self-gratification and entertainment. Virtual communities and friendships replace real communities and companions in mission. Today, missionaries serving in another country or continent can virtually live in their own culture, speak their own language, and spend most of the time watching native films, or chatting with friends from their home country. A missionary may pass lot of time browsing websites of all sorts, which prevent him from dedicating himself to know, love and serve the people to whom he is sent. Social media like WhatsApp and Facebook can be effective for sharing information and building bridges of communication among us. However, there are instances of the abuse of the same media to promote partisan interests and to avenge persons. We need to grow in transparency and prudence in the use of the Internet and educate ourselves better to use this platform as evangelizers rather than as mere consumers.

70. In order to qualify and enrich our evangelizing presence in the digital continent⁴⁶ and to avoid the danger of dispersion, we need to promote greater collaboration among the important Webpages

⁴⁵ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, Homily during Chrism Mass, 24 March, 2016.

⁴⁶ Cf. MS 60, 67.7.

of the Congregation and to orientate the utilization of web 2.0 tools for our evangelizing mission.

4. Gossip

71. The virus of gossip spreads like wild fire through the media gadgets more easily today than ever before. It saps the vitality of fraternal life in the provinces, tarnishes the good name of brothers and offers the mean pleasure of speaking ill of others. Gossiping pollutes the heart as sewage water contaminates the sparkling water in a deep well. Gossip feeds on envy and jealousy and causes divisions among brothers. Pope Francis has often warned religious against the disease of gossiping, grumbling and backbiting, which destroys fraternal life. He invited the religious to guard against the “terrorism of gossip”⁴⁷. We need to consciously bar ourselves from indulging in gossip and spreading rumours. Instead, we shall strive to speak well of others and dare to practice fraternal correction directly and honestly to the persons concerned.

5. Pastoral Individualism

72. This is perhaps the most prevalent temptation that afflicts many of our missionaries. Many are comfortable to work alone with the support of submissive supporters from outside. How many communities are just boarding houses for missionaries who carry out their mission individually! They live in communities like “potatoes in a sack”, unconnected, although living together under the same roof. Pastoral individualism is tempting because it is efficient at the outset and prompt decisions are possible without the delay of the processes of collective planning, discernment and

⁴⁷ POPE FRANCIS, Words to the Italian Conference of Religious Superiors, 7 November, 2014.

decision-making. It can evade the discomfort of feedback and correction from confreres. However, it fails to benefit from the wisdom of other members of the community, deprives the community members from participating and owning up the apostolate and often the mission suffers the crisis of continuity when eventual transfer of personnel is warranted. It reminds me of the African adage, “If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together”. We can overcome pastoral individualism when the center of gravity of apostolates shifts from personal glory to God’s glory, from personal fulfilment to serving the good of the people of God, and from short-term performance to long-term service.

6. Dualistic thinking and excessive rationalism

73. The tendency to see and judge everything in terms of black and white, good and bad, true and false, friend or foe, moral or immoral makes joyful community life and authentic relationships difficult. Even before understanding what is happening or knowing a person, one would have made the judgement in favour or against. This letter would certainly fail its purpose when it is only analyzed and studied to make a judgement about its orthodoxy rather than allow it to challenge our missionaries to live the joy of their missionary life. In the fraternal space of this letter, there is also room to seek clarification, correct mistakes and complement it with important insights from the missionaries.

74. Dualistic thinking prevents us from seeing the whole picture, reject the wisdom of a different perspective and keeps shut the door that opens to the surprises of God in our history. Ideas divide and ideologies tend to destroy the dissidents. The Spirit of the Lord unites our hearts and holds our differences in a creative

tension in order to promote growth. Critical thinking is a gift that God has given to humans to protect from naïve subjectivism. Reason is a good servant to assist the search for truth and goodness, but a bad master when it usurps the space of faith, mystery and transcendence in human life. We missionaries will do well if we, like Mary, contemplate the mystery of God's action in our life and cooperate with the Holy Spirit, rather than trying to take control of it by human ingenuities.

***For Introspection:** What are the temptations that you consider affecting your life and mission as well as other Claretians in your context? How do you address them?*

IV

COMPETENCIES AND GIFTS FOR PROCLAIMING THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL TODAY

75. While we remain alert to the temptations and illnesses that drain our missionary vitality, it is more important to cultivate and strengthen the virtues and skills that are necessary for our missionary journey. I propose the following as important in our times:

1. Discernment

76. As missionaries “with Spirit”, the most important instrument available to us to walk with the Spirit is discernment. It helps us to seek what the Lord is asking of us in every situation of decision making at the level of the person and community. The life of our Founder offers us the best example of how a missionary seeks to know God’s will at each moment of his life⁴⁸. Discernment is like a compass that indicates the direction of God’s will for us. When we need to make important decisions, we shall make it a habit to pray, as Claret did, asking the Lord, *Quid faciam, Domine?*⁴⁹. Claret has learnt from the tradition of St. Ignatius how to make a good discernment and he left it as a legacy in the tradition of the Congregation. I remember vividly how my novice master Fr. Francis Dirnberger was often asking the novices, “Is it the will of God?” A time-tested Claretian approach to discernment gathered from the life of the Founder is *Quid Prodest?*⁵⁰, a phase of discernment in the Forge program. The introspective question

⁴⁸ Cf. Aut. 40, 78, 81, 496, 623, 624, 762.

⁴⁹ “Lord what would you have me do?” Acts 22:10.

⁵⁰ “What does it serve?” Mt 16:26.

“what does it serve?” is a right tool to reach the soul when we are under inner pressure or external influences to act in the absence of the clear voice of the conscience.

77. It pains me to see that important life changing decisions are taken by some of our missionaries very casually according to the pressures of compulsive thoughts and feelings without any reference to know what God would want from them in such a situation. We need to reinforce a culture of discernment in all our decision-making processes. It would help us to objectify many seducing voices inside and outside of us and listen to the soft whisper of the Spirit indicating what is true and really good in contrast to what is false or apparently good. I invite the Major Organisms to arrange programs to help our missionaries to know and practice the art of discernment in their everyday lives.

2. Listening

78. Many of the propositions of the General Chapter related to discernment, community life, shared mission and dialogue with cultures and religions, and intercultural formation, requires the basic capacity of listening. Sadly, the virtue of listening is spoken about more than being practiced. Many of us often start a dialogue with minds full of prejudices and ideas so that there is very little space left to understand what the other is communicating verbally and nonverbally. Dialogue becomes merely a composite of two monologues. The capacity to listen to God, others and to one's own inner movements is necessary for authentic discernment, community living and intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

3. Mindfulness

79. Watchfulness and alertness are important qualities that the disciples of Jesus and the early Christians were often reminded to cultivate. They were asked to be aware of the lure of false prophets and the leaven of Pharisees⁵¹, to keep watching and praying not to enter into temptations⁵², and to be on guard against every form of greed and inner indisposition⁵³. Watchfulness is the required quality for waiting on the coming of the Lord⁵⁴. The term “mindfulness” is used more frequently today to express the state of watchfulness.

80. In the modern world, we are very attentive to virus threats, health alerts and climatic warnings. We take precautions against the danger of hacking of computers and stealing material goods. Unfortunately, most of us are not attentive to the threats to our vocational life and spiritual health. We need to cultivate mindfulness to take care of our inner world from being overtaken by our own emotions and ideas and to be alert to the enticements from outside. Mindfulness will keep us to be sensitive to the signs of the times. The virtues of resilience and endurance in times of trials and conscious cooperation with the will of God require a good level of mindfulness. Mindless acts often lead to unfortunate consequences. It is important for a joyful life to cultivate mindfulness.

4. Smile

⁵¹ Cf. Mt 7:15; 24:4-5; Mk 8:15; Rom 16:17.

⁵² Cf. Mk 14:38; Lk 12:15.

⁵³ Cf. Lk 12:15, 1 Pet 5:8.

⁵⁴ Cf. Mt 24:42; 25:13; Mk 13:35.

81. I suggest that our missionaries cherish and use the gift of a smile to witness and proclaim the joy of the Gospel to our brothers and sisters. A smile is the flower that blooms on the soil of gratitude and joy in the heart, a priceless gift of exchange among the people of beatitudes. The Bible attests that “The light of the eyes rejoices the heart” and “a cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones” (Proverbs 15:30; 17:22). It takes a contemplative heart to offer an authentic smile to someone. An artificially simulated smile withers as quickly as a tender flower offered to please a maiden. Smile relativizes what is trivial in life and appreciates what is worthy of love. It is healthy to cultivate the “wisdom smile”⁵⁵ that blooms as we take cognizance of our own follies and mistakes, and the follies of others. This smile has the glow of understanding. A caring smile is the affirmation of the divine image in the other. Our communities and apostolic venues will have more liveliness if we can gift God’s smile to each other rather than casting cold, fault-finding glances at their limitations. Our soul replenishes on the smile of God. That is why we pray with the psalmist, “Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord” (Ps 4:6).

5. Appreciative attitude to others⁵⁶

82. The gift of rejoicing in the achievements and talents of others is necessary for a missionary to celebrate communion in community life and to promote shared mission. This is perhaps the first gift of God’s love poured in our hearts, which helps to see the other as God’s grace and gift, and never as an enemy or a threat.

⁵⁵ You may recall the famous story of Leo Tolstoy about an Angel who was sent to the earth to find answers for three questions for resenting the decision of God. He smiles each time he discovered the wisdom of God’s actions.

⁵⁶ Cf. MS 48.2,5.

The other is discovered as a parable of God's love, a brother or a sister still on the road to holiness. Skills and talents of the other are gifts of God for you and others, and evoke gratitude. Limitations of the other can help develop our capacity for compassion and fortitude to accept the other in his condition. An appreciative approach enables us to offer others apt fraternal correction to overcome their limitations if possible. Authentic encounter with the mystery of God prepares us to encounter the deepest mystery of the other, which transcends their personal strengths and weaknesses as well as their cultural, ethnic, and gender wrappings. Respect and love for the other safeguards subject-to-subject relationship which precludes any treatment of the other as an object. An appreciative attitude for the other born of Gospel love is a condition for our pastoral relationship with people especially the poor in order to love them, as Jesus loves, "to the very end" (Jn 13:1). Any other form of love tends to manipulate and use the poor for ego-centric gains.

6. Holistic thinking

83. The capacity to hold differences within a comprehensive understanding of reality is another important gift for a missionary to experience the beauty of his faith and walk to various existential peripheries of human life. A dualistic mind cannot savour the mystery of one and triune God, the mystery of incarnation, Mary as mother and virgin, Church as communion, different charisms in harmonious unity, and the human condition as sinful and redeemed. An integral Christian vision of life offers the space to listen to differences of ideas and perspectives. It helps us to decipher the seeds of goodness and truth in all kinds of diversity that surrounds us. Conflicts in community are better handled when differences and disagreements are viewed as

different perspectives of the same issue. I think the antidote to many “isms” of rigid and narrow views of life (individualism, clericalism, tribalism, caste-ism etc.) is to have a comprehensive view of reality by pooling one’s own perspective with that of others.

7. Claretian Virtues

84. Our Founder gave much importance to the cultivation of virtues that he considered essential for a missionary⁵⁷. They are very relevant today for us to be effective especially in the context of many worldly values that contaminate young minds today. The first in his list is the foundational virtue of humility, which helps one to be grounded in the reality of one’s own existence and the mercy of God who saves him. An arrogant, pompous and self-made missionary cannot give witness to the joy of the Gospel. The other virtues of poverty, meekness, modesty and mortification dissipate selfishness and sets one’s heart on fire with God’s love. This self-emptying love makes a missionary credible and approachable to the people of God. We have come across honest and committed missionaries who scare away people because they have difficulty integrating their anger and frustration. Our love for God and his people invite us to surrender the un-evangelized parts of our own lives to Christ through the practice of virtues and to engage our whole being in the mission of Christ.

8. Integration of shadows

85. It is naïve for a missionary to pretend to live his missionary ideals without struggle and failures as if he is free from the

⁵⁷ Cf. Aut. 340-437.

influence of original sin and concupiscence. A mature missionary learns to integrate the shadow side of his life by recognizing and honestly owning it up. It could be his hurts, wounds, sins, sense of rejection and other collected hurt feelings from his past. What is not integrated is disintegrating in one's life. People with unhealed wounds wound others and collect more hurts. In certain cases, one may need professional help to integrate his brokenness. In the normal context, we have wonderful resources in the Church to help us live healthy and integrated lives at the service of the people of God. For example, the sacraments of reconciliation, Eucharist, meditation, prayer methods, and the practice of Spiritual Direction. I recommend all our missionaries to consciously appreciate and benefit from these priceless resources in the Church.

9. Integral self-care

86. Love for the missions prompt us to keep ourselves fit for missionary commitment in any situation. Taking care of our intellectual, moral, emotional, spiritual and Claretian formation as well as proper physical health care form vital part of our missionary commitment because we want to offer the best of ourselves to God and to his people. It is edifying to see many of our missionaries serving tirelessly with a young missionary heart even in their advanced age. Many of them keep themselves intellectually up to date and physically fit to serve the community because they practice the art of holistic self-care in order to care for others. They know how to embrace eventual illness, and physical and mental deterioration of old age with the same missionary love. It is love of Christ that urges a missionary on both in health and in illness to serve the Lord. It is sad to see some missionaries who spend up their health and energy in inordinate

living habits and march towards early retirement already in their middle age. Missionary care of health is different from the cult of body for self-promotion. I urge our missionaries to give due attention to their holistic wellbeing and integrity of life so that they can offer themselves to the Lord as fitting instruments for the proclamation of the Gospel.

10. Prayer of intercession for all our missionaries

87. When the awareness that we are one body with different members in mission⁵⁸, we express our participation in the wellbeing of the congregational body in beautiful ways. The prayer of communion and intercession for the whole Congregation and its mission on a daily basis is an important way to strengthen the life and mission of each Claretian and each community. We are certain of the communion and intercession of our Blessed Mother, our Founder, martyr brothers and departed Claretians from the other side of the veil of death. It is equally important that on this side of the veil, in the valley of tears, we need to meet together in the contemplative space of God's presence where we commend every Claretian and every mission to the care of the Lord. The psalmist reminds us, "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain; Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain" (Ps 127:1). We do well to reinforce the habit of remembering the Congregation in our personal and community prayers.

***For Introspection:** Have you considered the ardent desire of Claret for his missionaries to cultivate the virtues he considered essential for a missionary? What do you consider are the most*

⁵⁸ Cf. MS 47.

important competencies you need to develop in order to live and communicate the joy of the Gospel today?

CONCLUSION

88. We live at a time of incredible innovations and unpredicted changes in all walks of life. We also come across intense conflicts and wars that destroy human lives and provoke mass movements across continents. Some of the recent political happenings in the world proved that the unfolding of historical events does not follow even the best of scientific predictions and calculations⁵⁹. In the midst of these exciting as well as agonizing turn of events, we are convinced that the world needs the Gospel of joy to give meaning and hope to life.

89. In this context, we shall reinforce the processes of our own transformation to become new wineskins to hold the ever-new wine of the Gospel and proclaim the joy of this Gospel in the world today. We shall welcome and co-create the future of our Congregation with an open mind and open heart in obedience to the Spirit of the Lord. We are already in that future when each Claretian rejoices in his vocation and ministry, and brings his best to the community; and each community nurtures its bond of fraternal love and missionary vitality, and contribute its best to the mission of the province/delegation. In its turn, each province/delegation gives and receives the best of each other for the integral good of the Congregation which is called to proclaim the joy of the Gospel. We shall accompany this process through the facilitating service of authority at all levels in the Congregation. To be true to our vocation and mission, we must keep our gaze fixed on Christ from whom we learn the art of authentic living and loving. In our journey to the future, we are bound together with our Blessed Mother whose accompanying

⁵⁹ You may consider Brexit, elections in US, fight for Islamic state in the Middle East among many.

love envelops us, our Founder, our martyred brothers and all Claretians of the past and the present. We shall not forget that our communion in the Lord and with one another as a Charismatic family in the Church is inclusive of all people and all creation. Together let us be that symphony of the joy of the Gospel conducted by the Spirit of the Risen Lord for joy to the world!

90. With St. Paul we shall keep saying, “Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Phil 4:4).

Rome, November 20, 2106, memory of Blessed Andrea Solá, Claretian martyr, and conclusion of the Jubilee year of Mercy

Mathew Vattamattam CMF
Superior General

**CALLED TO RADIATE THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL
IN THE WORLD TODAY**

I. WHAT IS THE LORD ASKING OF US IN OUR TIMES?	5
1. One year after the celebration of the XXV General Chapter	5
2. The gift of two important ecclesial events for our missionary life ..	6
2.1. Year of Consecrated Life: A time to deepen our Missionary Vocation	6
2.2. Jubilee Year of Mercy: Entering through the door of God’s Mercy ..	7
3. Called to walk forward as missionaries “with Spirit” (MS 39)	8
4. Called to be Credible witnesses of the Gospel	10
5. Joy of Being a Missionary in the Style of Claret	12
II. OPENING OURSELVES TO THE PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATION	15
1. Ecological Conversion	15
1.1. Claretian mission within an integral ecology	16
1.2. Caring for a “Claretian Ecology”	19
2. Pastoral conversion: A Congregation going forth	22
2.1. Going to the peripheries	23
2.2. Reaching out to the Youth and care for vocations	25
2.3. Evangelization of evangelizers	27
2.4. Evangelization in the digital continent and publication ministry	28
3. Personal and community Conversion	28
3.1. Being a Community of Witnesses and Messengers	29
3.1.1. Creating Community-Mission	29
3.1.2. Transformation in the Governance of the Congregation	31
3.1.3. Transformation in the use of money and temporal goods	32
3.2. Men who adore God in the Spirit	34
3.2.1. Cultivating our missionary spirituality	35
3.2.2. Missionary Vocation as a transforming call of God	36
3.2.3. Formation, an ongoing journey of Transformation	37

III. TEMPTATIONS AND SPIRITUAL AILMENTS THAT AFFLICT OUR LIFE AND MISSION	40
1. Spiritual Worldliness	40
1.1. Clericalism	41
1.2. Careerism	41
1.3. Vain glory	42
1.4. Pessimism	42
1.5. Business mentality	43
1.6. Social status	43
2. Activism and lethargy	44
3. Digital Worldliness	45
4. Gossip	46
5. Pastoral Individualism	46
6. Dualistic thinking and excessive rationalism	47
IV. COMPETENCIES AND GIFTS FOR PROCLAIMING THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL TODAY	49
1. Discernment	49
2. Listening	50
3. Mindfulness	51
4. Smile	52
5. Appreciative attitude to others	52
6. Holistic thinking	53
7. Claretian Virtues	54
8. Integration of shadows	54
9. Integral self-care	55
10. Prayer of intercession for all our missionaries	56
CONCLUSION	57