

Letter from the Superior General after the General Council

March 8-19, 2017

Dear brothers,

After the intensive General Council of March, I want to greet you on behalf of the General Government. Here in Rome, the winter is giving way to spring, when the trees that looked dead and frozen in the cold are coming alive with sprouts getting ready to bloom. Though we know it happens each year in nature, we are often alarmed about the times of winter both in our individual lives and in the Congregation. Hard times in the life of individuals and of the Congregation inspire us to achieve greater apostolic vigour to bear fruit in the Church. Nature teaches us to be patient, faithful and enduring both in good and in bad times, as it keeps moving forward through seasons and years.

I write this letter to communicate some of the reflections and deliberations of the General Council after its intensive session in March, and to invite you to contribute your share to fulfil the mission of the Congregation in the Church and in the world today.

1. Two Congregational events that invite us to greater fidelity to our Charism

Providence has designed two events for us in 2017 for the benefit of our life and mission. We shall not let them pass by as mere commemorations and celebrations without allowing them to deeply challenge our missionary commitment in the Church today.

a. Bicentenary of the birth of Fr. Xifre (19 February-1817).

Father Xifre, whose vision and commitment greatly influenced the course of the Congregation during its first fifty years, has left us a beautiful legacy of going forth to the peripheries with the joy of the Gospel. He began his mandate in the Congregation with just 12 members and 1 house in 1860 and left it with 1782 members and 61 houses in 7 countries when he died in 1899. He lived the gift of his missionary vocation with an untiring and strong character, which has at times obscured the eyes of many from seeing the beauty of his missionary heart. Our Congregation has grown large and wide since its birth in the Church. However, without the Claretian missionary impulse that moved Fr. Xifre, we can only make a loud noise without the music that characterizes our Charism and mission in the Church. We grew because God had a free hand in and through the missionary availability and daring zeal of our pioneer Claretians. The bicentenary celebration is an opportunity to return to the foundational values that embody our Charism. I would like to highlight a few qualities of Fr. Xifre that are relevant for us.

- **Adherence to the Spirit of the Founder.** Fr. Xifre kept himself in constant contact with the Founder in all matters while the founder was alive. The definition of a Claretian missionary is well exemplified in the life of Fr. Xifre with the wealth and limitations of his personality.
- **Love for the Congregation.** He spent his whole energy for the growth of the Congregation and for the good of his brothers. His ardent love for the life and mission of the Congregation urged him to undertake many tedious and perilous travels to other continents in those days which we find difficult to imagine.

- **Missionary Vision.** He saw the Congregation beyond its immediate horizon and wanted the missionaries to go to the peripheries where people longed for the word of God. Without the missionary imagination that takes us beyond the limits of our immediate concerns, we risk “settling” in comfort zones and begin to suffer “rusting”.
- **Hard work and endurance.** Fr. Xifre challenges us today to get out of a “go-soft culture” which domesticates the prophetic dimension of our Charism and prefers a risk-free and easy-going life. He teaches us that we can live our life joyfully with very little and offer very much for the spiritual welfare of others.

I invite all the Major Organisms to benefit from this year in which we commemorate Fr. Xifre and organise forums to know our early history and the impulse that moved the early missionaries to undertake great missionary ventures and to accept joyfully the hardships in those missions. Today, we greatly need this gift of missionary zeal and courage to find new avenues to proclaim the joy of the Gospel.

b. Beatification of the 109 Martyrs of Spain

Pope Francis has approved the beatification of the 109 Claretian Martyrs which we hope to celebrate on 21st October 2017. The Holy Family Church in Barcelona has generously offered its facilities to express their appreciation for the life-giving sacrifice of the martyrs. We await the final confirmation from the Holy See. Let us celebrate this event meaningfully in a simple way focussing on the Gospel values that our martyr brothers testified in their lives. A commission has been formed to prepare the beatification ceremony while another commission has been constituted to animate and accompany the whole Congregation in imbibing and deepening the Gospel values for which the Martyrs laid their lives. The General Prefect of Spirituality is coordinating both the commissions.

The martyrs are sons of the Congregation and they belong to the whole Church. We shall celebrate the event together with the people in our missionary positions. I invite every Major Organism to form teams of animation to communicate with the General prefect of Spirituality and organize programs suited to their context to internalize and manifest the important values that the martyrs proclaimed in their lives. I highlight a few here:

- **Fidelity to one’s faith and vocation.** Unlike the martyrs of Barbastro, most of these martyrs were captured while on their way home and often were alone or in small groups to face the ordeal. They chose to die than give up their faith and missionary dream for a worldly one.
- **Forgiveness:** Many of them literally imitated Jesus, forgiving and praying for their assassins. The life of Jesus was the light of their life.
- **Resilience:** The courage to face the persecution with an otherworldly calmness. They took pride in being sons of the heart of the Mother who was brave to say her “fiat” and remain true to it even at the foot of the cross.
- **Solid formation for a missionary life.** They received a formation that enabled them to cooperate with God’s grace to remain steadfast in their commitment to Jesus to the very end.

The best homage we can pay to our martyrs is to live our own vocation with the generosity of the heart to lay down our lives for others. Its concrete expression is in giving up our comfort zones and being available to be sent in mission to where people need God’s word of consolation. Martyrdom and fidelity are fruits of God’s grace working in a cooperating person. Self-emptying love embodied in the martyrdom of our brothers is an essential dimension of our missionary vocation, which we celebrate in the mystery of the Eucharist each day. Our Founder shows us the way to live our lives as Eucharist broken and shared for the life of others in the midst of many inevitable sufferings.

2. A Congregation “going forth” (MS 66-68)

Our reflection of the various themes are arranged in this letter around the three processes of transformation proposed by the XXV General Chapter.

a. Apostolate

Fr. Artur Teixeira shared the initiatives taken in the last months and the next steps to keep us on the road to fulfill the vision, objective and proposals from the first process of transformation. He mentioned the visits to Mozambique and the commitment of our missionaries in that challenging missionary context. He also shared about his visit to the “peripheries” in Bilbao (Spain) where we run a huge project that covers complementary fields, from education, housing, employment, to health and immigration, to respond to the “poverties” of the neighborhood. The other points of reflection in the Apostolate are:

- Involvement of Claretians from all the continents in deepening one of our six Charismatic traits in mission each year (throughout the sexennium) and concretizing it in about twenty different apostolic contexts.
- The opportunity for any Claretian to attend an online forum on missionary conversion that is taking place on www.apostoladocmf.org before a Congregational meeting on this crucial matter.
- Orientation of spiritual exercises in several Major Organisms on the key of the six Charismatic traits in mission and the three processes of transformation.

Solidarity and Mission: The following points were discussed:

- The new action plan from the Secretariat of JPIC;
- The admission as associate member of VIVAT International
- The steps taken so far to clarify among ourselves and to better coordinate our presence at the United Nations in New York-USA (making new statutes discussed and available to all).
- The discernment and selection from 53 new projects received by our General Procure of Missions and all the demanding work and accompaniment needed to implement its objectives, criteria, and requirements in a proper way
- The continuity of our commitment to the inter-congregational project of South Sudan.

Regarding the **educational ministry**, we make efforts to keep our educational institutions rooted in our identity and practice as Claretian evangelizers. This year we are proposing to foster a partnership between ACLA and ECLA in education ministry to create synergies in which both can benefit from each other. It entails the facilitation of encounters between teams from the new schools to profit from the experience and expertise of more advanced centers and find ways to progress in a Claretian way by suitable ways of collaboration among them.

The General Prefect of Apostolate will continue directly to take care of the animation of **TICS** at the general level until our presence in this platform requires its own Secretariat.

b. Youth Ministry and Vocations

Bro. Carlos Verga shared about his contact with the various Major Organisms and the workshops organized in the conferences of ECLA and ASCLA-West in the past one year to articulate and coordinate the youth ministry in the various contexts and to recognize the youth apostolate as an integral part of Claretian mission. Almost all Major Organisms have a prefecture or secretariat on youth ministry and Vocations. The prefecture is planning an encounter of the respective prefects/secretaries of youth ministry in 2018 in view of re-launching the ministry within the framework of the entire Congregation. We are yet to decide if it is to be held either before or after the

synod of Bishops on Youth and Vocations. We plan an online course for the Claretians and pastoral workers to prepare them better for YVM. Another initiative concerns facilitating learning by providing opportunities for living contact with youth ministry in other places. The new webpage on youth ministry and vocations is an effective platform to share resources and enhance our presence and ministry among the youth.

The province of Central America has already begun the preparations to receive Claretian youth and youth workers of the Claretian family for the World youth day (WYD) to be held in Panama in 2019. Our experience during the past events of WMD affirm the positive impact it has on the youth ministry and we are learning better how to coordinate and participate in this important ecclesial event at a Congregational level. I encourage all Major Organisms to take advantage of this event for empowering the youth in their transformative journey as evangelizers and send at least a small team to participate in the event. Even when many cannot physically be present in the place due to distance and financial limitations, modern media facilitates the participation of groups even from a distance.

I would like to remind all of us that our ministry to the youth and promotion of vocations will bear fruit when all of us are involved in it within the spheres of our responsibilities. All of us can do at least three things. The first is to pray for vocations and bring the young generations to the Lord in our prayer. The second is to live our own missionary vocation joyfully. There is nothing as inspiring and attractive as an authentic and joyful Christ-centered life which can provoke the questions of faith and purpose of life in the hearts of the youth. The third is to genuinely love and care for the young when we are in contact with them and support the youth ministry of the Congregation in whatever way possible.

c. Bible Ministry, Institutes of Consecrated life and Publications

Fr. Henry Omonisaye shared about the activities of the areas of the mission that he has been animating. We insist that each Major Organism assign a missionary, either the prefect of Apostolate himself or a delegate, to be responsible to coordinate the Biblical ministry in its missions. They would form the team at the level of the Conferences and eventually we intend to set up a Congregational bible team. The conference of MICLA is better organized in this regard while other Conferences are slowly catching up.

There will be a meeting of the Board of Directors of our Institutes of Consecrated Life in Rome from 6-8 June 2017. Many steps are being taken to harness the resources of our different Institutes with a common vision by making use of various platforms to reach a wider range of consecrated people. We hope to initiate a Theological Institute of Consecrated life in Africa (TICLA) in Abuja, Nigeria in the near future and the conference of Africa (ACLA) will give priority to its realization and growth to make a specific Claretian contribution in the Church in Africa.

Collaboration and coordination among the Claretian publishers help us to address the many challenges faced by the publication ministry and find creative and new ways to evangelize by means of this ministry. A meeting of publishers is being planned to be held in Bangalore in 2018.

3. A Community of Witnesses and Messengers (MS 69-72)

a. Responding to the needs of the Universal Mission

Following the reflections during the meeting of Major Superiors in Sri Lanka, I have sent a letter to all the major superiors asking them to concretize the possible sending and receiving of missionaries in the coming four years. The first impression I get from the response is the openness and willingness of the Major Organisms to own up together the needs of the Universal Congregation, and to send and receive missionaries from other cultural contexts. The responses also show a willingness to create our future together by creating a healthy Claretian ecology. However, the projected figures for receiving missionaries in the coming four years (248) is far greater than those for sending (180). During the last one year, I have come across generous availability for the mission in many missionaries while we also have many who find it hard to leave their home-based tents. We need to recapture the daring spirit of the early missionaries to become a Congregation “going forth” as envisioned by the last General

Chapter. The letter one writes to Superior General before the final profession should not be reduced to a mere ritual, but needs to be an authentic expression of missionary availability.

We need to enhance a mature intercultural missionary environment in the Congregation, which would truly radiate what Claret predicted when he said, “My spirit is for the whole world”. Every time we take a step to send and receive missionaries as sons of the Congregation, giving priority to the fire of God’s love that burns in us, we are getting closer to the desire of our Founder’s heart. We will make special efforts to have concrete programs to prepare the missionaries who are sent in mission to other cultures and to receive them by proper co-ordination and collaboration between the General Government and the different Major Organisms.

b. Canonical Visits, Provincial Chapters and Assemblies

We have planned Canonical Visits of 2017 in the continent of Africa. Today Africa could be termed as the “young wine (viña joven)” in the way Claret termed America in his days. We hope that the Canonical Visits would be an occasion to deepen our missionary identity, harmonize our life style to the message proclaimed, and foster greater contribution to the Church in Africa from our Charismatic heritage. The Congregation also has much to profit from the cultural treasures of Africa.

Three of our provinces in America are preparing for their provincial Chapters: USA-Canada (5-9 June); Colombia Venezuela (26 June-1July) and Brazil (17-22 July). I invite all the Claretians to pray for these Provinces for the outpouring of the Spirit for a renewed missionary vigour. Three Independent Delegations are conducting their assemblies: Italy (18-20 April) and Indonesia-East Timor (18-22 July) and St. Charles Lwanga (11-13 September). We shall keep them also in our prayers.

c. Re-organization and New Foundations

We evaluated the process of reorganization of our presence in Europe, which is progressing at different paces. We see honest commitment on the part of the respective Governments of the Major Organisms without denying the normal anxiety of the human heart engaged in a change process. The Pasqual Mystery of dying and rising is embedded in the very fabric of our missionary life from the outset when we left our homes to enter into religious life and in the many transfers that concluded one phase of our lives and opened another. We can embrace the many changes of life calmly because we are anchored deep in the mystery of God’s steadfast love. Let us keep in mind that revision of positions and re-organization are normal processes of adapting to the changes both in the society and in the Congregation. They are necessarily self-referent activities that keep us worried about our gains and losses. While giving these processes their due importance, we should see that they do not consume our apostolic energy and resources unreasonably. We reorganize our missionary presence in a geographic area to become more effective evangelizers. The same principle is also valid for the dependent Delegations that are in the process of becoming Independent Delegations. They should focus on the consolidation of their respective missions by preparing enough personnel to assume responsibilities and creating stable Claretian communities and necessary structures for effective evangelization in a defined geographical area.

The Province of Philippines will open a mission in Myanmar in a few months. The designated missionaries are undergoing a preparation for it in Philippines.

It is important to keep our missionary vision clear. When we take our focus away from the purpose for which we are in the Church, we suffer fragmentation and apostolic inertia, irrespective of whether we multiply or diminish in our organisational structures.

d. Economy

The General council did the assessment of the budgets of the major organisms and the activities of General government before dealing with other themes. Our task was made easier because of the

service of an efficient economic council. Supported by its evaluation, I can say that, in general, the economic functioning of the Congregation is quite healthy.

We have found that sharing of goods continues to grow in the Congregation, so we can support not only the ordinary needs, especially of the formation expenses of many Organisms, but also the requests of some extraordinary grants, mainly to extend formation houses in the growing areas of the Congregation. Meanwhile, the Aid Fund fulfils an important role in supporting the efforts of the young Organisms to manage the growth and sustenance of the missions on their own by progressively increasing their internal resources.

The General Econome has informed about the important meeting of economies of the Organisms to be held in Batatais (Brazil) in September and about the implementation of an online course for the training of economies. The aim is that technical training, on either a basic or advanced level, reaches the economies of the Organisms, the local economies and the formandi. In coordination with the Prefecture of Formation, this training will be included in the initial Formation stage. The course will include some lessons about the Claretian criteria for the management of goods.

Furthermore, we have programmed the economic audits that will accompany the canonical visits foreseen to the Organisms of ACLA. Several of them will be made by the General Econome, others by designated delegates.

General Government has constituted a commission to advise and accompany the Major Organisms in the construction of building structures which are funded through the General Government. The commission is formed of the General Econome, Fr. Gonzalo Fernandez, Fr. Miguel Angel Velasco, Fr. Grilla and a nominee from the respective place.

We have come across an “economic disease” that afflicts a few missionaries when they are in contact with money. They handle finances on their own without consulting their legitimate superiors and community, and finally get into unfortunate situations of being misguided by their own desires and fantasies, or taken advantage of by others. Management of finances without transparency and accountability in any situation is a red alert. It is unsafe to cross the “yellow line” marked by the norms of consecrated life on the use of temporal goods.

e. General Secretariat

Fr. Joseba Kamiruaga took charge as the new Secretary General from 3 February 2017. After serving excellently for about 19 years as General Secretary, Fr. Jose Felix moved to the community of Juridicum in Rome. He now serves there as the superior of the Community and continues as Procurator General of the Congregation to represent us at the Holy See.

The course for the new secretaries of Major Organisms held in January is hoped to produce their fruits in their respective Organisms. The course emphasized the importance of maintaining effective communication within the Congregation, updating data in the Seclar and maintaining the archives well. The team for communication “ad intra” in the Congregation at the general Curia consists of Joseba Kamiruaga, Louie Guades and Mario Kevin Armigo, which is making efforts to qualify and update our means of communication by tapping the expertise available in different Organisms for our common good. They are also working on a digital photo archive of our missions especially related to their early history.

4. Men who Adore God in the Spirit (MS 73-75)

a. Spirituality

Forge Center for Claretian Renewal : In the area of Spirituality we focused, especially, on the new approach to the residential Forge programme. Starting from the proposal of the 25th General Chapter (cf. MS 74.7) and considering the discernment made with the Major Superiors in Sri Lanka, the

General Government has approved the establishment of the *Forge Center for Claretian Renewal*, which will be based in our house of Los Negrales, Madrid belonging to the Province of Santiago. We have approved also the statutes that regulate its operation and we have appointed team composed of Juan Carlos Martos (director), Salvador León, Paulson Valiyanoor and Roland Onuekwusi. Each year they will organize two encounters: one in English (April-June) and another one in Spanish (October-December). These encounters are specially designed for the Claretians who are in the middle age (between 40 and 60 years).

I invite all the Major Superiors to plan the participation of the members of their Organisms so that, over the next few years, all the Claretians who are in this age group or have completed 25 years of profession may attend this *Encounter for Claretian Renewal* (ECR). The Congregation is making a great effort to help us revitalize our missionary vocation and live in depth the three processes of transformation called for by the 25th General Chapter. I thank the Province of Santiago for all the facilities provided to launch the initiative and the members of the Team for their availability.

We are also renewing the **CESC** (Claretian spirituality Center) Team in Vic with Claretians from different backgrounds, so that, in coordination with the *Forge Center* of Los Negrales, it may continue to encourage the knowledge and appreciation of our Founder and the promotion of Claretian spirituality.

The “**Claretian Year**” project is taking its first steps, but probably will not be ready until 2019. It is an instrument that aims to help us live the spiritual journey of our Founder throughout the year. The Prefect of Spirituality also reported on some publications that the Prefecture is preparing as well as some suggestions to articulate the various groups of laity who collaborate with us throughout the world in a network of “Friends of Claretians”.

b. Formation

The prefect of formation has been familiarizing with the formation realities through his animation visits to the formation houses in Nigeria, Cameroun, and India during the past few months. The gift of many vocations and the commitment of the Organisms to offer good formation are very heartening. It was observed that we are also now facing formation issues arising from secularism and changes in the society. We have about 1400 young men in the formation process in about 74 formation centers. It is a huge responsibility, which we should assume with gratitude and courage by offering a conducive formative Congregational culture of joyful missionary life and commitment in all our Major Organisms. The experience of Claretian life during the initial formation and after it should be a single process of continuous and progressive grasp of the depth, width, length, and height of the love of Christ (Eph 3:18) as it happened in the life of our Founder and the martyr brothers.

The School of the Heart of Mary for Formators is planned from April 18 to July 7, 2017. This course in English has 24 participants from 14 organisms. The participants of the course had already finished their ten-week online course on Accompaniment as part of the formators course. We have included the training in accompaniment as a response to the proposal from the last General Chapter. The same course will be held in Spanish in 2018.

Evaluation and revision of the General Plan of Formation (GPF): The General Government, following the recommendation of the major superiors during their encounter in Sri Lanka, formed the commission that would help in the review of the GPF and later, make the necessary evaluation and revision. The commission is formed by the following members:

ACLA: Fr. Kenneth Oguejiofor and Fr. Théophile Yene
ASCLA EAST: Bro. Desiderio Ching and Fr. Vianney Lusi Emi
ASCLA WEST: Fr. James Kannanthanam and Fr. Antony Bhyju
ECLA: Fr. Paul Smyth and Fr. Jose Ramon Sanz
MICLA. Fr. Marcos Garnica and Bro. Fernando Kuhn
General Government: Fr. Leo Dalmao and Fr. Gonzalo Fernandez

The process for the review and revision of the General Plan of Formation is now going on. Questionnaires for the formators, candidates, and collaborators were already sent to the different organisms for the first part of the process. It was sent in January 2017. The collated responses are to be sent to Rome by the end of May. From September 25 to 30, 2017, the commission for the evaluation and revision of the GPF will meet in Rome to work for the draft of the formation plan. After this meeting, a series of consultations to the different conferences on the draft of the text will follow.

5. Concluding Reflection

The General Government also evaluated its own functioning as a team at the service of the Congregation. The openness to diversities among us and teaming up with one another to facilitate the three transformations have been a rewarding experience for us. The theology of shared mission illumines the exercise of authority at the service of the mission of Congregation and harnesses the distinctive responsibilities of the General Consulters for the common good. A second stage of any group development is often termed as a ‘conflict stage’, which claims space for individual idiosyncrasies in a group. It may happen to our team too as we move on. Nevertheless, we are aware that different perspectives and gifts we have among us are not at all a threat to the cohesion of the group, but invaluable gifts of God to refine each other and enrich our service to the Congregation. We have experienced that when we shared our different perceptions freely and openly without identifying with them. A more fruitful understanding of the reality would emerge out of the sharing. The experience of unity in diversity within the group makes the mystery of the Trinity more tangible to us.

I hope our Congregational unity in the Claretian Charism with the richness of our personal and cultural diversities give visibility to the mystery of God we believe in. When the love of God inflames our hearts, the diversities in each of us and among us will find the harmony and beauty of the work of God. Our great challenge, perhaps, is to learn to play each one’s part comfortably together with others playing their own alongside, and giving life to the single piece of music in the Congregational orchestra. The first step is to feel the whole piece of music in each one’s heart before one begins to play one’s own. We learn this art from our Blessed Mother whose free and generous “fiat” was one of the best pieces in the salvation history to which we can unite our own feeble “fiat”. Our Father Founder and our martyr brothers learned to say “fiat” by contemplating the Blessed Mother’s life. It is our turn to say a similar “fiat” to God’s invitation to us today.



Fr. Mathew Vattamattam cmf
Superior General

