

## Letter of Superior General – April 2018

Dear Brothers,

At the close of the March General Council meetings, I would like to share with you the major concerns and decisions of the meeting. Our reflections on the important concerns of the Congregation at this moment of our history brings alive in me a particular scene from the Gospel of John. It was also a time close to the Passover festival (cf. John 6:4). Seeing the large crowd of people in front of him, Jesus asked a question inviting the disciples to explore, “Where shall we buy bread so that these people may eat?” (John 6:5).

We are 500 communities in around 65 countries. The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few (Mt 9:37). In this circumstance of the scarcity of missionaries to be present amidst the people in the various peripheries of human struggles, we are obliged to abandon many of our missionary platforms in many Major Organisms. Like Philip, we count the cost and lose heart, “Two hundred silver coins would not buy enough bread for each of them to have a piece” (John 6:7). Jesus invited them to witness the miracle of a gesture of generosity in his hands. It started with a boy who placed his five barley loaves and two fish in the hands of Jesus who gave thanks and distributed it to feed the multitudes (cf. John 6:8-12). There was abundance over and above meeting the need of the people.

We are concerned about the lack of personnel and resources when we plan for the days ahead. I do not expect to find magical solutions to meet our needs. Nevertheless, I believe in the miracle of the Lord, which He works with the gesture of generosity of each of us who places the little that we have into His hands. The experience of our Founder and the handful of the first Claretians give us the assurance that apostolic fruitfulness is not a matter of quantity, but the function of being a leaven of the Gospel that ferments the dough (cf. Mt 13:33; Gal 5:9; 1 Cor 5:6). Our charismatic fruitfulness in the Church calls for at least three commitments on our part:

1. Grateful appreciation on the part of each Claretian of his vocation and its being anchored in the person of Christ, which is nurtured in the Heart of Mary.
2. Generously placing our time, talents and resources at the disposal of the mission of the Congregation at local and universal levels.
3. Courageous missionary presence in the various platforms of evangelization in keeping with our charism to walk with and accompany people with the mind of Christ.

Though we have remained numerically the same over the last two decades, there are two significant observations that cause concern. The first is that the distribution of personnel is not balanced. There are Major Organisms with numerous members while there are others that are going through a serious crisis of vocations. It calls for better formation and preparation of personnel for the universal mission and a suitable process of welcome and integration into the receiving Major Organisms in order to build our future together in the different parts of the world with our available personnel.

The second concern is that many communities are less than three members, which leads to multi-tasking and burnout in many missionaries. When there is no prospect of new members joining a community in the near future, it is self-defeating to pretend to go a long way but

limping with a heavy load on the head. It calls for timely revision of positions in all our Major Organisms.

When we take a glance at the overall balance of our Congregation with regard to personnel and resources, it is noted that we have made much progress in generously sharing goods and it has helped the growth of our new missions and formation of new members especially in Africa and Asia.

## **I. General Canonical Visitations**

We dedicated the year 2017 to do the Canonical Visitations in the continent of Africa. There is good growth taking place in our missionary commitment in this beloved continent where we are present in 17 countries. Our brothers are making good efforts to be present in the various areas such as missionary parishes, publications, preaching and education. Our missionaries are close to the people, especially the poor. At the close of the Canonical Visitation, the ACLA Conference had a one week long meeting with the General Government in November, 2017. The Conference planned various levels of collaboration and joint action in various areas especially in formation.

The General Canonical Visitations of 2018 will be in Asia. At the close of the visitations, we plan to have the meeting of both Conferences of ASCLA with the General Government which will be hosted in Indonesia in December, 2018.

## **II. First Process of Transformation: A Congregation going forth**

As we are nearing the midpoint of the sexennium of this General Government, we shall take stock of what is happening in the Congregation with respect to the call of the XXV General Chapter. Have we made progress in being a Congregation going forth as witnesses of the Joy of the Gospel? We will dedicate the Council meetings of October to evaluate our congregational journey.

### **Animation Visits, Education Ministry, Solidarity-Mission**

The Prefect of Apostolate shared about his recent visits and the upcoming ones to cooperate with our members and with the Major Organisms to move forward on this missionary conversion. He mentioned the Spiritual Exercises in Santiago (December 2017) as well as in Centro America (May-June 2018), the visit and Assembly in Zimbabwe (January 2018), the meeting with the Coordinators of the Pastoral Secretariats and Committees of Brazil at the end of his visit to D. Pedro Casaldáliga in São Félix do Araguaia, MG (February 2018) on the occasion of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his arrival in Brazil.

A meeting has been organized as previously informed for a group of Claretians who evangelize in different peripheries from all continents and will gather in Guatemala, from May 28 until June 2, 2018. Such an important forum and its main conferences and resources will be available at [www.apostoladocmf.org/en-salida](http://www.apostoladocmf.org/en-salida).

Related to Education Ministry, last February, Fr. Artur Teixeira attended the meeting of the Directors of 26 Schools from the Claretian Family in Europe, organized by the Interprovincial Commission for Schools, to deepen our reflection and common action based on our vision as evangelizers in education. He also gave the latest updates on the preparation of the first stage

of the Educational Exchange between ACLA and ECLA-Santiago (November 2018 and February 2019), as well as on the organization of the African Congress of Claretian Educators (Equatorial Guinea 2020).

In regard to “Solidarity and Mission” (SM), the journey that has been made (through meetings, formation, joint actions and media) in order to consolidate this new dynamism among the General Secretariat of JPIC, our presence at the United Nations - NY, our General Mission Procure and Proclade Internazionale ONLUS was highlighted. The appointment of SM Coordinators in each Interprovincial Conference has been requested. It is also crucial that at the level of each Conference as well as Major Organism we allow it to take root and then to work on these common areas of ministry in a long-term commitment. Throughout 2018, besides other initiatives (for instance, the “Claret-Life Award” and the “SOS Fund for emergency and natural disasters”), two Workshops on Solidarity and Mission will be offered in ACLA (Nairobi and Yaoundé) and two others in ASCLA East and West (Manila and Bangalore).

### **Bible Ministry, Publications and Claretian Institutes**

It is remarkable to observe the growing consciousness as well as activities related to Bible Ministry in the Congregation. The increasing number of visits to the site ([www.biblecmf.com](http://www.biblecmf.com)) and well as the various biblical reflections both on the general level and the different Major Organisms are indicative of this growth. Thus, the use of social media and digital means of communication as platforms for this ministry has been on the rise. Fr. Henry Omonisaye is appreciative of the response of the Major Organisms to his initiatives in the area of Bible Ministry. We are focussing on the coordination and empowerment of the Bible Ministry at the level of Conferences following the resolution of the XXV General Chapter and making this ministry an integral and transversal part of our life and ministry.

The ACLA Conference is getting more organized by assigning a coordinator to facilitate common initiatives in Bible Ministry especially in preparing programmes of formation of laity and pastoral bible ministry in the different Major Organisms of the Conference. The publication of bible diaries is gaining ground as well. Each year we are publishing more than one million bible diaries in about 17 languages. MICLA is organizing a Biblical Assembly to be held in May 2018 which will reflect on the theme “Bible and Politics”. An interesting initiative of the USA-Canada is the summer course on Bible studies in affiliation with the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago ([www.ibicla.org](http://www.ibicla.org)) which could be broadened at the level of the whole continent by making use of the online platform. This will, of course, have to be envisioned together as a Conference. ECLA and ASCLA have Bible diaries, and have other pastoral Bible ministries. We shall focus in the coming years on better organising this ministry in these two Conferences.

The triennial Meeting of Claret Publishing Group (CPG) was held in Bangalore from 10 to 17 February. 15 participants from 13 Publishing Houses of the Congregation were present at the meeting. It was a rich experience of sharing and planning of mutual cooperation, collaboration and up-to-date approach to this ministry in the service of the Word for evangelization. This, without doubt, takes into consideration the Directory of the CPG which enunciates the Claretian vision of the Publishing Ministry. Fr. Alberto Rossa continues to be its Coordinator and the next meeting is foreseen for 2021 in Sri Lanka. This missionary platform is a challenging periphery today and calls for closer collaboration among the units and a creative approach to reach out to people today especially the youth. The conclusions reached at the

meeting were approved at our meeting and we hope they will be implemented in the coming years with the accompaniment of Fr Henry Omonisaye.

We have reflected on our missionary service to Consecrated Life through the Institutes of Consecrated Life. We are appreciated for this service in the Church. An important initiative of the Congregation, which is gradually maturing, is the vision of having an Institute of Consecrated Life in Africa (TICLA). Steps have been taken to begin the Institute in Abuja in Nigeria by forming a team of competent persons to plan the project and to execute it in stages. A concrete action being organized from last year is the International Seminar on Consecrated Life. This year this Seminar will be from 13-16, November. MICLA has been aspiring for a Centre for Formation for Consecrated Life, though there is much to do to realise these aspirations. The already existing Institutes are making efforts to creatively respond to the challenges that religious are facing today and to fulfil the mission of evangelizing the evangelizers through these Institutes. The third Board Meeting of the Directors of our Institutes is proposed for the month of June.

### **Youth Ministry and Vocations**

We are happy that almost all Major Organisms have Prefectures or Secretariats for Youth Ministry and Vocations, which organize several activities to be present among the youth with the message of the Gospel. The forthcoming Synod of Bishops on this theme has given an added impetus to this ministry. The General Prefect of Youth Ministry and Vocations, Bro. Carlos Verga, has organized a Meeting of experienced Claretian youth and vocations ministers from different Branches of the Claretian Family in Rome from 11-23, February 2018 to prepare for the online Course for those Responsible for the Youth and Vocations Ministries of the different Major Organisms. This Course is expected to be in operation in September-October 2018. Working together as the Claretian Family is found to be very fruitful and mutually empowering in this area of apostolate.

The Prefecture of Youth Ministry and Vocations is organizing an experiential Workshop for Claretian Youth and Vocations Ministers in Rome, from 18th November to 1st December 2018. The Workshop will deepen the online Course done, and will focus on some concrete themes especially the personal accompaniment of the youth.

We are looking forward to the World Youth Day to be held in Panama where we have a significant Claretian presence. The Province of Central America and the RMI Claretian Sisters in Panama are getting ready to welcome Claretian youth for the event. We are learning from our experience of our presence in the previous WYD events to systematically organize our active participation in the event meaningfully. I urge the Major Organisms in America to benefit from this opportunity for the youth in our missions. The Claretian Major Organisms from distant countries could send at least two youth accompanied by a Claretian youth minister and explore the participation of many young people via online. Follow-up of the event is important to avoid remaining with merely the excitement of the grand event.

We need to consider networking and coordinating the Youth Ministry at the level of the Conferences and explore the possibilities of voluntary mission experience for suitable young people. Another aspect to reinforce is the collaboration among the Claretian Family to work among the youth. Finally, we must not fail to invite young people to discern the call of the Lord to a consecrated form of missionary life. Unless people listen in the depth of their heart, they cannot listen to the loving whisper of a call from God for his mission.

### **III. Second Process of Transformation: Community of Witnesses**

Various congregational forums such as Assemblies and Chapters have reflected on the call of the General Chapter to create missionary communities and rediscover the joy of living in communities which are houses and schools of communion (cf. MS 70). The growing intercultural nature of the communities is an important challenge to reckon with. We are exploring ways to put into practice the necessary interdisciplinary reflection regarding community life at all levels (cf. MS 70.5). We welcome creative suggestions to realize this invitation of the Chapter.

#### **Governance**

The reorganization of our presence in Europe is progressing. The Major Organisms of Betica, Portugal and the United Kingdom-Ireland have chosen the name “Fatima” for the future Province. These Organisms are engaged in a process of preparation which would eventually lead to the creation of the Province of Fatima at the beginning of 2019. A similar journey is being pursued by the Major Organisms of Catalunya, Euskal Herria, France and Italy, though the name is not yet decided. They hope to realize the creation of the new Province at the beginning of 2020. The maturity and fraternal openness of our brothers to create a sense of communion and belonging that transcend present confines of the Major Organisms makes me feel proud of their love for the Congregation and its mission. The Major Organisms of Germany and Poland are taking some steps to get to know each other and create suitable platforms for mutual collaboration.

The Delegation of Equatorial Guinea together with the Mission of Gabon will be erected as an Independent Delegation with the name “Padre Xifré” on July 16, 2018. The Vicar General, Fr. Gonzalo Fernandez, accompanies the process of the reorganization of our presence in this region of Africa. I appreciate the way our confreres, together with Fr. Gonzalo, made an honest discernment of the Lord’s will and assisted the General Government to finalize the process. We hope for a new surge of missionary enthusiasm in the new Organism to bring alive the untiring missionary thrust of Fr. Xifré.

The Dependent Delegation of Kolkotta has undertaken a series of programmes to deepen and consolidate the Claretian values and practices in its life and mission as a preparation to become an Independent Delegation in the coming year which marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Claretian presence in India. The Dependent Delegation of Sri Lanka too is on a similar journey of serious preparation to be eventually erected as an Independent Delegation. The Province of East Nigeria together with the West Nigeria Delegation is taking steps to strengthen the Claretian presence in North Nigeria for the eventual formation of a Delegation. The Missions of the Dependent Delegation of Angola-Sao Tome y Principe (Province of Portugal) as well as the Mission of Zimbabwe (Province of Betica) are in a process to discern what would be best for the growth of these Missions in the context of the creation of the Province of Fatima.

#### **Sharing of personnel across the Congregation**

We have found that adequate preparation of missionaries before sending them for the universal mission as well as the process of welcoming and integrating them into the life of the receiving Organism is crucial for enriching the mission of the Congregation through the sharing of personnel. Three members of the General Council participated in a one-week long Workshop

on the theme of intercultural community living and missioning in the last week of January 2018 organized by the Divine Word Missionaries in Rome. This is a relevant concern for a good number of Congregations.

After a period of slowing down the sending of missionaries to other Organisms, it is time to begin a new period of preparation and formation of intercultural mission communities by promoting greater availability for universal mission. For that, we need to consciously create a healthy intercultural environment to make a home for every Claretian irrespective of where he is assigned. At times, missionaries who are sent to a new culture or those who receive a missionary from another culture may get discouraged by individual failures in adaptation and integration. I intend to write to you on this theme in the near future.

## **Economy**

The General Commission of Economy has studied the budgets of the Major Organisms and the General Government and made their recommendations. The Commission has observed that the congregational patrimony, though not big, is progressively improving to take care of the needs of our missions and their growth. We need to take good care of our patrimony and administer it within the larger vision of the mission of the entire Congregation.

Though there is a general improvement in the economic administration and most of the missionaries live the simplicity of the Gospel, there are attitudes and practices of some missionaries, which require constant revision and conversion in order that we do not conform to the standards of the world, but rather to Christ in the style of Claret.

A significant economic activity recently was the transfer of Green Park Hotel Pamphili in Rome from our direct management to a credible private Hotel company named ATH.

The Prefecture of Economy has started the pilot course of training for the Claretian way of economic administration. I invite all Major Organisms to make use of this opportunity to create a culture of effective and responsible care and management of our material goods for the mission. We must consciously create a fraternal culture in our communities in such a way that our missionaries do not succumb to the many temptations of the comfort culture promoted by a consumer mentality which marginalizes millions into the throes of poverty. Our Founder knew very well that a simple life lived in the spirit of religious poverty makes the Gospel message credible before the world.

## **IV. Third process of Transformation: Adorers in Spirit**

### **Spirituality**

We consider that a major concern of Spirituality is how to move from a head level spirituality to a lived and experienced spiritual life, which is the fruit of our faith effecting transformation of our daily living.

The Prefecture of Spirituality counts on the assistance of the team of four missionaries of the Forge Programme in Los Negrales (Madrid) and another Team of four missionaries in the Spirituality Centre in Vic (Barcelona). Both Teams plan their programmes together with the General Prefect of Spirituality. I invite the Major Superiors to plan in advance and send missionaries to benefit from the Forge Programme which is conducted both in English and

Spanish each year in Madrid. This much appreciated specific Claretian renewal Programme lasts about 3 months. The Forge Team is also preparing another Programme in Spanish for Claretians of the third age. The CESC in Vic will be a venue for investigation and formative spiritual programmes.

Claretian Year. An important initiative of the Prefecture of Spirituality is the preparation of a Claretian Year with materials for daily reflection and prayer on our founder, spirituality, history and charism for an entire year. We hope to initiate it in the year 2019. A team of Claretian experts are preparing it. There will be a printed book for each Claretian and the programme will also be supported by online resources.

The following are the publications programmed for this year:

- An intermediate size biography of Fr. Josep Xifre in Spanish written by Fr. Jaume Sidera.
- The writings of Fr. Josep Maria Abella during his tenure as Superior General.
- An English version of the Claretian Calendar.
- An English version of the book on the Claretian Martyrs written by Fr. Pedro Garcia.

## **Formation**

The conviction that authentic formation is a continuous process of transformation into the likeness of Christ invites us to look at Formation as a single, life-long process in the life of every missionary. A false dichotomy between initial formation and ongoing formation makes many missionaries ignore their growth process after final vows. Hence, our formative itinerary needs to cover all stages of life and all of us need care and nourishment for our progressive vocational unfolding through the stages and seasons of life. We are also concerned about the lower level of intellectual preparation in many contexts. At times, the young missionaries settle for mediocrity because of the thinking that our work among the poor does not require intellectual acuity. This is a refined way of scoffing at the poor. Our love for the poor invites us to give the best of us. We should not allow ourselves to settle for spiritual, emotional, pastoral or intellectual mediocrity that impoverish the people whom we love and serve.

A primary concern of the Prefecture of Formation is to prepare Formators to accompany our young missionaries for authentic Claretian missionary life. The Heart of Mary School of Formators in Spanish is beginning in April this year.

The updating of the General Plan of Formation is in the second stage of its drafting. We hope to have it ready by March 2019.

The Meeting of the Conference of ACLA has decided all Novitiates, Theologates and a few of the Formation Centres of Philosophy Studies in Africa will be Interprovincial Formation Houses with an Interprovincial Team of Formators. The House in Bata will be a Novitiate in the coming year. Interprovincial exposure during the initial stages of Formation, with due accompaniment by competent Formators, facilitates maturity of our missionaries and widens the congregational perspective of their missionary vocation. We expect that each of the

Conferences will prepare common Formation Programmes together and make long term plans in the preparation of suitable Formators for Formation Ministry.

The General Prefecture of Formation is facilitating a Workshop on Accompaniment for formators of MICLA in November 2018. It is important to make it possible for all Formators to have some training in formative accompaniment.

Another important concern is the specialization of suitable members to meet the missionary priorities of the universal Congregation and that of the Major Organisms. I invite the Major Organisms, especially those of MICLA, to give particular attention to this need.

### **Concluding Comments**

Various socio-political events taking place around us, with dire consequences on the life of the people and the planet, call us to be deeply rooted in our charism and participate in the struggle for a better world. As missionaries, we cannot stand by as silent spectators of the crucifixion of humanity. The Easter event has the transforming power to dispel the fears and anxieties and send us in mission to proclaim the Joy of the Gospel. I recall the words of Pope Francis during the Easter Vigil this year:

“He is not here... he is risen! This is the message that sustains our hope and turns it into concrete gestures of charity. How greatly we need to let our frailty be anointed by this experience! How greatly we need to let our faith be revived! How greatly we need our myopic horizons to be challenged and renewed by this message! Christ is risen, and with him he makes our hope and creativity rise, so that we can face our present problems in the knowledge that we are not alone”. (Easter Vigil, 31 March 2018).

As happened to the missionaries of the early Church, only the experience of the Risen Lord can gather us together to be a Congregation going forth in mission as Witnesses and Messengers of the Joy of the Gospel.

Rome, April 7, 2018

Mathew Vattamattam cmf  
Superior General