

**“My Spirit is for all the world”
Called and sent as missionaries in an intercultural world**

“There is no Gentile, no Jew, no circumcised, no uncircumcised, no barbarian, no Scythian, no slave, no free man, but Christ is everything in each of us” (Col 3:11).



Dear brothers,

1. Fraternal Greetings. In this missionary month of October, we join the whole Church to reflect on our missionary identity and affirm our very life as mission. Pope Francis reminds us, “each of us is a mission to the world, for each of us is the fruit of God’s love.”¹ Mission implies a call and a sending. This letter is to reflect with you on our missionary vocation from an intercultural perspective in the context of the changing demographic face of the Congregation. We situate our intercultural reality within the vision of an *integral ecology of Claretian charism*² which calls for the interconnectedness of the rich diversity of our members, their cultural differences as well as our missionary presence and diversity of ministries in different parts of the world. When these elements of our life and mission are disconnected from the spirit of our Founder, we run the risk of dispersion of resources and weakening of the missionary vitality of our Congregation.

¹ Pope Francis, Message for the World Mission Day 2019. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) the Pope says, “I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing” (no. 273).

² Cf. This concept was used in the Letter of Superior General, “*Called to radiate the joy of the Gospel in the world today*”, no.22 (20 November 2016). Integral ecology, applied to the Claretian charism, imply that everything that constitute the life and mission of the Congregation need to be interconnected as well as integrated to our charism and mission in the Church. Anything that is not integrated would be a disintegrating presence in the Congregation.

1.- Three beautiful calls from God

2. I would start with the three fundamental calls that you and I have received in our lives in unique ways.

1.1.- The call to existence:

3. Each of you is a precious gift of God to the world when you were called into existence with a divine purpose. Providence has arranged that we take flesh from the flesh of our parents and unfold as persons in a social setting in relationship with other persons by being members of a family, a neighbourhood, a town, a region, a nation and the world at large. The question of culture comes in here. We were humanized by culture which organized our human nature and continues to shape us as we move beyond our familiar environment and participate in in a wider social environment.
4. In a broad sense, culture is “the lifestyle of a given society, the specific way in which its members relate to one another, to other creatures and to God. Understood in this way, culture embraces the totality of a people’s life.”³ However, a person is more than his culture, and his origin and destiny go beyond his cultural identity. We grow up as members of various social groups in the same social environment based on age, gender, region, tribe, religion, spiritual movements and so on with lot of interactions between people creating a shared common ground of co-existence. Unity in diversity is the necessary lesson of life we learn in the world to live together in harmony. Through the eyes of faith, we see the interconnection of humans in the society reflecting the mystery of the triune God who is Love.
5. However, reality presents another side of the human story too. The unending history of exploitation, conflict, and wars in human society, despite great achievements, clearly indicates that human being cannot save himself. Teilhard Chardin makes it clear: “Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfil them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves.”⁴ This love has a name: Jesus Christ, the saviour of the world. This love has a process: The economy of Christian salvation. By this love the consciousness of our identity expands from tribal identity towards Christ consciousness which broadens our circle of love to include all humans and all creation. Indeed, our faith has introduced a new dimension in our lives: the project of God’s love for humanity and the world.

³ *Evangelii Gaudium* 115.

⁴ In *Phenomenon of Man* (1955) p. 265

1.2.- The call to share the life and love of Christ

6. One of the beautiful things that happened in our lives is when we were called by name at baptism to belong to Christ sacramentally and form part of his mystical body, the Church. The new life in Baptism implies a mission as Pope Francis says “What in the Christian is a sacramental reality – whose fulfilment is found in the Eucharist – remains the vocation and destiny of every man and woman in search of conversion and salvation. For baptism fulfils the promise of the gift of God, that makes everyone a son or daughter in the Son.... This mission is part of our identity as Christians; it makes us responsible for enabling all men and women to realize their vocation to be adoptive children of the Father, to recognize their personal dignity and to appreciate the intrinsic worth of every human life, from conception until natural death.”⁵ In baptism and confirmation, we have received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and have become partners of the Spirit in his mission.
7. Mission takes us to the basics of Christian faith that God “in a plan of sheer goodness freely created humans to make him share in his own blessed life”, and “calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength.”⁶ This inbuilt longing for fulness of life in man finds its fulfilment in the mystery of Christ. Thus, “those who with God's help have welcomed Christ's call and freely responded to it are urged on by love of Christ to proclaim the Good News everywhere in the world.”⁷

1.3.- The call to be a Claretian missionary

8. Again, the Lord has gazed on each of us and has called us out of our homes and cultures to follow him closely, to live a life in common with those who are similarly called and be at the service of his mission according to the charism given by the Holy Spirit to our Institute. It has been indeed a life-changing call of God to be a Claretian missionary. Our special calling in the Church is to “communicate the total mystery of Christ to humanity through the ministry of the word.”⁸ Thus, we are in the Congregation because, enabled by the Holy Spirit, we have publicly declared our desire “to seek the glory of God earnestly, to devote ourselves more fully, and to follow Christ more closely, as the Apostles did, in the ministry of Salvation throughout the world.”⁹ The charism that unites us is a gift of the Spirit to the universal Church through our Founder. Claret’s words, “my spirit is for the whole world” is truer today than ever before. Mission is the reason of our existence as Claretians in the Church.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Message for the World Mission Day 2019*.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1.

⁷ *Catechism of Catholic Church* 3.

⁸ *Constitutions* 46.

⁹ Cf. *Formula of Profession*.

2.- The Mission of the Congregation in the Church

9. The three fundamental calls which we have received (human, Christian and Claretian) converge in pursuing the purpose of our lives, viz., the coming of the Kingdom of God which Jesus preached. The three calls have their corresponding community setting (human family, the Church and the Congregation) and they point to the same unifying goal: to fulfil the purpose of our life in the light of the mystery of Christ. Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God which as St. Paul says, “is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17).” Certainly the purpose of our life in the Congregation is not to have a comfortable life, nor enviable careers, social status or achievements. Claret discovered it in the title of apostolic missionary and expressed it in the apostolic prayer. *“O my God and my Father, may I know you and make you known; love you and make you loved; serve you and make you served; praise you and make all creatures praise you. Grant, my Father, that all sinners be converted, all the just persevere in grace, and all of us attain to eternal glory.”*¹⁰ Our Constitutions state our aim thus: *“to seek in all things the glory of God, the sanctification of our members and the salvation of people throughout the world.”*¹¹
10. These three words express the “why” of our existence as Claretians: Glory of God, sanctification of each of us and the salvation of all humans. These words may sound out of tune with our times. As they refer to the core questions of human life, it would require a holistic and mystical approach to make sense of them in different cultures and epochs. The attempts to use modern terms for them do not seem to help. God’s glory is much more than the wellbeing of humans, sanctification is not just personal fulfilment, and salvation is not the same as liberation. At the same time, we cannot build our lives on vague purposes. In the context of today, it is easy to be distracted from the fundamental questions of life, and the question of the purpose of life can get drowned in the many distractions and noises of modern life.
11. The harmony between the stated purpose of life and the lived life of Claret beautifully bespeaks his vocational integrity and holiness of life. In our case too, the integrity and harmony of life has to do with our missionary vocation becoming “the principle that organizes and articulates all our hopes, aspirations and projects,”¹² and for us, “being Claretians is the concrete way of being men, Christians, religious, priests and apostles.”¹³
12. Our missionary vocation addresses the deep questions of life (who am I? What is my mission on earth? Does what I do resonate with my purpose in life? Why should I renounce good things of life? Why bother about others?) by taking us experientially to the folly of the cross of Christ where the answer of these questions is accessible to

¹⁰ *Autobiography* 233.

¹¹ *Constitutions* 2.

¹² *Mission of the Claretian Today* 126. Cf. *Men on Fire with Love* 37.

¹³ *Mission of the Claretian Today* 132.

those who follow him. The Paschal mystery of Christ affirms that “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 1:25).

13. My mission, the mission of the Congregation and the mission of Jesus converge on making God’s love known to the world through concrete acts of loving as Christ loved. Our missionary vocation makes sense only within the mission of the Church. The love of Christ that urges us unites us in the fraternity of our communities and provokes commitment in our different ministries in the Church. Mission is defeated when sin and greed disconnect us from our true identity and the real purpose of the short life on earth. The purpose of life is unfolded to each of us along the journey of life in our personal and unique encounter with God, others, and oneself which takes place through many mediations. The mediation of cultural factors in this process is significant. Our life and mission in the Congregation are enhanced or impeded by the richness and limitations of the cultures that raised us and our brothers, and the intercultural dynamics in our communities.

14. How would you articulate the purpose of your life? How is it related to the mission of the Congregation and the mission of the Church?

3.- Intercultural missionary life, a call to conversion

15. Though we say the Lord’s prayer “Our Father” regularly, it takes time to accept all the children of God as our own brothers and sisters. Calling God our Father is a revolutionary act because it declares that all of us are of the same origin and belong to the one family. Therefore, we need to conceive mission as a visible sign of the Father’s love for us. Thus, Mission should not just be seen as doing something for someone, which is a very easy thing to do. Intercultural communities are a call to be sons of the Father in heaven and, therefore, brothers and sisters to one another here on earth. Our upbringing makes us to categorize others into mental boxes of different ethnic and national labels. Jesus, on the other hand, teaches us a different way of looking at people. Our own encounter with Jesus initiates the discovery of our own self as loved by God which is not conditioned by any human criteria. In turn, we too learn the art of seeing others as Jesus sees, going beyond the cultural and social labels, and at the same time without rejecting their legitimate place in human life.

16. I like to share one of my own change of attitude related to national and ethnic identity. In 1990s when HIV/AIDS was spreading in India, the Camillians opened a Care Home for the abandoned patients of the then dreaded disease in Bangalore. I used to admire an Italian brother, who used to carry ailing patients of the contagious illness in his both hands as if they were his own brothers without any fear of nursing them. Unfortunately, one day he received a notice from the police to quit the country in a couple of days because he was a foreign missionary¹⁴. A revengeful man had tipped

¹⁴ In India foreigner can be deported on any accusation of proselytization. This missionary returned after a couple of years with permission for longer stay due to the mediation of some good people.

him off to the police. I felt ashamed as an Indian for the expulsion of this man of God who loved and cared for the least of Indians which I myself would not have dared in those days. This event challenged my definition of national identity. One who loves and serves the people of India risking his own life is more eligible to be called an Indian than one who happens to be born there but abuses the people and exploits the resources of the country. I have admiration for joyful overseas missionaries of ours in many missions who have served there for decades even before the birth of most of the native missionaries. As missionaries who belongs to God, we have every human person as our own people and the planet as our common home.

17. In our Congregation there are no foreigners or outsiders, but only sons of the heart of Mary who are, therefore, brothers to one another. As missionaries, we are called to expand our identity consciousness to embrace everybody. The XXIV General Chapter affirmed “although we live in a network of multiple belongings (family, social, ecclesial...) our belonging to Christ, expressed in the vocation we share in the Congregation, takes the first place over all.”¹⁵ As we grow in our missionary vocation, we become capable of the mystical gaze that cuts through the cultural and ethnic wrappings of people and see them as the image of God shining forth.

4.- Claretian missionary life, a missionary expression of unity in diversity

18. Today our Congregation is gifted with more than three thousand members who come from over 68 countries and brought up in various cultures. In some instances, the same country has Claretians coming from different cultural groups (for example, in Congo there are Claretians from over 23 sub-tribes, in India from over 15 language groups, in Nigeria from at least 6 tribes). We have more and more intercultural communities where missionaries from different cultural backgrounds live together and do mission. In the General Curia we have Claretians from 15 countries who speak about 16 native languages. In our fragmented world, is not the witness of communion in our communities already a proclamation of the joy of the Gospel? However, Intercultural communities can become like the people building the tower of Babel if the Gospel does not rule our hearts. The civil society around us, predominantly in the west, is becoming multicultural. Against this backdrop of a multicultural composition of contemporary society, our Congregation with its own multicultural configuration is in a providential moment of unprecedented missionary opportunity. Nineteen years ago, my predecessor Cardinal Aquilino Bocos already spoke about the obligatory road of interculturality in our Congregation¹⁶.

¹⁵ Cf *Men on Fire with Love* 37.

¹⁶ Talk to the Conference of European Claretians (CEC) on 11 December 2000 titled, “*La Obligada Via de la Interculturalidad*”. He said, “Our Congregation has been enriched with many and very diverse cultures in recent years and it demands that we deal with this reality which affects the life and mission of the Congregation so much”.

19. I invite the whole Congregation to reflect about and advance together on this “obligatory road of Interculturality” in our Congregation. The leap from being multicultural (co-existence of members from different cultures without real integration) to intercultural (bound by charism that transcends cultural differences) is a journey of conversion. In a religious community, interculturality assumes a theological meaning as it “shares intentional commitment to the common life, motivated not by pragmatic considerations alone, but by a shared religious conviction and common purpose.”¹⁷ I like to highlight some important factors about interculturality to progress in living and missioning in an intercultural context.

5.- Claretian culture, culture of Claretians, and the culture of the mission

20. In a Claretian intercultural community, we need to consider three cultural factors that constantly interact: The charismatic culture of the Congregation, the cultures of the members who form the community and the culture of the people to whom we are sent in mission. The transforming power of our charism can integrate the rich cultural diversity of our members and the culture of the mission and bring about a witnessing harmony among them. The charism of an Institute transcends all cultures, but expresses itself in and through the shared values, customs and symbols proper to our Institute. Therefore, we speak of a dynamic Claretian culture which shapes our “Claretianness” in each soil where we are sent in mission.

21. When you evaluate your Major Organism in terms of the Claretian missionary charism, what are the elements that you consider contributing to the life of the local Church from our charism? Which cultural factors enhance our form of life and which factors pose challenges? How do you go about it?

5.1.- I am a Claretian because I am called by the Lord

22. An intercultural Claretian community is made possible by our Charismatic identity in the Church rather than any national, ethnic, or tribal identities. Our form of life is not guided by the norms of any culture or nation, but by the charismatic spirit of our Congregation enshrined in our Constitutions. Thus, I do not represent any country or culture in the Congregation. I am in the Congregation because God has called me and I am in this particular missionary community because God has sent me there through the mediation of my Superiors. However, I come to the Congregation with a pattern of thinking and doing as shaped by my culture which may enhance or delimit my freedom to live my consecration. The centrality of vocation and mission lived in accordance with our Constitutions is the condition for the richness of diverse cultures and languages to create a symphony of God’s love before the world.

23. When cultural or national identities of members superimpose themselves in a community or mission, the symphony turns out to be a cacophony and our testimony becomes a scandal and a counter witness to the love of Christ.

¹⁷ Gittins J.A, *Living mission interculturality*, (2010), p. 22.

24. When first thing (the mission of Christ) is first, other realities (culture, nationality, personal character, etc.) occupy their legitimate place in our missionary life. CS Lewis beautifully explains this primacy of love of God among the many loves that are present in our lives saying, “When God arrives (and only then) the half gods can remain. Left to themselves they either vanish or become demons. Only in His name can they with beauty and security wield their little tridents.”¹⁸ Applying this principle to cultural affinities we can say that when cultural identities take the place of God, they act like demons causing division, competition, and humiliation of one another. When love of Christ urges us, cultural and national identities occupy their legitimate place in our common life as an enriching factor in the community.

5.2.- We are enriched by the cultural diversity of our brothers in the community

25. My community is formed by members whom the Lord sends to me through the mediation of my Superiors and they add to the vitality of our Congregation and her mission. Claret did not call his companions and formed the first community to remain only in Vic within the comfort zone of the Catalan culture. If they were to remain only in Catalunya, we would have probably been at the verge of extinction like some other Institutes. Our Congregation is blessed with missionary vitality because of the wealth of diversity of our members and the consequent enrichment of the universal Congregation. However, it should not be a mere statement of cultural romance, but an honest appreciation of the work of the Spirit in our history.

26. The Claretian attitude towards cultures should be gospel-based appreciation of the richness and beauty of all cultures. Every culture has wonderful gifts to offer to others and no culture is so perfect that it has nothing to learn from others. While the positive cultural values of the members enrich the life and mission of each community, the gospel values help to purify and uplift those values and customs that are inconsistent with our form of life. Cultural values and customs are not free from the tint of human greed and sin and therefore they too, as part of the whole creation, are awaiting with eager longing to be freed from its slavery to corruption and be brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God (Cf. Rom 8:19-21). Hence, discernment is the key to distinguish the grain from the chaff in every human reality including culture. This is a difficult but necessary task in the evaluation of cultural values that guide each one's life.

27. As a congregation we need to grow further by widening the space in our hearts to hold the diversities among us in harmony and enrich each other to live our missionary charism more holistically. We have excellent missionaries who left their homes to serve people in other cultures adapting to the customs of the people and dedicating their whole life for them. I have fond memories of my novice master, Fr. Franz Dirnberger from Germany, who left a deep imprint of the Claretian spirit in me and other novices through his missionary zeal, simplicity of life and love for the people.

¹⁸ CS Lewis (1960) p. 166.

I think of our great pioneer missionaries who went to the various countries of all continents to initiate our missionary presence. There are now many who joyfully serve in distant missions away from their native land. Some of us experience personal limitations to enter into the ethos of the people in another culture. Learning a new language is very challenging for some of us. However, a missionary knows the universal language of love which everyone understands.

5.3.- The missionary dimension of our Community life

28. Fraternal love lived in intercultural communities gives witness to God's love and its transforming effect on human relationships transcending the barriers of age, culture, race and nationality. There is no better credible witness to show to the world that all of us, irrespective of our differences, are children of God and, therefore, are brothers and sisters to one another. It is also a witness to the fact that communal harmony in a multi-cultural context is possible and necessary in a human society. The Synod on *The new evangelization for the transmission of Christian faith* told us, the consecrated persons, "The witness of a life which manifests the primacy of God and which, by means of the common life, expresses the humanizing force of the Gospel is a powerful proclamation of the Reign of God"¹⁹.

29. Intercultural communities offer a model which values diversity of views for the wider perspective it gives on various issues to help proper discernment and decision making. Healthy intercultural communities promote the personal growth of their members, enrich the community from their cultural richness, and add to their apostolic effectiveness.

5.4.- Challenges that interculturality presents in communities

30. Intercultural living and interactions are not always easy and pleasant. Cultural differences can at times cause misunderstanding and miscommunication which can at times affect one's missionary enthusiasm. I list a few of the challenges:

a.- Prejudices and stereotypes

31. Preconceived ideas and evaluations regarding a group (country, region, race, tribe, etc.) affect the perception about the people of that group. Prejudices about a person may be associated to a previous bad experience from someone belonging to a group which is attributed to other members of the same group. Cultural prejudices and stereotypes can hurt persons and prevent them from growing and giving their best to the Congregation.

¹⁹ XIII Ordinary Synod of Bishops (2012), Proposition 50.

b.- Cultural shield

32. In intercultural communities, members may defend their self-interests using cultural differences as a shield. For example, a religious may use cultural difference to defend himself (for example, “in our culture we are doing like this”). One may blame the culture of another to express annoyance when corrected by a superior who comes from another culture. This is one of the most used tools to cover up actions contrary to our form of life.

c.- Cultural domination

33. In an intercultural community, the predominant cultural group tends to consider themselves superior and impose their group norms as normative for everyone else. They may compare cultures and use cultural prejudices to humiliate other group members and the wounded members become passive in community. When a predominant group in an intercultural community speaks in vernacular language and follows their customs without any regard for others, minority group members may pretend to ignore it, but harbour rancour against the big group. This can affect the fraternal climate of the community.

d.- Polarization and cultural conflict

34. Cultural differences coupled with personal conflicts between members (for example, a quarrel between two persons belonging to different cultural groups) can lead to polarization of members based on racial, ethnic, tribal or linguistic differences and nurture covert or overt hostility among them. Often such cultural polarization underlies personal conflicts related to desire for power or economic interests. I have seen instances when the demon of division wakes up during the period of Chapters and play the cultural card to polarize members at the behest of the interests of some members and then vanish until the next Chapter. When the divisions are not dealt with properly, they may lead to vocational haemorrhage resulting in departures from the Congregation without proper discernment.

e.- Self-victimization

35. A person who suffers from low self-esteem may easily perceive discrimination and ill-treatment from persons of other cultures even when there are no objective evidences for it. He may take the “victim” role in relation to those perceived as belonging to a “superior” culture. One may even provoke in others what he expects of them or read such behaviours in neutral situations. For example, a missionary in a foreign country who has a poor self-image constantly complains of ill-treatment and partiality from others, even though others make efforts to make him happy.

f.- Minority discount

36. In a multicultural context, a member from a minority group tends to enjoy privileges and attention which the majority group may not be granted. Similarly, mistakes done by the minority member may be easily absolved by the authorities. For example, Superiors tend to ignore even serious lapses when the first member from a new culture is to be promoted for profession. Cultural discounts on religious values usually result in unfortunate negative consequences for the Congregation in course of time.

g.- Communication issues from speaking a foreign language

37. Miscommunication among members of various cultures is prone to happen due to difficulties in expressing one's thoughts and feelings in a foreign language. Besides, words and expressions which have different connotations may not easily be perceived by a non-native speaker. When a confrere attempts to speak a new language, he thinks in his native language and translates into the new language. Often it results in miscommunication. Native speakers may get annoyed about linguistic deficiencies of a confrere when they have already lived a few years in the new culture. Members of host culture would be more tolerant if they themselves have experienced learning a new language and had the experience of living in a foreign mission.

h.- Erosion of Claretian Spirit in Provincial or Delegation cultures

38. When Provinces/Delegations fail to inculcate the Claretian traits in their life and mission (e.g., simplicity of life, concern for the poor, word of God, personal prayer) the attitudes and values contrary to our vocational values ingrained in a culture may get installed into the ethos of the Organism and come to be considered as normal and necessary. For example, if the practice of collective discernment is not cultivated, private possessions, affective and sexual leniency, individualistic ministries or similar tendencies may get installed into the culture of a Major Organism situated in an individualistic and consumeristic society. There are cultures in which parents consider the upbringing of their children as an investment made in view of returns during their old age which can cause tremendous pressure on their missionary son in his practice of poverty and obedience. When values of missionary life are thus undermined, they cause great harm in community life and erode apostolic vitality of the respective Organism.

39. The challenges that we encounter in an intercultural setting can be overcome by giving primacy to our vocational values and needs of the mission over individual interests and cultural pressures. It is difficult to free ourselves of the prejudices and stereotypes that create bias against a brother if we do not recognize them in ourselves and make conscious effort to grow beyond, and value the dignity of each person. It is harder to let go of prejudices when they serve as a refuge to avoid facing the uncertainty and fear of what letting go may cost in our lives. Paradoxically, it is the

very letting go of ourselves and our comfort zones that allow free space for the Spirit of God to do great things through us in the Church.

40. What would you consider are the blessings in your life because of the presence of your brothers from other cultures? What are the challenges that you face in your encounter with your brothers from other cultures? How do you face those challenges?

6.- Forming ourselves to enrich from our intercultural richness

41. Most of you who have lived in intercultural communities have experienced difficult moments in understanding and adapting to the personal and cultural differences of our brothers. My impression after living most part of my life in intercultural communities is that individual differences are greater than cultural differences. Hence, there can be conflicts and tensions between persons of the same culture just as there are between persons of different cultures. Serious tensions can arise between two missionaries of different cultures when their underlying cultural values conflict with one another and they are not brought to the open in any forum of dialogue (for example, difference in the concept of time or meaning of liturgical practices). Personal maturity and integrity of the members is the most important factor that contribute to the harmony and missionary vigour of a community especially in an intercultural setting. Many struggles in intercultural contexts are part of the necessary process of breaking and building in human growth or due to ignorance of the normal group dynamics of intercultural communities. I like to point out three important factors to be taken into consideration for community building.

6.1.- Cultural shock

42. When a missionary is sent to another culture, it is normal that he experiences cultural shock because his values and customs can conflict with that of another people. It is mostly felt during the gap between separation from home culture and integration into the new culture. Adequate preparation before going to the new culture, warm reception and good accompaniment in the host culture will reduce or, at least, help to deal with the intensity of cultural shock. Social anthropologists point to four phases in any cultural shock: honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and integration. Missionaries who return to home culture after significant years abroad may also experience similar shock on reintegration into his native culture.

6.2.- Cultural differences

43. Knowledge of differences between cultures can help avoid cultural misunderstanding and miscommunication²⁰. Some cultures value competition, action, direct communication, individual initiatives, avoidance of conflict and so on. There are

²⁰ Geert Hofstede introduced five dimensions of culture based on his research on national cultures. Cf. Hofstede et al, *Cultures and Organizations, Software of the mind*, Mc Grow Hill (2010).

other cultures that prize cooperation, community, indirect communication, conflict tolerance, relationships and similar other traits. A person from an individualistic culture may find his confrere from a collectivistic and indirect communication cultures as lacking in initiative, enthusiasm and drive. The latter may consider the former a bully, selfish and rude. Without mutual understanding of the cultural traits of each other, they would be hurting each other. There are instances when a missionary from a collectivistic culture felt ignored and rejected because the superior from an individualistic culture expected him to take initiatives and become confident. Differences in ecclesiology and liturgical practices can cause inner conflicts in many missionaries when they are in other ecclesial and cultural contexts. A missionary from a continent where hierarchical structure of the Church is held in esteem and liturgy is celebrated with decorum will have a hard time reconciling with his ministry in another continent where hierarchical distinctions are blurred and and strict liturgical norms are frowned as vestiges of clericalism.

6.3.- Stages of intercultural growth

44. We look at the world through our cultural glasses and judge what is good and bad accordingly. As our only reference to know the world is our native culture, all of us are ethnocentric at an earlier stage of our intercultural relationships. People consider their own culture as superior and evaluate other cultures in terms of their native culture. An ethnocentric person tends to be prejudiced against people who are different and look down on their cultures and customs. As we grow further in intercultural relations, we recognize other cultures as valid, accept them for their own value and move to a stage of cultural relativism. At higher stages of our relationship with cultures including our own, we should be able to appreciate the positive values and critically look at those which are not in harmony with the values of the Gospel. As Christians we should not confuse cultural relativism with moral relativism. For example, some cultural practices like female infanticide and human sacrifice are inherently evil and are unacceptable. The progress towards healthy intercultural relationships pass through the stages of acceptance, adaptation and finally integration of the wealth of other cultures into one's own repertoire of values and skills to become an effective missionary. We come across this struggle of growth in the missionaries who are sent to a mission in a different cultural setting. We shall strive together as a congregation to create a congregational culture of joyful missionary life accepting and integrating our differences by confronting them to the values of the Gospel.

7.- Interculturality and Interculturation in the mission

45. When a missionary is sent in mission to another cultural setting, his integration into that culture is important to become a catalyst of the gospel message to the people. Inculturation is the theological term for nurturing the Gospel in the soil of a culture. A missionary needs to learn the art of transcending all cultures including his own native one, and at the same time include the richness of all these cultures in such a way that he becomes a free instrument to preach the word of God and never a

colonizing agent of any human group. In the hierarchy of many values and practices that embody the various cultures that one is part of (ethnic, national, tribal, religious, Christian, Claretian, etc.), the values of the Gospel enshrined in the Claretian culture should take roots in the culture of the host country.

46. However, there is the legitimate place for one's native culture in the life and mission of the community especially when it can contribute to the missionary vitality of the community and the people. This leads to a mutual fecundation in the life of the missionary and in his mission. This mutual fecundation is termed *interculturalization*. For example, a missionary from a culture of planning and organization may contribute to bring order to a disordered apostolic programming in another mission. Another missionary may bring in the best practices he has discovered in his previous mission. The focus here is the mutual fecundation by the osmosis of positive values which may be highly developed in a culture but less cultivated in another. If the focus is to promote material goods, food habits or customs of an alien culture by the missionary, he is not an ambassador of Christ, but an agent of worldly interests.

47. How do you understand and address the cultural differences among people in your context and find the creative balance and integration in relation to our life and mission as Claretians?

8.- Towards creating healthy intercultural environment in the Congregation

48. Though we have made much progress in sending missionaries across cultures, there is much more to do in this regard. There are Major Organisms which need to move out from their cultural haven by sending as well as welcoming missionaries from other cultures and continents. We need to work together to create collective awareness of the intercultural dimension of our life and mission and create policies regarding the preparation and welcoming of missionaries sent across the Major Organisms. I like to present before you some reflections:

8.1.- Preparation and welcoming of missionaries sent in universal mission

49. Universal mission is not a volunteer service to another Organism, but an authentic missionary sending as Jesus sent his disciples in mission. Availability to be sent in any mission of the Congregation is integral to our missionary vocation and it disposes each missionary to be open in his heart to any assignment within or beyond the Major Organism of his origin.

50. As living and missioning in another cultural setting requires certain personal qualities and competencies to avoid failure and burn out, selection and preparation of suitable personnel are important. We should take into account the vocational maturity, emotional balance, relational skills and apostolic zeal which are key qualities to face the challenges one will have to face in another culture. Willingness, generosity and joy are important dispositions on the part of the missionary being sent. A missionary

who continuously feels a call to offer himself to universal mission deep in his heart should make it known to his superiors and discern the matter with them and remain open to what is decided by the Superiors. I am glad that some of our Major Organisms take it seriously to plan the preparation of the missionaries before sending and have a program for welcoming and integrating those sent to them.

51. The plan of preparation should include a period of developing some useful skills, programs for outgoing missionaries, intercultural seminars, and if possible at least a preliminary knowledge of the major language of the recipient mission. There should be an accompanier to the missionary on the part of the sending Organism who also contacts with the Major Superior of the receiving Organism. Similarly, the Major Superior of the receiving Organism should prepare a program of receiving the missionary to integrate him into the life and mission of the Organism. This plan should include welcoming and introducing the missionary to the Organism, good learning of the language and a program of cultural integration. There should be an accompanier to the missionary in the receiving Organism. I would recommend that the sending Organism keep in touch with the missionary and support his integration into the new Organism.

52. The E-learning section of Claret.org (<http://e-class.iclaret.org/?redirect=0>) has an online course that has been prepared on intercultural mission which will be helpful for the preparation and welcoming of missionaries and support the congregational reflection on interculturality. I invite our missionaries to benefit from this opportunity.

8.2.- Assignment and Incardination

53. Missionaries are sent in universal mission in view of becoming part of the new Organism and share its life and mission unless they are sent in view of a specific ministry on a temporary basis such as teaching in an institution or helping to develop a mission. The process of sending begins with assignment for three years as a period of integration. If grave reasons like ill health, adaptation to climate, or other personal situations impede the continuation of the missionary in the place, he may be assigned back to the Organism of origin or be sent to another. If conditions are favourable a missionary should be incardinated to the receiving Major Organism after three years. Assignment to another Organism done by Superior General (Dir 314) is different from sending missionaries by a Major Superior to another Organism for reasons of study, missionary exposure or training.

8.3.- Fidelity to and perseverance in the New Mission

54. There will be moments of excitement and joy as well as struggles and disappointments in the life of any missionary. We have hundreds of missionaries who spent their whole lives in distant missions. They have blossomed as persons and as missionaries in the new context of the mission. Their secret is the power of Paschal

mystery that leads to the light and life of the Risen Lord. The capacity to lay down one's life for the people to whom he is sent, and active and full participation in the life and mission of the new Organism are beautiful witnesses of the Kingdom of God. Acceptance of the new Organism and its members and the people in the mission as one's own is crucial for his integration.

55. The receiving Organism, in its turn, embraces him into the fraternity of the Organism and help him feel at home by accompanying him in the process of adaptation and integration with joy and gratitude. A Claretian is not a hired servant in another Organism. This is why when a new Major Organism is erected, all those in the territory of the Organism become automatically part of the new Major Organism (Dir 315) without prejudice to the right of each missionary to ask the Superior General for a different assignment for a valid reason.

56. There are particularly two challenging moments that many missionaries face in the first half of their life. Those who face them courageously become resilient and the inner flame of God's love in them would shine even more brightly before the world. These challenges are common to all, though overseas missionaries may go through them with a slightly different nuance.

a.- Loss of enthusiasm

57. The first challenge is the diminution of enthusiasm when the "honeymoon period" of the new mission wanes and the demands of the ordinary prophetism makes claims on one's time and energy. It is a critical time for growth and integration of life by going deeper into the source of their vocation through prayer and the help of spiritual guides. Unfortunately, some are tempted to avoid the silence of solitude within by taking refuge in affective entanglements, distractions or different kinds of addictions. Some may look for a change of mission. In fact, it is a privileged moment of discovering the most intimate presence of the Lord in the solitude of the heart and learn to love all others with the love of the Lord accepting the cross and the challenges.

b.- Joining the dioceses in developed countries

58. The second challenging moment related to one's waning missionary enthusiasm is dealing with the desire for change and the lure of diocesan life in a developed country especially to USA, Canada or Europe. This exodus of religious priests to the dioceses of developed countries and the easy shift of vocation to secular clergy often expose one's inner inconsistencies and question the integrity of the missionary vocation lived for many years. When a missionary, after due discernment involving his Superiors, reaches the conclusion that he is not called to Claretian missionary life but rather to diocesan priesthood, he should seek incardination to a diocese of his country of origin. Responsibility, accountability and transparency before God and the Church demand that we should honestly and duly discern the will of God in such situations and rule out the temptation of "spiritual worldliness".

8.4.- The joy of being in the mission of the Lord

59. I have often wondered what keeps the priests and religious going forward with joy and dedication despite the humiliation and discredit they face amidst the highly publicized scandals in the Church in our times. Why do missionaries generously offer themselves to be away from their cherished hearth and home to serve in an unfamiliar world? Each of us should know it in his heart as Blaise Pascal rightly put it, “The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of”. Our hearts find reason in what Jesus said, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24). There is joy in the heart in offering our lives to the Lord, in sharing the pains and sorrows of others in ministry, in facing trials and tribulations for truth, in sharing love and mission with brothers of different origins, in leaving personal comfort zones to reach out to serve God’s people in distant lands... This is a joy which nothing in the world can give. In short, love of Jesus and the power of his grace make all the difference in our lives.

60. I am edified and strengthened by our elderly missionaries who, in their advanced age, with their illnesses, disabilities and temperaments of old age, radiate the joy of missionary life irrespective of where they missioned. Joy and holiness of missionary life is not linked to the offices and positions that one holds, nor to any privileged places of service and prestigious ministries carried out. Our sanctification is related to the centrality of Christ in our lives that transform our entire being with all that we have and we do into missionary opportunities for the action of the Holy Spirit for the good of the Church and the world. For us Claretians, being Superior General in Rome or to be an itinerant missionary in the Amazonian forest of Brazil are just two ways of living the same Claretian mission in distinct responsibilities.

61. Jesus, the missionary of the Father, called and sent his disciples to go forth to all nations with a missionary mandate and assured his abiding presence with them to the very end of the age (Mt 28:19-20). Today, it is our turn to be in the line of missionaries whom the Holy Spirit has been gifting to the Church along the course of history. Our Founder, our martyrs and all who went before us have left us a testimony which can be summarized in the words of St. Paul, “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ (Phil 3:8).

62. In the light of the reflections in this letter and your own experience, what would you contribute to the Congregation to enhance the quality of our intercultural reflection and praxis? How do you think we can live the missionary mandate of the Lord more effectively in our contemporary context?

9.- Conclusion

63. I have highlighted growing intercultural aspect of our life and mission which is becoming more challenging and relevant in our times. Joyful intercultural communities are a living witness of Gospel love. When I see how a mother takes care her children with a love that understands, forgives and corrects, I see God's love reflecting in her eyes. I wish that together as a Congregation we cultivate the tender love of the Heart of Mary in relating with one another so that each of us will have that glance of the love of God to understand, appreciate and correct one another. Mary's missionary "Fiat" at annunciation (Lk 1:38) was endorsed by her son when he said, "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt 12:50). Our name as sons of the heart of Mary becomes real in doing the will of the Father with the attitudes of her heart. With the presence and guidance of our Blessed Mother, we shall transform our communities into "houses and schools of communion; that give witness to God's primacy and, in and of themselves, will announce the Gospel."²¹ When God's love rules our interconnected lives, we realize that we are the mission.

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Superior General
Rome, 15th October 2019

²¹ Cf. *Missionarii Sumus* 70.