



General Council Meetings - March 2020

Letter of Superior General to the Congregation

Dear brothers,

Fraternal Greetings.

I write this letter during the 8th week of lockdown in Italy as part of the collective effort to contain and defeat the pandemic virus that has been afflicting the globe. It gives me joy to come to know the many efforts of our brothers in all our Major Organisms to live out our missionary charism and reach out to people to offer help, solace and spiritual closeness in the context of physical distancing to fight the pandemic. I appreciate the responsible cooperation of our missionaries with the civil authorities and others to address this global emergency. So far, we have very few Claretian Missionaries who have been infected by the virus. The Lord has allowed one of our brothers, Fr. Julio Vivas of the community of Valladolid, Spain, to succumb to the pandemic in the context of his pastoral ministry. We thank the Lord for the health of our brothers in the midst of the pandemic which we shall count as a responsibility and call to serve our brothers and sisters more ardently.

I.- The General Council sessions of March 2020

When the pandemic virus erupted in Italy with rapid spread of it in the north, the members of the General Government were already in Rome which helped us to hold the sessions during the lock down. We slowed down its pace and continued over to the month of April. Bro. Carlos Verga who went to Argentina after knowing the news of the demise of his beloved mother, could not return due to the flight restrictions.

1.- Our journey towards XXVI General Chapter: The Meeting of Major Superiors Talagante, Chile (12-26 January 2020)

A significant event that preceded the General Council Meeting was the Meeting of the Major Superiors in Talagante, Chile. Three Major Superiors (of West Nigeria, Padre Xifré and Congo) could not attend the Meeting due to Visa issues and other two (East Nigeria and St. Joseph Vaz) arrived on the last days of the Meeting. This Meeting initiated the remote preparation for the forthcoming General Chapter in August 2021. We discerned together the kind of General Chapter that our times require of us so as to collectively listen to the call of God and to walk towards the future in the path the Lord invites us to tread.

The Council evaluated the Meeting with Major Superiors in Talagante and took its results for our deliberation. Our collective discernment in Talagante designed an itinerary towards the XXVI General Chapter which envisaged a Synodal approach to engage our entire Congregation in the process from the very beginning. As an adage states, “the strength of a chain is the strength of its weakest link”. It requires the active engagement of each Claretian Missionary to create the environment of honest dialogue and authentic discernment as a Congregation at this challenging moment of our history.

In the light of the reflections with the Major Superiors, we made a process of discernment on how to go about the XXVI General Chapter: What kind of a General Chapter would respond to the sign of our times? What should be its concerns? What is the best way to engage all stakeholders in the process? What is the kind of future which the Lord is beckoning our Congregation to co-create with the Spirit of Christ in the Church and the world? We recalled the call of the last General Chapter to “explore new methods and ways of organizing our general and provincial chapters in its different phases (preparation, implementation and evaluation)” (MS 72.3).

To co-create our future with the Holy Spirit, we need to develop the gifts of authentic listening and generative conversations at level of our lived life where the rubber meets the road. We can fulfil our mission only when we are deeply rooted in our charism and be audacious in the mission.

Given the importance of the preparatory period to engage all Claretian Missionaries and our close associates, the General Government has conceived the itinerary in three stages:

- a) **The stage of Sensibilization** (May - August 2020): It begins with the Circular Letter of the Superior General announcing the General Chapter (May 31, 2020) and with the use of various means available to prepare ourselves for a new way of celebrating the General Chapter. A video conference with the Major Superiors is envisaged to initiate our collective journey in the end of May. The Major Organisms need to identify a team of animators which will be prepared to accompany their respective Major Organisms following a suitable methodology.
- b) **Stage of participation and synodal meetings** (September 2020 - February 2021): During this stage, a few circles of meetings are to be organized for all members and collaborators of our missions to hold generative conversations to enrich the General Chapter. It is also the stage of election of chapter members and preparation of reports by the Major Organisms.
- c) **Stage of immediate preparation for the General Chapter** (until August 2021): This stage would overlap with the previous stage and begin with the convocation of the General Chapter by the Superior General on 2 February 2021. During this stage, the various Conferences prepare their contributions. It is also time for the immediate preparation and planning of the logistics of the General Chapter and the preparation of the report of the General Government.

The world scenario in the context of Covid-19 will naturally affect our plans for the Pre-Chapter phase and we should be prepared for it. More detailed information about the preparatory phase will be sent to the Major Organisms when we officially begin the process.

2.- The 150th anniversary of the death of our Founder and the 150th anniversary of the Claretian mission in America (24-26 January 2020)

The celebration of the 150th anniversary of the death of our founder was officially inaugurated in Santiago of Chile on 24 January 2020. It was celebrated together with the commemoration of 150 years of Claretian presence in America. This celebration was the apex of the Meeting of the Major Superiors in Talagante. The Spirituality Congress held on the occasion and the celebration of the concluding Eucharist were beautifully organized by the Province of San José del Sur to recapture the mystique of mission that our pioneer Claretian Missionaries transpired into the continent. Besides valuable information and rich reflection on Claretian mission in America, it was also a lived experience of our oneness as missionaries evangelizing in shared mission. The active participation and collaboration of laity and Claretian Family in this event was exemplary. We are grateful to the Province and the coordinators of the program for organizing the celebration very meaningfully. This celebration has a significance in the preparation for the General Chapter as we want to recapture the audacity of our early Claretian Missionaries to boost our missionary outreach today.

The various programs organized for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the death of our Founder are clouded by the changes in the rhythm of life brought about by the pandemic virus. Paradoxically, the life of the Father Claret which was lived amidst wars, epidemy and earthquakes motivate us to live this period of Covid-19 with the same courage and faith in God. Some of the programs are in progress with good results:

- a) **The Claretian Year:** The daily reflection on the life of the Father Claret made available in printed book, internet and Apps is benefitted by both Claretian Missionaries, Claretian Family and collaborators. The Apps is downloaded by a total of 1442 users (Android 1100 and iPhone 341). The application can be downloaded from Play Store as *Claretian Year* or *Año Claretiano* and the contents can be read in Spanish, English, German and Portuguese. The French version is being translated. You may have noticed how each day of the life of the Father Claret was lived as an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel wherever he went. It is also an eye opener to know our history and the life of illustrious Claretian Missionaries and others who lived their call by employing their gifts and talents creatively for the spread of the Gospel. One important lesson they teach us is that mediocrity has no place in our life and mission.
- b) **Claret 150:** This is a joint initiative of the CMF and RMI, open to the whole Claretian Family, to open a mission to mark the 150th death anniversary of our Founder. The proposal was to start a new mission in any of the peripheries of the world. In the joint meeting in last October, we identified two possible missions: one in the Amazonia in Brazil and the other in Madagascar, and made studies on them. On 3 April 2020 General Councils of both Institutes decided to go for the mission in Madagascar. On our part, we need to discern and designate at least two pioneering Claretian Missionaries with missionary zeal, good health, language skills and the capacity to team up with other Claretians in shared mission. I would be glad to receive information from any Claretian Missionary whom the Lord inspires to go for this mission.
- c) **Symposium on Claret:** Another initiative is at the level of the Claretian Family is to organize a Program of Ongoing Formation on themes of Claretian spirituality and mission in Vic and Reus by involving members from various branches of Claretian Family. On our part it will be CESC in Vic to collaborate with the project in communication with the General Prefect of Spirituality. The Program is planned in July 2021.
- d) **The feature film *Claret*:** The feature film *Claret* has almost finished the phase of shooting the scenes before the outbreak of the pandemic virus. It is now in the stage of editing. The public collection received for the film amounted a total of € 20,154 consisting of crowdfunding (€3,973) and direct donations (€16,181). Some promised donations are yet to reach us. It seems that the Claretian Missionaries and the people around us are not used to crowdfunding and promoting causes through social media. I thank all those who have contributed to this cause and encouraged others to do so.

3.- Study and approval of the Balances and Budgets

The General Government reviewed the report of the analysis of all the budgets and balances of the Provinces and Delegations studied by the Economic Council. There is significant progress in presenting the balances and budgets by almost all the major Organisms which is the result of the efforts of the Economes of Major Organisms to learn the congregational way of accounting and the accompaniment offered by the General Econome and his collaborators. I want to thank the spirit of sharing of goods by all the Major Organisms and the responsibility and endeavours on the part of the younger Major Organisms to increase their capacity for sustaining the missions by themselves by making use of the financial schemes of the Congregation as well as Mission Procure. We shall make all efforts to take care of the resources of the Congregation by practicing the virtues that our Founder practiced and making sure that all our financial dealings are carried out with responsibility, accountability and transparency.

We expect a difficult time ahead in the post-Covid-19 era for global economy. It calls for greater sensitivity to the suffering in the world and the urgency of serene austerity and sacrifices. The worst times should bring the best of us to live our mission credibly and contribute to a just and fraternal world in accordance with the design of God for his creation.

4.- The postponement of the programs scheduled in 2020

The pandemic virus has paralysed our movements and programmes. The following programs were postponed:

- a) Canonical Visits scheduled from April 2020 in Europe are postponed mostly to the first months of 2021.
- b) Bible Assembly for ACLA is moved from April to November 2020.
- c) Meeting of the General Council of Economy. From June to September 2020.
- d) Economic Audit to Fatima: from April 2020 to first part of 2021.
- e) Economic Audit to Sanctus Paulus: from May 2020 to the end of 2020 or beginning of 2021.
- f) Course for New Economes: from presence modality to online one.
- g) Workshop for Provincial Secretaries of MICLA in May in Brazil (in Sao Paolo) moved to 5 and 11 October 2020 and that of ACLA in June in the General Curia in Rome to 4-10 November 2020.
- h) Course of Formators in the School of the Heart of Mary (English) is postponed to from 6 April to 25 June 2021.

II.- Our journey ahead through the processes of transformation

Though there is setback in pursuing the prepared programs, we will be able to carry out most of them in creative new ways. Though the pandemic may hang around in the globe for some more time, and place limitations for our free movement, life should continue with renewed enthusiasm enriched by the lessons we have learned collectively from this unprecedented challenge. The following are some of the information pertaining to the three processes of transformation.

1.- First Process of Transformation (Apostolate, Youth Ministry and Vocations)

- a) **3rd Claretian Educational Exchange:** After two groups of the directors of Claretian Schools from Africa had come to visit the education mission in Santiago Province, Nigeria hosted the 3rd education exchange. Educators from Santiago had a chance to see *in situ* the education ministry in Nigeria, interact with the students, teachers and parents, and to witness the implementation of what they have learnt, and the challenges and struggles they face. They returned enriched by the exposure to the diversity of Nigerian culture and an unforgettable and fraternal hospitality in all the communities. We consider that such exchange experiences greatly enhance our evangelizing mission through education ministry.
- b) **Claretian Voluntary Program:** The General Prefect of Apostolate visited the volunteering program of the Province of San José del Sur in Patagonia, Argentina, at the end of January 2020. This program which entailed 20 volunteers (university students) and included encounters with leaders of Mapuche people and JPIC changemakers from the villages was a rich learning experience. We need to consolidate and improve our program for missionary volunteers from the various experiences in different parts of our Congregation. The Prefecture of Apostolate (though the General Mission Procure) and the Prefecture of Youth Ministry and Vocations are working on this program.

c) **SOMI Conferences:** Several meetings have been organized with each Interprovincial Conference as well as with the continental coordinators of this area. Also, the Secretariat of JPIC and the CMF-UN Team organized three prayer sessions (English, Spanish and French) through online video conferencing on the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day on 22 April. The program was attended by a good number of Claretian Missionaries from all continents as well as from Claretian Family members. The General Mission Procure have been organizing coaching sessions for Mission Procurators at the level of continents.

d) **Upcoming Meetings:**

- June 28-July 3, 2020: Encounter of Social Apostolates from ECLA in Ceuta-Tangier.
- September 8-15, 2020: Encounter of Prefects of Apostolate in Garrison, New York (USA).
- November 2-6, 2020: Congress of Claretian Educators in Mongomo, Equatorial Guinea.

Due to the high importance of the Encounter of all the Prefects of Apostolate and of the Congress of Educators (within the Claretian Family), we are on the watch to see the evolving scenario of the pandemic crisis to discern about the realization of these international encounters.

e) **Claretian Mission Day** (19th April 2020): It was celebrated in many countries amidst the lockdown due to Covid-19. The General Mission Procure has prepared different materials which can be used in social media to assist our communities for online celebration of this day wherever possible. I hope all Major Organisms will find their own suitable time to celebrate Claretian Mission Day if they were not able to celebrate on 19th of April this year.

f) **Mission Projects:** The General Mission Procure has made significant progress in coordinating and facilitating the working of the Mission Procures of the Major Organisms. Special attention was given to the Major Organisms which are in their growth phase. We have received a total of 76 projects for the study and consideration of the Council of General Mission Procure during its meeting in March 2020. It signifies greater trust in the congregational process for supporting projects from our Major Organisms. The General Mission Procure plans to have two support offices, one in Asia and another in Latin America, for more effective functioning. A Consulting Team is also formed to offer online support to the General Mission Procure consisting of subject matter experts, staff of donor agencies and some of our Mission Procurators. They will offer the possibility for wider consultation for the new initiatives taken by the General Mission Procure.

g) **Formation of Missionaries in Project Management:** It is also crucial for the growth of our missions in the peripheries. In the month of March 2020, four online sessions about the functioning of the Mission Procure in Major Organisms was held for the SOMI members of MICLA. Another set of discussions with funding agency personnel is planned in May 2020 for the Claretian Missionaries involved in project work in the continent of Africa. We believe that more capacity building in this area of our members can help the overall development of our missions in countries where we work amidst the poor.

h) **Claret Digital Continent Project:** It is the implementation of one of the conclusions reached at the Meeting of Claret Publishing Group in Bangalore with the website created for the project: www.claretonline.org. A pilot upload of the digitalised publications of Hongkong and Macau has been done. It will be important that all our Publishing Houses collaborate and see to the realization of this project which will benefit our entire Congregation. The office of this project is resident in the Curia House of Bangalore Province.

i) **Ministry of the Word:** With the completion of the Bible Seminars in Asia (ASCLA EAST and WEST) and the formation of their respective coordinating teams, the bible ministry and biblical animation of the pastoral ministry will be better organised both on the provincial and on the conference levels. The formation of Claretian Missionaries in this biblical area has been identified as indispensable. In view of this, plan is underway in these Conferences to organise a Bible Formation Course to help our missionaries in this charismatic trait as Listeners and Servants of the Word. We encourage our Major Organisms in these Conferences to support the realisation of this formation project.

j) **Institutes of Consecrated Life:** Our Institutes of Consecrated Life are in a state that requires a serious reflection for renewal to serve the Consecrated men and women in the Church and envision a new way of organizing this platform of evangelization in accordance with the directions of the Apostolic Constitution, *Veritatis Gaudium*. We are exploring better ways of co-ordination of our Institutes for a renewed service in this area of mission. The project for ACLA (TICLA) in Abuja, Nigeria, and MICLA (ITVCA) in Bogotá, Columbia, are going on and we hope that they will be fully realised in the nearest future.

Our Institutes in Rome (Claretianum) and Madrid (ITVR) will be celebrating their Golden Jubilee of the establishment in 2021. It is our hope that this will be a time of renewed and better missionary service to the consecrated people, leveraging on our long accumulated experiences in order to explore new methods and ways of being an institute and offering our services to different consecrated men and women in different peripheries of our world.

k) **Online Course for Local Animators of Youth Ministry and Vocations:** They are scheduled for April-June and September-November 2020, in Spanish and English. The translation of the course materials into French is begun and the translation into Polish is completed. These courses are for youth animators of Claretian Family.

l) **Claret-Way. World Claretian Youth Network +18:** The Claretian Family Core Team for Youth Ministry has carried out a survey addressed to all the animators of the Youth Ministry of Claretian Family and received 118 responses from different continents. In the light of the suggestions received from youth meetings and the survey, it was decided to go ahead with coordinating a Claretian youth network at local, continental and global levels as well as in internet for the youth above 18 years. Now work is in progress towards launching the worldwide network of Claretian Youth hopefully on October 24, 2020.

m) **Other commissions continue to work in different projects of animation of the Youth Ministry of the Claretian Family:**

- Design of a Proposal for Vocational Accompaniment.
- Coordination of the Youth Ministry with Claretian Family in each continent.
- Formation Meeting for the new leaders of the Youth Ministry of the Claretian Family.

2.- Second Process of Transformation (Governance, Economy and Secretariat)

a) **Reflection on Community Life** (Cf. MS 70.5): The modules for reflection on community are ready. We shall use it as part of our spiritual preparation for the General Chapter starting from June 2020 after the announcement of the General Chapter. These modules will be sent to the Major Organisms for use in communities and could be used for retreats and ongoing formation.

b) **Course on Interculturality:** The course on interculturality is already uploaded on *Moodle Learning Platform* both in English and in Spanish, and it is available in our website. We have got the proposed list of participants who are divided in two groups and the registration is going on. The first course will start on 4 May 2020. We are grateful for the tutors who would be accompanying the participants.

c) **New Logo for the General Government:** After a period of discernment, the General Government approved a logo to be used by General Government and its different Areas and Departments. The logo inspired by the definition of a Claretian Missionary consists of the symbols of the Holy Spirit, flame and heart. It was designed by Monzón-8 Designing Group.

d) **Meeting of New Major Superiors:** The General Government is organizing the meeting of New Major Superiors in December 2020 if the conditions are favourable.

e) **Online Course on Economic Administration:** The General Council assessed the pilot courses of online learning on economic administration conducted by the Claretian University in Batatais, Brazil. The inconsistency of many participants in pursuing the course point out to the need for greater personal discipline and endurance when we encounter difficulties in the learning platform. In fact, the course is a much reduced one from the standard academic course. Let us collectively improve our learning capacity and intellectual level out of love for the mission and the people.

f) **Online Course on Economic Administration in Formation Houses:** At the beginning of 2021 we will start the pilot online course on economy for our members in Initial Formation. Contact is being made with the various Centres of Formation.

g) **Secretariat:** We remind the Provincial Secretaries to update information regarding their respective Major Organisms, Local Communities and members in the SECLAR regularly. It is also important to produce the Bulletin of the respective Major Organisms and to send a printed copy to the General Archives of Rome. We solicit the Secretaries to send the news of the respective Major Organisms for their publication in the informative services of our Congregation (web page, NUNC etc.).

h) **Protocol for the Protection of Minors:** Each of the Major Organism has to prepare their Protocol taking into account the Civil Law and the directives of the respective Ecclesiastical Conferences. The last date to send the Protocol for the Protection of Minors adapted for your Major Organism the General Government is June 30, 2020.

3.- Third Process of Transformation (Spirituality and Formation)

a) **Spirituality:** We hope that the Major Organisms creatively benefit the materials made during the 150th anniversary of the death of our Founder. The General Prefect of Spirituality is hopeful of conducting the scheduled meetings with the Prefects of Spirituality of ACLA and ASCLA in September.

b) **Formation:** The new General Plan of Formation (GPF 2020) was approved by the General Government on 19 March 2020. The document will be available in digital version at the earliest. This document is the roadmap of the formative journey for all Claretian Missionaries and should not be reduced to be a document for initial formation. Now the General Prefecture of Formation will focus on the preparation of the handbook for the practical application of the principles of formation to assist the Formation Animators. Many realities we encounter demand that we have to do everything possible to assure that our Claretian Missionaries come out with their best for the Lord and never settle with mediocrity throughout their life journey.

Conclusion

Dear brothers, as Claretian Missionaries we learn to walk in the Spirit of the Risen Lord in the current situation of many uncertainties in the world. We do not expect that the world would be back to the same old ways after Covid-19. Our faith in the presence of the Risen Lord amidst us is our strength to navigate our path through uncertainties. Our Founder knew this art when he had to leave the newly founded Congregation to the providence of God to go to Cuba in obedience to the mandate of the Pope in 1849. He walked to unknown frontiers with the certainty of God leading him. In the meditation on Psalm 22 which he gave to his companions on the foundation day on 16 July 1849, he alluded to the staff and the rod to represent the courage which the wood of the cross and the intercession of Mary would give them in their life and mission. Father Claret walked with that strength all through his life and bequeathed to us this great missionary heritage of fortitude amidst trials when he gave up his spirit in consummation of his mission on 24 October 1870. Though we are uncertain of the course of future, we know how to walk forth with courage amidst the uncertainties in the world because our hearts are certainly anchored in the Lord's abiding presence. We also know that our Blessed Mother would accompany us as She did for her son Jesus.

Father Mathew Vattamattam CMF
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