

**CIRCULAR LETTER
OF ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE
XXV GENERAL CHAPTER**

Rome 2014

AN IMPORTANT MOMENT IN THE CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

1. A General Chapter always arouses expectations, reactions and diverse echoes in the members of a Congregation. It depends on many factors. Some will live this congregational event for the first time, with that excitement that characterizes those who look towards the future projecting their missionary dreams. Others will participate once more in a chapter process of a congregational history of which they have been main actors for many years. How will they all be in tune with the congregational moment and with the new proposals that will arise from the chapter discernment?
2. The social and cultural context in which each one lives will also meaningfully determine the expectations towards the Chapter and the way to confront the points proposed for discussion. The same could be said about the ecclesial context in which each participant or each community places itself. The expectations of those who live anchored in a self-referential church model or with certain nostalgia of a “better past,” and those of others who are looking for new ecclesial models, ready to let themselves be questioned by the situations of our world and to express with new signs and languages the announcement of the Gospel, will also differ.
3. The degree of assimilation of the charismatic patrimony of the Congregation will make easy or difficult the participation in the process of congregational dis-

cernment which a Chapter is. Without a deep Claretian missionary identity and without a strong sense of belonging to the Congregation, it will be very difficult to understand and accept the decisions that will arise from the Chapter journey. For those who do not live their Claretian vocation with enthusiasm the Chapter decisions will remain just a written document and will not be ready to let them affect their lives and question their positions and behaviour. On the contrary, the more consistent the adherence to the project of Claretian missionary life and more solid the knowledge and assimilation of the charismatic patrimony of the Congregation are, the more hope and commitment will the chapter journey awaken.

4. With what disposition do I begin the chapter itinerary? What do I expect from this XXV General Chapter, beyond the fact that it will give the Congregation a new general government? Where do my expectations come from? Where do my possible fears or concerns arise? Are these expectations in accordance with the values of the Claretian missionary life? Are they truly an echo of a missionary concern? These are all questions which all of us should make to ourselves and which we should try to answer with deep sincerity. I think that the success of this congregational event will depend from it to a great extent.
5. A General Chapter is a very important moment of the life of an Institute. It is not just an exercise of democracy, as we understand it in the case of the

political life. It is a matter of a journey of religious discernment which seeks the will of God on our Congregation and on each one of its members. We do not go to the General Chapter just to approve an agenda which will guarantee or foster interests which have nothing to do with our project of missionary life, or to promote some candidates to certain institutional posts. We go to make an exercise of religious discernment in which the only valid “interests” are those of God’s Kingdom, to the service of which we are called to contribute the missionary charism which we have received. A Chapter requires a great openness to the Spirit of the Lord, which is the only guarantee to be able to discern with a true freedom of spirit.

THE OBJECTIVES OF A GENERAL CHAPTER

6. In this section I will repeat what I already wrote in the Circular Letter of announcement of the previous General Chapter which I recalled again to the Major Superiors of the Congregation in the encounter we had in Vic last month of January. There is no need of inventing anything new because the Constitutions are very clear in this sense.
7. **The Constitutions** give us some concrete indications about the nature and objectives of the Chapter (cf. 153-155). These should be our main point of reference.

8. They tell us, above all, that *the Chapter is at the service of the charism*. It is an evident observation, but of the highest importance. It is an affirmation that sets us in a perspective of faith, because it invites us to enter into an attentive dialogue with the Lord who called us and continues calling us through multiple mediations. The reference to the Word of God which convokes us; the memory of the Founder who was the instrument of Providence to give body to this charism that God gave to his Church, the path that the Congregation has taken to re-read it throughout its history are fundamental aspects to be taken into account. Maintaining the charism alive, striving for it to continue being source of life for those who have received it, seeing how it may continue fertilizing the life of the Church and rendering a relevant service to humanity are the fitting tasks of a Chapter, Our *raison d'être* in the Church and in the world lies precisely in this charism, The General Chapter, therefore, should be set at its service.

9. The Constitutions define the *Chapter as the greatest symbol of the whole Congregation's communion of life and mission*." Our Congregation was born as a missionary Community. Our Congregation will only be faithful to the original inspiration as long as it continues existing as a "missionary community." The Chapter must know how to express and promote this communion that makes us all feel as brothers and consolidate, at the same time, its missionary character. We will have to learn how to listen to one another. We will have to let ourselves be questioned by the concerns and proposals that will emerge from

the different Claretian communities because of their closeness to the life of the people. We will have to help one another to read these situations in a missionary key and to look for a response to them that, respecting the diversity, may be faithful to the Claretian charism. Our community has been enriched with the presence of brothers of very diverse cultural contexts in these last years. Building up communion is an exciting task, but it entails a true asceticism on the part of everyone. The great challenge we have now before us, during these days, is outlining a path that will help us to consolidate the communion and to better define the keys that will guarantee fidelity to the Claretian missionary charism of our pastoral projects and activities through which they will be expressed.

10. The Constitutions tell us also that *the Chapter is a very important moment to examine the life of the Congregation*. It is a matter of seeing how we are assuming the project of missionary life that the Constitutions propose to us and how we are expressing it in our spirituality, in our community relationships, in our formative programs, in our pastoral initiatives, in the government structures and in the functioning of our economy. We will have to review also the discernment we made six years ago about our life and mission and see how we have been able to keep the priorities that we set for ourselves. We expressed it in the document "*Men on Fire with Love*" that has guided our programming during these years. We cannot forget these two fundamental objectives if we want to continue growing charismatically.

11. We are also reminded that *“the Chapter applies the Church’s doctrine on religious life and apostolate to the Congregation.”* In communion with the Church we live our charism and, through it, we want to enrich its spiritual heritage and strengthen its missionary projection. The conscience of ecclesial communion has to be with us in the reflection during this period. We will have to listen to the voice of the Universal Church and of the local Churches and be very attentive to the new horizons they point out to us. The heartfelt adhesion to the Church was one of the characteristics of our Father Founder. We know that the consecrated life has a prophetic mission within the Church and being faithful to it is a demand of the vocation we have received. We know too that ecclesial communion is built with the effort and contribution of everyone and that it constitutes a sign of the Lord’s presence which accompanies humanity along its journey.

12. The Chapter, the Constitutions continue, *“exercises a teaching function as regards the spiritual heritage of the Congregation.”* It re-reads in the new historical and cultural contexts the charism and *it issues those decrees and guidelines”* that it deems necessary to maintain the vigor of the missionary life. Only from a deep knowledge of our own tradition shall we be capable of giving new expressions to our charismatic heritage so that our presence and our pastoral work may truly be relevant for the Church and for today’s world. The celebration of the General Chapter should help us all reinforce our sense of belonging to the congregational community and to take a renewed awareness of its

history and of its effort to be faithful to the charism received in the different times and places. The road towards the Chapter commits us to seek how we can express today a charism which, to maintain its vitality, must be deeply faithful to its source and to learn how to dialogue with the concrete situations of humanity in each historical moment.

13. Lastly, the Chapter *elects the “Superior General and his Consultors”* who will confirm their brothers in their vocation and encourage the Congregation to walk along the appointed path.

14. These are the objectives of a General Chapter. We all should bear them in mind, since all of us are called to actively participate along the Chapter journey. Those who will be part of the Chapter community should bear them much more in mind. They should gather in Rome starting on August 24 of the next year 2015.

THE CONTEXT OF THE XXV GENERAL CHAPTER

15. A second point I want to emphasize is the importance of the context in which a General Chapter takes place. It takes place at a particular historical moment and this is not insignificant. The situation of our world, the ecclesial period we are living in, the features that characterize our Congregation today, they all make demands of us and require of us some serious reflection.

Only in the light of this will it be possible to place our life and mission in the history of salvation. The Constitutions, which define our mission in the Church, remind us of the words of *Gaudium et Spes* and tell us the following: “sharing the hopes and joys, the sorrows and trials of the people, especially those of the poor, we readily offer to join efforts with all who are striving to transform the world according to God’s plan” (CC 46). This insertion into history is part of our mission and is what makes it truly relevant. We are, therefore, required to pay great attention to the historic moment in which we live. In any case, this is an observation that goes beyond the assertion of facts or a mere social study. In the religious or the community that finds itself at the front of a particular human situation, there is a kind of “pathos” which leads him or them to fix their attention on the person suffering within that reality and to be deeply questioned by it. In the documents from our General Chapters we have insisted on the need to look at reality “with the compassionate heart of Jesus” and “with the eyes and heart of a missionary” and to “let us be touched by the poor.” The questions that arise from this reality viewed in this way should disturb us to the extent that we couldn’t do anything other than take action, and to seek an answer to the clamor that is coming up from our hearts. The prophetic ministry always comes from a deep communion with God and with the situation of the people.

16. Let me hint some aspects that should not be missing from our range of vision in relation to the three reference points that define our reality.

a. The situation of our world

17. We contemplate the reality of our world with the awareness that it is the “world so loved by God that He sent his own Son, not to condemn but to save it” (cf Jn 3,16). I think this is a very important starting point. God, when He contemplates the world, what He feels is love and compassion, and it couldn’t happen any differently with us. This friendly view of reality is very important because, in addition to helping us discover the signs of the presence of God’s Spirit in it, allows us to identify those features that show a response to the love that God has bestowed upon it, and those that express rejection of that love and become therefore a source of suffering and death. We observe reality from a perspective of faith, which does not mean, in any way, that we want to distort what we see or we don’t bear in mind what we are told by the myriad scientific analyses which exist.
18. Precisely because we see reality from the perspective of faith, everything that threatens the lives and dignity of individuals and peoples has a huge impact on us and causes us deep soul searching. These are the people loved by God, called to live in brotherhood and to care for the precious gift of creation that God himself has placed in their hands.
19. We are delighted to see that in our world there are many people and groups living with a deep awareness of the dignity of all human beings and they do not back down in their efforts to ensure respect for each person, and

peace amongst nations. We find in them the Spirit of God who guides history and we feel called to unite ourselves with them, in the service of God's plan for his children. This call to the "shared mission" beyond the Church is a very important element in our missionary vocation. God speaks to us and calls us through them.

20. We also see that there are many elements and situations in our world that break the harmony that God put into creation, and we feel called to restore that harmony as a requirement of the faith we profess.
21. The situations of violence, poverty and oppression that we know about, either personally or through the social communication media, move us deeply. Very often it concerns situations very close to us, people with familiar faces, whose names are engraved on our hearts. Their sufferings and struggles are present in our prayer and become disturbing questions that challenge our lives, those of our communities and our apostolic projects. Are our lives truly parables of God's mercy and of his love for those who are marginalized? Do their screams reach us with enough force to cause in us a strong and generous response that goes beyond mere pronouncements? Do we feel the pain of this "disharmony" that is opposed to God's plan?
22. There are other features of the world's circumstances that profoundly affect our lives and the missionary outreach of the Congregation. Just to name a few: globalization, the new awareness concerning

cultural and religious pluralism, the increasing process of secularization, the development of communication systems, the pivotal role that the economy plays in most areas of private and public life, the diversity of family models, the increasing influence of emerging groups in a wide variety of tendencies, and so on and so forth. All these traits display positive aspects, and others we perceive as a threat to the integrity of life and dignity of individuals. We are part of this world and its reality raises new questions and takes us to new cultural landscapes in which we have some difficulty in defining our own niche. All of this must be echoed in the Chapter itinerary which aims to discern God's calling to us today and how we respond to it in our missionary charism.

23. All this occurs in a context marked by a certain "light culture" that seems little concerned for the fundamental principles that give meaning to life and governs coexistence among peoples, but that is overly concerned with a sense of wellbeing which, because it confines itself to the present or the immediate future, is not able to be truly concerned by the situation of others. In this cultural context, how can we sow the seed of the experience of faith that touches people in the deepest part of their being and speaks to their heart?
24. If the Chapter is to define how to live our charism today, the first step is to become aware of this "today". Our world needs hope and we are called especially to be bearers of this hope.

b. The ecclesial moment

25. The Church, after the conclusion of the Synod on the New Evangelization, led by Pope Francis, is looking for new directions. We all feel a sense of hope while listening to and watching Pope Francis. We endorse his repeated calls for simplicity, honesty and commitment to the mission. It is painful to discover resistance within the Church but, at the same time, we also realize that our own attachments and interests often extinguish the enthusiasm aroused by the words and example of the Pope. We realize that we are always lured by the temptation of what the Pope denounces with the word “worldliness”, which has penetrated too deeply into the Church and into consecrated life.
26. He has repeatedly invited us into the “new areopagi” to give witness to the Gospel there as well. The post-conciliar era has been a time of pastoral creativity and of great missionary generosity. Creativity involves close attention to the signs of the times, to the action of the Spirit in history; therefore it requires a deep spirituality and a generous sense of availability to take on new challenges and seek responses that will be truly relevant. Sometimes it is our own lack of spiritual consistency or our fear of rejection that hinders a bolder and more generous missionary response. We opt for our own personal, corporate or social securities.
27. We participate in the journey of our continental and particular churches which are seeking to play a prominent role in the lives of their people. Tuning into

our churches will help us to better define the charismatic contribution that it would be our turn to give to their evangelizing project. The experience of the various continental churches is of immense wealth, and can and should encourage us to continue searching for the most meaningful evangelizing projects for people of today.

28. It is equally true that in our Church there are signs of negative reaction and that some, who have a misunderstanding of the mission, seem more concerned about maintaining status and power than putting themselves freely at the service of preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. Nor is it less certain that, all too often, there is a tendency to stifle the charism of consecrated life or of the various Institutes, for the sake of a church discipline that definitely does not promote the harmonious growth of the ecclesial community or the dynamic development of the mission.
29. Moreover, we cannot close our eyes to the scandals caused by the improper conduct of those who are called to the service of the Christian community. I refer not only to misconduct in sexual matters, so extensively exposed by the mass media, but also to all those examples of behavior that are inspired by criteria far removed from the Gospel, and demonstrate interests that have nothing to do with the mission that the Lord entrusted to the Church. Unfortunately we cannot rid ourselves of these responsibilities either.
30. All this is true and, therefore, a critical examination of the ecclesial situation, though one based on love and

respect, is vital. We deeply love our Church and want to be, just like our Fr. Founder, instruments of renewal and missionary dynamism.

c. Our Congregation today

31. The Congregation is the subject of the mission entrusted to us, in which each of us participates according to the gifts we have received. We are all jointly responsible for the congregational mission. It is therefore important to be aware of the health of the Congregation and its situation in the various parts of the world.
32. A first observation, one that has been repeated for some years, is the profound change in the human geography of our Institute. It is all good news, as it is an enrichment of the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Congregation with new cultural and ecclesial traditions and sensitivities. But, at the same time, it presents a great challenge because it requires clarity and effort to maintain fidelity to the charism amongst the multiplicity of expressions that it can have. This is critical because the charism is the reason for our existence within the Church. Let me share some concerns that we must bear in mind in our preparations for the Chapter journey.
33. I note in many Claretians in new areas of congregational presence, but not only in those areas, a disturbing lack of interest and commitment to get to know the heritage

of the Congregation. Great efforts are being made to prepare formators in those areas more properly regarding the spirituality and the missionary charism of Fr. Founder and the history of the Congregation, but I don't see a corresponding effort on initiatives which, in this regard, should be taken in each of the Provinces and Delegations of the Congregations. The here-and-now is of concern and that is normal, but this should not be an obstacle to engage in a deeper understanding of the charism of our Fr. Founder and how it has been expressed throughout the history of the Congregation. I'm sure it would be a great source of missionary creativity and community cohesion, elements of which we have special need in this moment of our history. Through extensive work of translations, access to the charismatic sources in the main languages of the Congregation has been provided, but I have been unable to detect the interest that should be expected for getting to know this rich heritage of our own family. Even Claretians with significant congregational responsibilities suffer from this lack of knowledge that could be used to better serve their brothers. The same can be said about interest in knowing the guidelines offered both through the circular letters of the Superior General and other congregational documents, to consolidate the missionary life of each of the Claretians, the communities and their apostolic activities. These are indicators that alert us to the need for more incisive action by the Major Superiors in their respective Provinces and Delegations.

34. Another important aspect, closely related to the previous point, is the concern about a sense of belonging to

the Congregation. It is true that we can speak about a sense of emotional belonging to the Institute, but we haven't managed to detect that cordial adhesion to the Congregation for which our brother martyrs bore witness, as well as many other missionaries, which I consider essential for maintaining the vitality of the communion of the congregational mission in the world today. We have to keep all this in mind during the discernment process of the Chapter. The Council called for a return to the charismatic sources of each Institute and the Church asks of us today "creative fidelity". We should ponder deeply the meaning of these expressions.

35. All this is linked to the concern about identity which was the focal point of our reflection in the previous General Chapter. It appears as central element in the document "Men on fire with love", which summarizes the discussions that the Congregation had five years ago at the XXIV General Chapter. We are "missionaries". Number 26 of the Directory provides a good summary of this identity: *"The word "missionary", understood in the light of the spiritual experience of St. Anthony Mary Claret, defines our charismatic identity. The title of the "Apostolic Missionary" which he received synthesises his ideal of life according to the style of the apostles. This way of life implies being disciples and to follow the Master, to live the evangelical counsels in a community of life with Jesus and the group of those who are called, to be sent and to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom to the whole world. The anointing of the Spirit to announce the Good News and*

the communion with Christ, the Prophet par excellence, render us sharers of his prophetic function."

36. The issue of identity, in terms of the call to live today our missionary vocation, is still of great relevance in the congregational today. We cannot leave it out of our analysis. The effort into the project "The Forge in our daily life" has precisely this goal.
37. Alongside this, we discovered the need to enhance the experience of fraternal life in the community. On many occasions the community has come to occupy a marginal place in the scale of values of some Claretians. The commitment to the project of community life is weakening and so it is easy to give up something that no longer is felt like an important part of life or to put it in second place amongst the many obligations in our lives. It is, however, in the community where we learn what it means to be part of the group of Jesus' disciples and where we discern the choices and activities through which we express our missionary charism. The community humanizes us and prepares us to keep close to the people, especially those who need to feel the warmth of a presence to help them live with hope. In the community we are called to live the mystery of love which is the heart of the Christian message. Our fraternal life, just as we have said repeatedly, is our first missionary word.
38. I don't want you to interpret these observations as if I were looking to create a disposition towards self-accounting. It's not about that at all, but rather the

opposite. Without a strong sense of identity, we will not be able to offer the Church and the world that service for which the Lord has called the Institute into being. Mission has been, is and will always remain the key consideration for arousing these other concerns because we don't want our commitment to lose strength or to become less consistent.

39. We are carrying out a process of clarification about the style of our contribution to the mission of the Church. I think the process which has been promoted for this purpose by the General Prefecture of Apostolate is helping us. I myself wanted to emphasize this aspect through the circular letter "Missionaries" which I sent out a little over a year ago. I became aware of an excessive fragmentation of our ministries which have progressively emerged, all too often, without careful, thoughtful consideration. Sometimes we have been simply increasing our presence because a bishop has requested it, especially in the case of parishes, or because it has not been possible to establish serious processes of reflection on the missionary outreach of a particular Organism. Moreover, we should consider here the issue of missionary availability, which is essential when trying to decide on the options and the apostolic activities of the Congregation and each Organism. Keeping the Congregation available for the universal mission of the Church is an obligation that falls on all of us. The guidelines for new foundations and the suppression of presences contained in the Directory has this objective in mind and, therefore, it is essential to adhere to it.

40. I have also observed a certain fragility in most of our formative processes. It is crucial to highlight the importance of the personal accompaniment required to support our formandi, this being the most important aspect of the formation process. They go through the stages of formation with the academic program as a point of reference. In some places, in practice, more importance is bestowed on discipline, which is always important of course, than to the personalization of the formation content. Good formation requires the close presence of formators, which is very difficult to maintain when the number of formandi is excessive or when the formator has to cover multiple responsibilities. Along with this, one must consider the fundamental importance of what we might call the "provincial culture", in other words a lifestyle that helps people to breathe, within the Province or Delegation, and in each of their communities, the values which, during the period of formation, have been presented as essential for living in consistence with the vocational response. This provincial "climate" or "culture" is also fundamental in the planning of the vocation ministry. Is our life appealing to those seeking a more radical adherence to Jesus and a fraternity experience truly inspired by the Gospel? What resonance do our missionary commitments have in the hearts of young people?

41. During the past few years we have tried to head up the processes of congregational reorganization, as ordered by the previous General Chapter. It will be one of the aspects of the life of the Congregation which

we will have to evaluate during the Chapter. We are still working on the definition of the congregational reorganization in Europe since, both because of cultural differences as well as the advanced age of most of the Claretians residing in the continent, it presents us with special difficulties. Anyway, we know that we must move forward if we want to maintain the missionary vitality of the Congregation in Europe.

42. These are all urgent issues in our congregational life. I want to emphasize, lastly, one aspect that I consider essential. It is a perception that I have, and one I have repeatedly shared both within the General Government and with other General Superiors, of a certain lack of depth in the life of many of us. Perhaps it has something to do with that feature of current culture that we define with the word “light”. I sincerely believe that we often suffer from a lack of depth. It is something that extends to our relationship with God, to our interpersonal relationships and to our apostolic undertaking. I think it is worth reflecting on this aspect and see how to include it in our itinerary leading up to the Chapter. Without depth, we can’t be missionaries today.
43. We must bear in mind the congregational reality, both the gifts with which the Lord has graced us and the deficiencies in our response. We have experienced achievements and failures. We continue having dreams that need personal and community consistency to become realities and thus be able to be transformed into projects that will announce in our world the joy of the Gospel. Let us share all this with our brothers and

make the fruit of our reflection reach the committee that will prepare the working paper for the next General Chapter. It will help us all.

THE CHAPTER AND THE YEAR OF THE “CONSECRATED LIFE”

44. Our General Chapter will take place during the celebration of the “year of consecrated life”. It is a beautiful coincidence that will stimulate us to a deeper discernment of the ways that the Lord points out to us today. The “year of the consecrated life” will be an important occasion to give thanks for this gift with which the Lord embellishes his Church, to celebrate with the entire People of God the life of those of us who have been called to live this vocation, to make known to everyone the reality of the consecrated life and share our experience, to renew the commitment of all the religious to faithfully follow Jesus and to make of the service to the Church and to humankind the objective of our lives.
45. It is a year that is born under the sign of “joy”. Both the apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis and the programmatic document of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are articulated around this message: *To announce with gladness the joy of the Gospel.*
46. The call to joy of the document “*Rejoice*” of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life

seems somewhat paradoxical when the situations we are experiencing are, much too often, overwhelming us. In some places we feel somewhat discouraged for the lack of vocations which raises doubts about our own subsistence and the continuity of so many works that we, religious, are carrying out. Other times the concern revolves around the vocational consistence and the charismatic and apostolic commitment of the consecrated life in places of more recent presence, blessed with abundant vocations. In the midst of this reality and of many other traits that today characterize the realities of our Orders and Congregations we are called to a joyful experience: “*Rejoice*”.

47. We are talking about a *joy* that goes beyond the numbers and the different events that mark the journey of consecrated life in the various parts of the world. In the document “*Rejoice*” we are told that it is a joy that is expression of a deep experience of God and that it arises from the friendship with Jesus and the awareness of oneself as part of God’s project over the world. It is a joy that is born, grows and is nourished in a spirituality of the kenosis and, therefore, it knows how to discover the sense of the mystery of the cross and its capacity to give rise to new life. It is the joy experienced when one feels to be in communion with the Church and with so many persons who seek the transformation of the world according to God’s design. It is a joy that fills the heart and always opens new horizons of hope in life. A religious knows that no suffering or setback may rob him of this joy, although in some moment of his life he may feel it to be far off

or strange. He knows that he is in God’s hands and in his brothers’ heart.

48. But it is also a joy beset by temptations and dangers. When we prefer other interests to God’s project or when the friendship with Jesus is hindered by other attachments that keep us far from Him and from the mission that He entrusted to us, the joy decreases, the vocation is felt more as a burden than as a gift and the religious becomes unable to give witness to and announce the Gospel. We are exhorted not to be sad witnesses and, even less, embittered ones. This tone of joy should mark our Chapter and the entire process that will bring us to it.

49. Pope Francis announced the celebration of the “year of the consecrated life” during the encounter he had with the Superiors General on November 29 of last year 2013. I believe that retaking the indications that the Pope gave us in that encounter will help us on the way towards the General Chapter. I will do it by briefly presenting some of the guidelines that he offered us:

50. “*Wake up the world*”. He insisted on the ‘alternative’ character the consecrated life should always have. Our life should not leave indifferent those who enter into contact with us. “Be witnesses of a different way of doing, acting, living”, he said to us. The capacity to wake up the world demands from us to be vigilant so that it would be God’s project that would maintain all our potentialities active. We know that we are sinners and that many times it is the values of the world that

make our life sleepy. For that reason, the Pope insisted on the need to be awake and open to the action of the Spirit in order to be able to “wake up the world.”

51. *“Look at the reality from the periphery”*. The Pope emphasized that this is a question of hermeneutics. The location makes us understand the reality in a different way and allows us to see tones and angles that go unnoticed to those who do not have the courage to travel there. The reason is that in the periphery the consequences of the options and the projects can be touched and there the suffering they produce has faces and names. There one can discover the dehumanizing forces that must be contrasted with the power of the Gospel.
52. *“Live out the gift of prophecy”*. And he continued: “Don’t play being prophets,” because it would be mere hypocrisy. Hypocrisy kills the message; coherence gives credibility to the announcement. Prophecy is expressed through a life that is “memory” of how Jesus lived and “announcement” of what the Kingdom is called to be and the relationships among persons and peoples in it. The Pope insisted several times in this prophetic dimension of the consecrated life which has very specific consequences in the life of the religious, in the communities and activities, and that it is necessary to maintain the health of the whole Christian community.
53. *“Keep the charism alive”*. He invited us to maintain alive, above all, the charism of consecrated life

which is “being the memory of Jesus’ lifestyle.” He insisted on it several times, emphasizing that this is the peculiarity of religious life. He reminded us that our mission is living the Gospel “sine glossa” and with deep joy. He also asked us to live with fidelity and creativity the charism of our own Institutes which enrich the whole Church and reinforce its mission. “The charism remains and develops, the works and the structures, although important, disappear.” He alerted us not to forget this reality.

54. *“Take care of the formation”* and, for that, he exhorted us to be always very attentive to the personal and cultural realities and to the guidelines of the Church. Formation, Pope Francis insisted, is a handicraft work. Attention must be given to each one of the candidates, accompanying his inner growth and the internalization of the Gospel values and those of consecrated life. He warned us against an excessively en masse formation which does not allow this type of personal accompaniment and, at the end, is focused on mere discipline, with the danger of covering up insufficient or slanted motivations. He shared with us that he is concerned with vocational selection and that in the formative process we must always have to keep in mind the people of God for whose service the candidates are educated. He emphasized the importance of the four pillars on which the building up the formation processes and which should be simultaneously raised: spiritual, intellectual, communitarian and apostolic.

55. *“Live the joy of fraternity”*. The Synod on the new evangelization asked that we, religious, be witnesses of the humanizing force of the Gospel through our fraternal life. The Pope encouraged us to share the joy of the Gospel in the community. A joyful community is appealing, convokes new vocations. If anyone is not capable of living the fraternity with all its consequences, the Pope said, he has no vocation for religious life. In a true fraternity the fragilities are understood and the conflicts are overcome with evangelical love. Fraternity is built up when one knows how to deal with the brothers with “Eucharistic tenderness”, Pope Francis explained.

56. *“Don’t be afraid to go out to the peripheries”*. This is the repeated call of Pope Francis to the entire Church and, especially, addressed to the religious. The last Synod on the New Evangelization had already asked this from us when he invited us to place ourselves in the social, geographic and cultural frontiers of the mission. Traveling to the periphery requires spiritual consistency, human maturity and intellectual preparation. The Pope asked from us Superiors to send to the peripheries well prepared persons with a heart inflamed with the love of God and of the brothers. The missionary availability has been a characteristic of consecrated life and should continue being it everywhere, always resisting the temptations of installation and the search for securities. The Pope echoed the synod proposal and invited us to go to these different peripheries of our world.

57. I think it’s necessary to keep these indications present in the planning of our General Chapter. They will help us go deeper in the discernment and will force us to look toward the new goals that the Church points out to us.

THE THEME OF THE XXV GENERAL CHAPTER

58. From January 20 to 30 the General Government had, in Vic, an encounter with all the Major Superiors of the Congregation. Its main objective was to define the central theme of the next General Chapter. We had the opportunity to share the achievements, difficulties and hopes of each one of the Organisms and of the Congregation in general. We tried to discern to what the Lord was calling us in this moment of our congregational history. It was a fraternal and sincere dialogue. From it arose what will be the articulating theme of the XXV General Chapter, which will give continuity to the previous Chapter because we are conscious of its centrality:

CALLED TO EVANGELIZE
Witnesses and Messengers of the joy of the Gospel

59. The main motives that brought us to opt for this theme were three:

1. *The awareness of our identity*. We are missionaries. In the Circular Letter that I sent to you two years

ago I amply commented on this theme. I refer you to it again. Our life and our projects are called to express this identity and to do it in a credible and intelligible way in each cultural context and in each historical moment.

2. *The tuning with the ecclesial moment we are living.* I already referred to it in this same letter. The call of Pope Francis to build up a Church that “goes out of herself to the encounter with the other” finds a strong resonance in our missionary heart. The resignation of Pope Benedict XVI was a gesture full of wisdom and courage that clearly showed what it means to look at oneself from the perspective of the mission and its demands, and that invites to overcome all kinds of attachments and fears. The last Synod on the New Evangelization requested that the religious live with a true missionary spirit, by being witnesses and messengers of the Gospel, of the “joy of the Gospel”, as Pope Francis tells us.
3. *The concern for humanity and for the world.* This is our fundamental concern. The Pope, in his apostolic exhortation, warns us against any type of self-accounting, because it would stifle the action of the Spirit. God wants us to be instruments of his love and bearers of hope. Yes, we are concerned for humanity because we can foresee in the heart of our fellow-travelers that unquenchable desire for truth, for beauty, for peace, for harmony and for good, which God himself planted in the heart of each human being and which He wishes to give abundant fruit for the good of all. This is our wish:

to put ourselves unconditionally at the service of God’s project for his children.

60. In the enunciation of the theme there are some stresses that I want to emphasize:
 - a. It expresses the awareness of *a call*, of God’s look, full of love, and of a will to *respond to it*. Our life is a development of a vocation which is, before anything else, a gift.
 - b. The title is *written in plural*. “We are called.” This places us in a perspective of community: we share the call with others who have also been called and, with them, we also want to share the response.
 - c. *Mission* is placed at the center. We have been called to “evangelize” which, as Paul VI said, “constitutes the grace and vocation of the Church, its deepest identity” (EN 14) and consists in bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming from within and renew humanity itself” (EN 18). This has implications in all the dimensions of our life and in all the aspects of our organization.
 - d. *Witnesses and messengers*. There is a sincere desire to confront our life and our words with the action of the Spirit and with the Word that has been entrusted to us to be announced. We know that only the coherence between the life and the message arouses credibility.
 - e. And finally, *joy*. With it, we want to be in tune with the invitation of Pope Francis who encourages us

to be bearers of hope. It is, at the same time, an invitation to live joyfully our vocation.

61. We feel called to be generously and fully integrated in the project of the New Evangelization to which the Church convokes us today. And we want to do it “as Claretians”, contributing what the Lord has given us through the charism of our Congregation. Hence, we feel the need to define with greater clarity the traits that should characterize today the Claretian style of evangelization. I proposed it to you in the circular “Missionaries”, to which I referred earlier. It would be good to recall it in the process of preparation of the Chapter. On the other hand, the General Prefecture of Apostolate has been leading an interesting process of reflection on this theme, through a seminar on the theology of the mission, celebrated in Colmenar Viejo (Spain) and through continental encounters. This contribution will help us in the Chapter reflection. The process of charismatic renewal “The Forge in Daily Life,” which we have been following during these years, has also prepared us for this discernment.
62. In this moment of the congregational history, I think it’s important that we reflect on our missionary style, which goes beyond the apostolic activities, because it marks each of the dimensions of our life. The renewed Constitutions have offered us a new reading of the charism that God aroused in the Church through St. Anthony M. Claret and have indicated a sure way to live it and make it bear life for the Church and for the world. The document “The Mission of the Claretian

Today”, of the XIX General Chapter, pointed out to us a beautiful missionary horizon that the following General Chapters and the congregational teaching have been developing all throughout these years.

63. More than thirty years have passed since that General Chapter. The Congregation has substantially changed in its human geography and the missionary presences have multiplied both geographically and in the variety of apostolates. The world has experienced radical changes and the Church has continued looking for new ways to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. It is good, therefore, to become once more aware of our missionary identity and to discern what it asks from us in these new contexts. It invites us to clarify those characteristics which will make of our life, of our communities and of our apostolic activities valid instruments of evangelization in accordance with the missionary charism we have received. What does it mean being “servants of the Word”, “missionaries of the Kingdom”, and what does it demand today?
64. This exercise is equally important to help those Organisms that must redefine their apostolic positions because of a notable decrease of personnel, reducing them or creating others that will allow them to maintain their missionary dynamism. And it is also even more important for those Organisms which experience a growth in personnel and must define the new places of missionary presence and their modalities. Serious processes of discernment need solid criteria which will guarantee, in each place and according to the

characteristics proper of the context in which we are called to evangelize, the fidelity to the charism we have received, as religious and as Claretians, for the good of the Church and of the world.

65. This will be the theme at the center of the Chapter reflection. However, from this perspective we also want to reflect on three aspects of the congregational life which repeatedly appeared in the gathering of the General Government with the Major Superiors of the Congregation: community, formation and collaboration in the Congregation. It's important, however, to clearly maintain the perspective from which we want to tackle those themes:

- a. *The community* as subject of the mission and parable of the message that we announce. We have seen that individualism, a well spread disease of our times, makes us lose the sense of community and weakens the fundamental role of the community as subject of the mission. On the other hand, a community that lives the values that it proclaims is fundamental in an age in which testimony is especially valued. We have repeatedly said that the "fraternal life is the first mission fact" (IPM 24).
- b. *Formation* as a process that prepares and trains to live with boldness and generosity the demands of the mission, as we understand it today, and to live them in and from the community.
- c. *Coordination* of the economic and personnel resources of the Congregation for a better missionary service in the world of today and to better respond to the needs of the Church.

66. They are all important aspects which respond to concerns expressed by the Major Superiors and also observed by the General Government. I insist however that we want to confront these issues from the perspective of the *mission*, which explains our life and is the source from which we have to establish the guidelines for our organization.

THE PROCESS TOWARDS THE CHAPTER

67. It is important, then, to set off. **With this letter I officially announce the celebration of the XXV General Chapter of the Congregation which will take place in Rome, starting on August 24, 2015.** As I have underlined throughout this letter, the active participation of all in the road of Chapter discernment is important. Next I offer you some indications to help the participation of all. I will present four questions about which I ask for three things:

- a. *Personal reflection* which must include prayer and a return to the sources of our project of life: the Gospel and the Constitutions. This is a reflection which cannot leave aside the stimuli and guidelines that come from the ecclesial and congregational teaching or from the appeals that reach us from the reality of the people with whom we share our life.
- b. *Dialogue in the community*, which widens the personal horizon and allows us to discern the will of God over us with greater certainty.
- c. *Contribution of your community to the report that the Province or Delegation has to send.* Each

Organism will send to the General Secretariat its contribution to the Chapter theme so that we may be able to prepare a working paper that will gather the richness of the reflection of all the Claretians.

68. I also encourage you to create spaces of reflection together with the lay persons with whom you share the evangelizing task. Their contribution will be very important. In the meeting with the Major Superiors we spoke about the convenience of their participation in the Chapter hall. Most of those present thought that their participation in the provincial phase of the preparation of the Chapter would be much more effective, without excluding the possibility of inviting some of them to enlighten the reflection of the Chapter itself during its celebration in Rome.

69. Now let me offer to you the four questions for your personal and community reflection. Obviously they refer to the Chapter theme and to the three aspects that we want to examine from this perspective:

- 1. Which should be the specific traits of the Claretian style of evangelization in the mission of the Church today?***
- 2. How could the Claretian community be truly the subject of the mission and itself become a proclamation of the humanizing force of the Gospel?***
- 3. What elements should we stress in the formative processes in order to live with greater coherence the demands of the mission?***

- a. In the process of initial formation***
- b. In the on-going formation***
- 4. How can we more adequately coordinate the congregational resources of personnel and economy to improve our missionary service in the present moment?***

70. And, finally, I offer you *the calendar* of preparation of the Chapter. From the General Secretariat you will receive more concrete indications on some of the indicated activities:

YEAR 2014

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|-------------|---|
| July 16: | Letter of announcement of the General Chapter, which will be sent to the Congregation together with other materials for the preparation of the Chapter. |
| October 10: | Closing of the lists of members of the Organisms to determine the number of delegates that each one of them must elect. |
| October 20: | Appointment of the pre-Chapter committee members and sending of the outline for the elaboration of the Reports. |

October 24: Beginning of the election period of the delegates of the Organisms.

YEAR 2015

March 1: Conclusion of the election period of the delegates to the Chapter.

March 5-10: Meeting of the General Government for the designation of the delegates that it is allowed to appoint according to the decision of the XXIV General Chapter.

March 19: Convocation Letter of the XXV General Chapter.

April 1: Deadline for the sending to the General Secretariat of the Reports and the contributions to the Chapter theme.

April 22-30: Meeting of the Pre-Chapter committee.

Mayo 15: Sending of the working paper of the Chapter to the Chapter members and to the communities.

Juny 1: Meeting of the General Government for the approval of the Reports on Government and Economy to be presented to the Chapter.

August 24: Beginning of the XXV General Chapter.

71. The road towards the Chapter is a spiritual journey. I want to put it in the hands and, above all, in the Heart of our Mother. Her “Magnificat” is going to accompany us on this road. With her we want to learn how to discover the marvels that God works in his servants and to be filled with that unbreakable hope that is born of the absolute trust in the love of the Father and in his promises. With Her, we will look at the reality to let ourselves be questioned by its contradictions and to commit ourselves to collaborate to its transformation according God’s design for his children.

72. Let us not fail to look at the testimony of our Father Founder who passionately lived his missionary vocation and to our Martyrs who, with their blood, corroborated their commitment to live only for God and for the announcement of the Gospel. I hope that the Chapter road may be for each one of us a moment of vocational growth and of fortification of our cordial adhesion to the missionary project of the Congregation.

Rome, July 16, 2104

165th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation

JOSEP M. ABELLA, cmf.
Superior General

