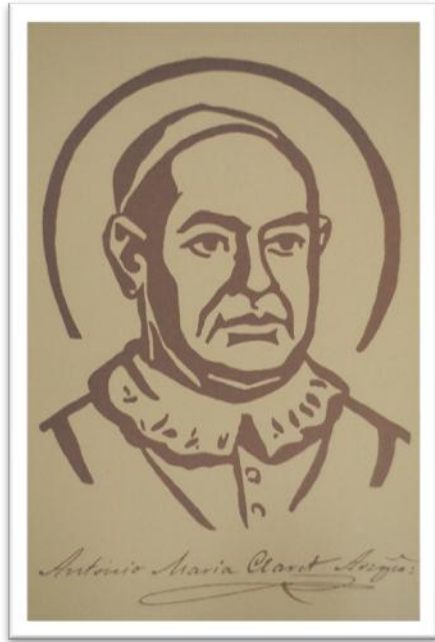


# MISSIONARIES



**CIRCULAR LETTER OF  
FR. JOSEP M. ABELLA, C.M.F.  
SUPERIOR GENERAL**

**ROMA 2012**



## INTRODUCTION

Dear Brothers,

I hope this letter sees that you are all well and full of enthusiasm in the missionary service that the superiors have entrusted to you. Some of you, because of health problems or age, will be praying for the success of the ministry of your brothers. Some, on the other hand, will find yourselves in one of the stages of formation, preparing for your own integration into the mission teams. I write to you all, when we are half way through the term of office of this General Government, to recall and comment on some important points that the last General Chapter gave us for the renewal of our missionary life. This time I felt it appropriate to do so from the perspective offered by what we understand as the very core of our vocation: to be missionaries, and to be such today.

As we began to prepare the previous General Chapter we noticed an area of common concern among the Major Superiors of the Congregation about addressing the issue of our identity. We clearly had no need for creating new definitions, because we were convinced that the process of congregational renewal after Vatican II had already given us detailed definitions, both in the renewed Constitutions and in other documents. In addition, the decisions made by the General Chapters and the magisterium of the General Superiors had offered us important indications on this matter. We were concerned, however, as to how the definition of this identity came to shape our own lives, our communities and apostolic projects. Both the characteristics of the historical moment we were living in, as well as the plurality of the cultural situations present in congregational reality, confront us with new questions; even more than that, they led us to discov-

er new resonances in the fundamental question: who are we and how do we live this identity today? We avoided the word "identity" which could guide us towards an excessively theoretical discussion, and we chose to put the question in the following way: How can we live our missionary vocation today? This was the concern that guided our decision-making in the pre-chapter period and during the celebration of the General Chapter itself. The three elements in question draw our attention to the fundamental aspects which must be taken into account. This is a "vocation", a gift, a calling, a present from God and not primarily a project of our own making, designed and defined by ourselves. It is, above all, a call to be listened to and to be answered. It implies a relationship that touches the lives of those who hear the call and who will be continually confronted by new questions. It is about "living" according to the requirements arising from this call, which echoes throughout all dimensions of life. And finally it's about living it "today", re-listening to the changing circumstances of history, always keeping in mind the "pathos" of He who calls, and his plan of salvation.

The Chapter agenda focused on the theme of missionary mysticism, as a fundamental condition for answering this call. We are, primarily, missionaries. It is an affirmation that is almost superfluous to us, because we have heard it, meditated on it and spoken about it countless times. But, at the same time, it is a statement that leaves us uneasy because it presents us with the challenge of demonstrating through our attitudes, projects and activities that this continues to be true in our personal lives, in our communities and in the journey of the universal Congregation. During the Chapter we saw very clearly that we needed to renew the motivation that kept us fully aware of the challenges that we were discovering in the world, and that we were willing to face up to the consequences brought about by answering

them, as required by the missionary charism that the Lord has given us. It is precisely in the light of this concern that some initiatives have been launched in the Congregation over the years.

It seemed, therefore, appropriate to share with you some reflections on this crucial issue, so we can keep writing congregational history in the true language of the missionary.

## **I. THE MISSION, A FUNDAMENTAL TOPIC**

The mission is at the centre of religious life. The Pope reminded us Superiors General of this in his speech during the audience he gave us in November 2011: "The mission is the route to being part of the Church and, through it, part of the consecrated life; it is an element of your identity". Charisms are gifts of the Spirit for the good of the whole Church, so that you can grow in your journey of faith, build up true brotherhood and develop the mission to witness and proclaim the kingdom.

The mission was also one of the focal points of the reflections of the International Congress of consecrated life held in Rome in 2004. We tried to express it through the phrase that has served as a point of reference and inspiration for many: "Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity". I referred to this motto, repeatedly stressing that it expresses the key that allows us to establish the true missionary sense of our lives.

There have been many conferences and symposia that have been organized on this subject and numerous publications that deal with it. There is a major focus on the importance of this aspect of our identity as religious and as Claretians. But questions continue to haunt us that cause us grave concern and that require us to look for new answers and define new coordinate axes on which to draw up the missionary outreach of our congregation today.

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**POINTS OF REFERENCE WHEN IT COMES TO  
CONSIDERING OUR MISSION TODAY**

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When we think of our missionary charism, we obviously feel called to turn our gaze to the experience of Fr. Founder. We are interested especially in being fully aware of what motivated him in his missionary vocation, how he internalized this call and how he expressed his response through projects and activities. We know very well how he was able to combine the analysis of the historical reality of his time with the call that he discovered with great force in his meditation on the Word of God. He did it using theological, ecclesiological and sociological paradigms of his time, but allowing himself to be challenged by both the reality and the Word and trying to respond to them. His spirituality, the organization of the group accompanying him (his community) and his activity were always guided by missionary concern. This is the information we want to gather from the experience of our Fr Founder. We realize that the missionary zeal that gripped his heart was the axis around which the various dimensions of his personality revolved, as well as all the projects of his life as a priest and bishop. Our Congregation itself is the result of that zeal. During the celebration of the bicentenary of his birth, we had occasion to go deeply into all these aspects. It was a time of grace for the Congregation.

Anyway, times have changed and some of the motivations that drove Claret to his tireless apostolic activity, no longer have significant echoes in our lives. I had the opportunity to discuss this with many of you in personal conversations and in meet-

ings of various kinds. A new vision of man, a different way of thinking about the Church and its mission, an ecumenical sensitivity unthinkable in the time of Fr Founder, new approaches in theology and Christology, a closer contact with other religious traditions and so on, put us in a very different perspective. This forces us to recover the core of his missionary vocation so as to be able to share it with the enthusiasm which speaks to our hearts and fills our apostolic fervour with a dynamic motivation. For those of us called to this missionary community, Claret remains for us a point of reference, but we need to know how to reinterpret it. The paragraph of the Autobiography that concludes the chapter in which he talks about the "stimulus that moved him to his mission" is beautiful. It is a text that we have come to call "apostolic prayer" and that continues to fuel our missionary spirituality: "Oh 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. Amen "(Aut 233). Here we find an important focus of our spirituality and missionary motivation.

Along with this we continue to bear in the mind and heart the words of the "definition of the missionary", which inspired the commitment of many of our brothers and which still speaks powerfully to our hearts. In fact, it was around this text that the chapter reflections were formulated, and this was reflected in the Chapter document "Men on fire with love."

These are the Claretian traits that will help us to define the motivation which can continue to sustain and enhance our missionary commitment today, and where we will be inspired to identify the axes through which we will define the large num-



ber of apostolic activities through which the Congregation can express its missionary charism today.

## **1.2.**

### ***Guidance from the ecclesial Magisterium***

We are commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Vatican II. There is no doubt that the Council represented a radical change in the mindset of the Church and its mission in the world. The ecclesiology of communion that we find in the documents of the Council invites us to live the mystery of the Church as a reality in which the different charisms and ministries, precious gifts of the Spirit, are mutually interrelated, helping one another to follow Jesus more faithfully, and to enthusiastically fulfill the mission entrusted by the Lord to the Church. Through it we felt called and made to feel responsible for this mission, which is vital and urgent for all mankind.

The Council noted that the path to the achievement of this mission requires a sense of openness to the world and attentive listening to the questions that accompany the journeying of humanity at this historic moment. Only through open and friendly dialogue will the Gospel really touch peoples' lives. We are talking about a dialogue that is vital if we are to find ways of evangelization which are capable of penetrating right into the cultures of different peoples, just as Paul VI said in "Evangelii Nuntiandi" (EN 20).

The Council recognized the urgent need to deepen and accelerate the path of ecumenism and to enter into a sincere dialogue with believers of other religious traditions and with all persons of good will. Human rights, peace, justice, ecology and other

deeply human subjects found their own place on the horizon of evangelization.

This is not the place to offer any kind of synthesis of the Council's teaching; I simply wanted to draw attention to the importance of not losing sight of that moment of grace in the life of the Church. It inaugurated a new period for the missionary activity of the Church. Referring to the Council, the Blessed John Paul II says: "The enormous wealth of content and the new emphases, never before experienced, of the Council's presentation of these contents, almost constituted a proclamation for new times" (TMA 20).

The following Magisterium has helped us to go deeper into this train of thought and has offered us several prompts to explore it further in the new "areopagi", inviting us also to give witness to the Gospel there. The post-conciliar era has been a time of great pastoral creativity and missionary generosity, but unfortunately, a certain weariness has appeared in some sectors of the Church today. Creativity demands close attention to the signs of the times, to the Spirit's action in history; for that reason, it requires a deep spirituality and a generous willingness to take on new challenges and seek answers that are truly relevant.

Equally important has been the teaching of the continental and national churches. I will make just a few observations about the continental churches, since entering into the experience of the national churches is impossible.

The Latin American Church has been a pioneer and the guidelines issued by its General Conferences in Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) and recently in Aparecida (2007), have touched the lives of all the churches of the continent and stimulated the missionary commitment on other

continents. The preferential option for the poor, the commitment to justice, the recovery of the Word of God in the Christian community, and many other aspects, have led to new forms of ecclesial presence among the people and good pastoral practice, which have developed a totally new models of being Church.

The Church in Asia has emphasized dialogue as the proper place for evangelization: dialogue with cultures, with religious traditions and with the poor. Through this dialogue the joyful message of the Gospel is communicated and our experience of God, whom we discover more and more as Father/Mother of all, is enriched. Through dialogue we can all turn more towards the Kingdom. In dialogue the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ finds its proper place.

The Church in Europe has been confronted with the issues that arise from a cultural situation marked by a very strong process of secularization, which has involved people distancing themselves from the Church and has produced a certain religious indifference in most of the citizens of that continent. There have emerged countless new pastoral initiatives and we are seeking new opportunities for dialogue with this culture. The Church in Europe has also made significant contributions to the new political directions that have been taken on the continent.

The Church of North America has come to realize the urgency of not losing sight of other peoples' situations when considering one's own welfare and safety, and has been able to raise important issues that have had an impact on the consciousness of citizens and rulers of those nations. Proximity to, and solidarity with, immigrants have been clear testimony of the Gospel values.

The Church in Africa has tried to be an instrument of communion and reconciliation in many conflict situations that the continent has lived through. It has also been able to joyfully welcome a growing number of people who ask to be part of the Christian community and to accompany them on their journey of faith. In the midst of difficulties, but always with a great sense of hope, the features that should characterize this "Church, Family of God" have been consolidated, so that all can be integrated with the richness of their own cultural traditions.

It is true that, with all this, there are many shadows in Church life that sometimes weaken the credibility of the proclamation of the Gospel. But there is no doubt that the new way of thinking about church and mission, which has arisen since Vatican II, has been a major change. It has placed us in a new dynamic in which you cannot avoid hearing the questions that arise from social and cultural realities, because evangelization occurs precisely within this dialogue. The Council continues to offer us a perspective from which we can address the various questions that arise from the reality of our world. It encourages us to seek new ways of living our religious consecration so that it really becomes a meaningful message for the world today.

### **1.3.**

#### ***Other important references***

There are other benchmarks that we should not forget when thinking about our missionary outreach. I list some of them which I think to be most relevant.

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tention to reality.* I refer especially to the situation of the

people of those towns or places where we live. An open and cordial relationship with these people opens our minds and our hearts so as to capture their hopes and fears, their joys and sufferings. Seeing these people as a fundamental part of our own lives is the first step to take for the building of the Kingdom together with them. Preaching, liturgy, catechesis and many other activities are not going to find harmony and resonance in their lives if they do not spring out of this "dialogue of life". Along with this, it is equally important not to lose sight of the fact that this small portion of the world, that is within our everyday experience, is part of a much larger reality that conditions and controls it, for good and ill. In attending to the reality about us, we should never neglect a study of its cultural, political, economic and other aspects that helps us better understand the essence of the situations that we find ourselves in.

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*Contributions from theological and pastoral reflections.* This is another important aspect. We cannot continue to be tied down by schemes that were designed in the past, because they will hardly encourage missionary creativity today. Our study of those contributions offered by the persons dedicated to the ministry of theological reflection, also helps us to better identify the questions that must be addressed and find the necessary answers. Similarly, I think it is essential to closely follow the evolution of the today's thinking and other cultural manifestations (literature, art, music, etc..) at this historic moment in which we live because they always offer new challenges for our missionary work. At the same time, all these contributions stir up troubling questions about the nature and

methods of the mission of the Church, in the new situations in which it finds itself.

c. *Th*  
*e witness of people, whether Christian or not, which stirs up hope.* Some people are able to question the state of our society and to point to horizons where you will discover beautiful signs of hope. Through these people the Spirit of the Father acts and speaks to us. I am thinking, for example, of people like Archbishop Oscar Romero, Brother Roger of Taizé, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Edith Stein, to name but a few prominent names. But I am also thinking of people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela and many others. Everyone, men and women, and many others whom we know and love (some, very close to us, whose names would never appear in the media), are important landmarks when we begin to think about what it means today to proclaim the Gospel and build the Kingdom. They widen our horizons and often question the narrowness of our perspective.

d. *The discernment of the community.* The Lord speaks to us through the discernment of the community. The different sensitivities within the community, which is increasingly intercultural, help us to better analyze situations and be able to cope with them. It is an exercise of discernment that seeks inspiration in the Word of God, which should never be absent from this process. Led by the Word of God, we allow the voices and signs, which come from the reality that surrounds us, to penetrate into our hearts. Through prayer and community dialogue we will purify our criteria, make our attitudes more sincere and overcome our fears. Good community discernment is an im-

portant reference point in order to give continuity to pastoral activities that would otherwise remain mere activities linked to a single person, with no guarantee of the necessary continuity for them to become truly transformative. The community should never be absent from our reflection on our missionary outreach.

## **2. THE NEW QUESTIONS THAT TROUBLE US**

All these elements that I have listed arouse in us a sincere desire to tackle the mission enthusiastically, and generously give ourselves to the tasks that have been entrusted to us to carry out. We recognize ourselves as missionaries and we are happy to have been called by God to live out this particular vocation within the Claretian community.

But at the same time, many questions emerge that require us to constantly rethink how to express this mission today, which constitutes the core of our vocation. I want to pick out some of these concerns. I do it from my own personal experience and also echoing the long hours of dialogue with so many of you and with many very close collaborators. These are questions that vary according to the context in which we live and work, or according to the ministry that has been entrusted to us. These are issues that, on the one hand, stimulate missionary creativity, but in some cases, can lead us to feel discouraged or instill in each of us, and in the community, some confusion when it comes to giving guidance on missionary activity.

Faced with a world where, unfortunately, exclusion is an increasingly common phenomenon, and in which millions of people do not have enough resources to live on, we ask ourselves the following: How can we be credible signs of God's

love to the poor and excluded of this globalized world? Sometimes the security we enjoy bothers us, and we come to understand how the credibility of our missionary message is undermined. We discover, in some sectors of the Church, connivances that keep us distant from those suffering the effects of situations of exclusion and injustice. We cannot deny that it sometimes bothers us to have to confront in our own lives the demands of being close to the needs of the poor and excluded. We begin to wonder what the purpose of missionary work is, if it is incapable of bringing the world to God's plan for all its children. The words of Jesus recounted in the Luke's Gospel (cf. Lk 4.18 to 21) and which inspired the missionary life of Fr Founder, challenge our hearts and our way of thinking.

The revolution in the systems of global communications has enabled a better understanding of other religious traditions and brought us closer to the cultural wealth of other nations. So, having been sent to these peoples, we ask ourselves: What does it mean to proclaim the Word of God to people who have already had a deep relationship with God through other mediations? What does, or should, the Gospel bring to people who have built their culture and history through religious traditions that are different to ours? Jesus Christ is also "a gift of the Father" for these people and these nations. What kind of presence and missionary activity do these situations demand of us? We know that there are those who question the mission "ad gentes". They prefer to speak about the "missio inter gentes". How do we live the missionary vocation through the dynamics of deep and sincere dialogue with other religious traditions? How have these encounters with others affected our own experience of God and our way of living the mission?

In many parts of the world the processes of secularization are creating a culture which is disconnected with the universe of



faith and, consequently, with the message that the Church proclaims. Aggressiveness has disappeared, but we are now encountering indifference. Many of us are living in these environments and we are feeling the cultural impact. I am convinced that the phenomenon of unbelief or religious indifference is not just a pastoral problem, but is also an existential problem, because it affects us and influences our experience of faith and our vision of man, society and history. We struggle to create space for meaningful dialogue with those who have grown distant from the world of faith, a dialogue in which the witness of faith will find its own place. It's not easy finding the right language. At the same time, this dialogue holds our own lives up to question and its ability to manifest that God is all we need to believe in, and in whom we trust completely. It would seem that many other attachments of ours overshadow this witness. Do we feel any urgency to proclaim the Gospel? Are we convinced that it is necessary that these people need to be offered the chance of an encounter with Jesus? Are we willing to accept the consequences of a "new evangelization" that goes beyond mere recovery of lost ground by the Church and is profoundly transforming? Are really committed to evangelize by becoming "friends" with those who do not share our vision of mankind and of the world and, at the same time, keeping faithful to the mission which has been entrusted to us?

Moreover, we find that scientific progress questions many certainties we had in the past and requires us to re-think many things we have been saying for a while, and the way we have presented them. We cannot ignore the fact that it gives rise to questions within us that make us feel a little vulnerable or, at best, out of touch. Some of us even fall into the temptation of ignoring them entirely. But they are issues that weigh heavily on the conscience of the people, who themselves keep on looking for a horizon that will help them discover the true dignity

beyond the conclusions that the latest scientific discoveries bring. It is a tremendous challenge to evangelization and an opportunity for purifying many aspects of the message that have been repeated over the years and which no longer even enter the minds or hearts of the new generations. How do we address these questions?

With our own Christian and religious identity, how do we join with the efforts of humanity, at least the efforts of many people, to build a more fraternal and commonly shared world that is more respectful towards nature? Are we truly convinced that this is part of our mission, that it is part of the process of evangelization, which is also a fundamental dimension of the mission? There are numerous groups and individuals seeking a different world, more in touch with the dignity of every human being and, therefore, closer to God's plan. Important ways of participating in global forums, which decide the fate of many millions, are opening up. Do we feel the need to have a presence in them as a valid, legitimate expression of our missionary vocation? Or, conversely, do we see these initiatives as something that separates us from what we believe belongs to us as evangelizers? These are issues that touch fundamental aspects of our identity and require clarification, both theoretical and existential. We must find new models of spirituality that help us integrate these dimensions which are so important to keep on building the Kingdom of God.

But even limiting ourselves strictly to the sphere of pastoral work in the service of the Christian community, there are several questions we need to ask. What is it that is really motivating us in our pastoral work? Is it the "Caritas Christi urget nos" that motivated Fr. Founder? We sometimes go about primarily concerned about maintaining church structures, about increasing numbers, about what other sectors of society think about us.

We need to give our attention generously to those involved in the life of the parish and Christian community, so that we empower their potential as evangelizers. On visits and encounters, I have seen a determined effort to increase the number of evangelizers and to provide a solid Christian formation to those entrusted to help in our pastoral care. Biblical pastoral projects, attention to basic ecclesial communities, support of youth groups, etc.. these are all evidence of this. However, I also detect some disappointment when I see that the desired response is not always forthcoming. What direction should our pastoral work now take? Where should we place ourselves? Why are we afraid of withdrawing from some pastoral activities and responding pastorally to more challenging situations? Are we truly excited by the mission or do we risk ending up being mere "civil servants" of the Church?

There are also many places where participation in the liturgy and ecclesial life of the church is full of dynamism. There we frequently wonder how we should overcome a certain dichotomy we see between faith and life. How can we make the liturgy we celebrate be a reflection of the living experience, and that life be an expression of what we celebrate? We are concerned that developments we have experienced in other areas will be repeated in those places; but we sometimes find it difficult to take on new pastoral approaches. There is still a certain level of clericalism which may be detrimental to the building of a church which is open to seeking new answers to new challenges.

We are also questioning the capacity to evangelize of some of our pastoral structures: centres of education, human development projects, work with marginalized groups, the various initiatives in the world of social media and new communication technologies, centres of higher ecclesiastical studies, etc.. If we

continue working with them it is because we consider them viable platforms for evangelization. From them we also receive many questions that demand that we constantly rethink the meaning of evangelization and the most appropriate methods to maintain its missionary dynamism. We are concerned about the social environment where they are placed and who the beneficiaries are. Do we get to those who really need us? Do these structures let the values of the Gospel shine through? Do they empower those who benefit from them to be world-changers, to bring it closer to God's plan?

We are supported and encouraged by the guidelines given to us by the Pope and many of our Pastors, and by the witness of many church groups that cooperate generously in proclaiming the Gospel. The witness through martyrdom of many churches remains a source of credibility for the mission of the Church. But at the same time, we also see how ecclesial situations far removed from the true values of the Gospel, or reprehensible or outrageous behaviour on the part of those who have been given a ministry within the church community, have had a tremendously negative effect within the Christian community and in the development of the mission of the Church in the world. How can we work together to restore the credibility of the Church?

And above all, there is always the question about what constitutes the core of evangelization: to be instruments of the peoples' encounter with Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father that expresses the immeasurable depth of his love. How do we present Jesus? Are He and the Kingdom of God really at the heart of our commitment to evangelization? To accompany people to an enthusiastic commitment to Jesus and the Kingdom is the goal to which we are called in our work of evangelization. Often we realize that we have placed great emphasis on the doctrine and have neglected leading people towards a profound ex-

perience of God. It seems as if we had wanted to supplant the action of Jesus and his Spirit, the true mystagogues on the road to faith. We wonder why, after so much effort has been dedicated to education in the faith, we often see the growing distance between people and the Christian community. It seems that, sometimes, we no longer convey that enthusiasm which is contagious to others nor do we communicate that deep peace of mind which invites others to follow the same road. What is our catechesis like? What experience of God do our lives convey?

We could continue voicing many more concerns. All of this might encourage creativity and dynamism in the missionary outreach of the Congregation or, conversely, it might generate pessimism that might prevent us from living the joy of the mission. It is important to realize this and seek answers that "convince us" and "move us". The purpose of this letter is to encourage everyone to walk down a path that will lead us to a bolder and more generous commitment to proclaim Jesus Christ and to steadfastly collaborate in the building of the Kingdom of God.

There remains, however, a question we cannot ignore. It concerns our own lifestyle and the instruments we choose to carry out our mission. On the one hand, are our lives really a parable of God's love for his people, a parable of the compassion of Jesus for those who were in need of his word and of his presence? I have observed on a number of occasions a kind of reluctance to "be present among the people." We seem to have entered into a certain "professional" dynamic which places too great a distinction between "hours of service" and "one's own free time". Making ourselves transparent to the Father's love and allowing our consecration to be the only criterion for our lifestyle is a big challenge and is a key condition that gives credibility to our missionary work. I will not deny the importance of time for

prayer, study, rest or community life. On the contrary, I judge them to be essential. Nor do I condone an attitude that does not respect the areas reserved for our family-community. The question arises more about a lifestyle that can make us grow distant from the people for whom we have been sent. Similarly, we do question the choice of instruments we use for our task of evangelization and the areas where we work. We must be ever vigilant to possible deviations of our criteria from the core values of the Gospel, and the danger of accommodating them to other parameters of evaluation more common in our society but separated from the "power of the gospel".

Bringing all these concerns together, as well as many others, which we all carry within our hearts, let us consider the horizons of the mission of consecrated life, and the features that our own Claretian missionary work should have, so as to be evangelically meaningful and effective in the world today.

## II. NEW HORIZONS FOR THE MISSION OF CONSECRATED LIFE

In May 2011 the Union of General Superiors focused the reflections of its biannual Assembly around the identity and significance of apostolic religious life in today's world. It addressed the issue from the perspective of spirituality, fraternity and mission. It was specifically my role to introduce reflections on the theme of mission. I would like now to share with you what I presented at that time, because I think it offers a comprehensive framework which will help us to identify the specific characteristics of our own Claretian mission. All religious Orders and Congregations are concerned about the issue of mission, and seek how to express the charism received today for the good of the Church and the world<sup>1</sup>.

When we speak of '*mission*' we are, of course, speaking of something more than just apostolic activities. The mission reaches further than specific apostolic ministries; it articulates different dimensions of our life, all of which are called to be an announcement of the newness of the Kingdom of God. The mission is at the centre of the consecrated life and of the identity of each Institute<sup>2</sup>.

The fundamental mission of the consecrated life and of each Institute is the mission of the Church, the only one that Jesus entrusted to his disciples. In this regard, it is "our" mission, although the "our" goes beyond the limits of our Congregation or

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<sup>1</sup> In this second part of the Circular Letter, I will follow basically the contribution I presented in the General Assembly of the Union of Superiors General (USG) held in Rome on May 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. VITA CONSECRATA 25, and others.

Institute. It is the mission of the Church which, faithful to the commission of Jesus, continues to announce the Gospel of the Kingdom to all people and serving the cause of those to whom, according to Jesus himself, it belongs: the poor, the peace makers, those who work for justice, those who suffer. It is the mission that Jesus entrusted to his disciples and that is recorded in the Gospels through different ‘missionary mandates’: to proclaim the Good News to all people (cf. Mt 28, 18; Mk 16, 15); to be witnesses to the Resurrection cf. Lk 24, 46-48); Acts 1, 8); to be bearers of peace and reconciliation (cf. Jn 20, 21-23); to cure the sick and help those excluded (cf. Lk 10, 1-9); to be light to the world and salt of the earth (cf. Mt 5, 13-16); to love one another with the love with which Jesus himself loved (cf. 13, 34-35); etc. In the end, it deals with the mission of Jesus, which he himself presented through the words of the book of the prophet Isaiah which he proclaimed in the synagogue at Nazareth: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and new sight to the blind, to free the oppressed and to announce the Lord’s year of mercy.” (Lk 4, 18-19).

There is more. It also deals with the mission that God entrusted to the whole of humanity to care for the Creation and to build a history of fraternity and solidarity, as we discover in the accounts of Creation and throughout the pages of Scripture, especially in the preaching of the Prophets.

To properly understand the theme of mission, we must go back to its Trinitarian roots. The mission comes from the very insides of God Abba. Abba generates the Son in eternity and sends Him to us in order for Him to be incarnated in history. The Son is he who has been sent, and fulfils the mission that the Father had entrusted to Him. This “filial” mission, however, is not the only one that is born of God’s heart. There is another



mission, which flows from the Son like living water (cf. Jn 7: 37-39) and that comes from the Father (Jn 15:26): it is the mission of the Spirit. This mission continues to be fulfilled in the history of the world until the end of time<sup>3</sup>.

We can see that the mission comes from the experience of a God who is communion and communication, who is love and who fills us with this love, who dwells in us and wishes to communicate himself. The missionary mandate of Jesus is a resonance of the communion of trinitarian love, an invitation to give it, under the impulse of the Spirit, a concrete expression in time and space. The Church only has meaning as an instrument of the communication of this love. In this way it participates in the 'Mission Dei', although it does not exhaust nor monopolize it.

To this mission we participate as religious women and men. The consecrated life and each Institute in particular ought to give visibility to that which corresponds to them in the carrying out of this mission. We will have to see which should be each one's contribution, how to harmonize the different charisms and how to articulate the diverse activities at the service of a common project which is truly relevant for the humankind.

## **1. CHALLENGES TO THE MISSION IN THIS PERIOD OF HISTORY**

I will try to bring together some of the most important questions about the mission of consecrated life, and the future horizons or directions that these will imply. I will do it from the perspective of the consecrated life offered by the Congress in

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Claretian Missionaries. "*Do with others*", *workshop on shared mission*. Claretian Publications. Bangalore 2006, pp. 20-21.

2004: a life characterized by "a passion for Christ and a passion for humanity." This means, above all, bringing peoples' lives to the centre of our concern and reflection, their hopes and their struggles, their insights and questions. We would like to look at the world with the compassionate eyes of our Lord and be guided by his compassion in our response to the challenges presented to us. The icons of the Samaritan woman who meet Jesus at the well's side and the Samaritan man who helped the wounded person he found in the road remain benchmarks of our reflection. We continue believing it necessary to create a dynamic harmony between contemplative mercy and committed contemplation. We understand, with *Vita Consecrata*, that consecrated life must continue to be a manifestation of the love of God, and we are well aware that this manifestation took place, and is taking place, through kenosis.

I think that the word that synthesizes best the different aspects of the challenges that we perceive in today's world might be the word 'change'. This is nothing new because each age has lived through important changes such as those taught us by history, including the history of our own Institutes. But there exists awareness that we are going through a time in which this change has been accelerated and that its consequences are being felt very strongly in the life of our Institutes and its apostolic projection.

There is a change in this key era: we are truly changing in terms of values, in terms of relationships and in terms of institutions and systems. All of us experience this change and we observe the different connotations it has in the diverse contexts and experience some difficulties in naming them.

These transformations are generating crises, and crises cause insecurity. These are times when our distrust of existing institu-

tions grows deeper, because they contributed to the development of the current situation, and during this period of historical transition they are perceived as an obstacle or hindrance. It is a phenomenon we experience both in society at large and in the Church and consecrated life.

But crises also awaken a new consciousness that creates expectations, especially in people who have experienced inequality, oppression and exclusion in existing institutions and, therefore, urge us to try new ways of overcoming these situations looking at it from the perspective of a participatory inclusion. Hence, the challenge to support these individuals and groups, to help keep their hopes alive, and not to allow our inhibitions to disappoint their generous and courageous efforts. Are we really aware of this change taking place? How are we living it?

It is important to try to identify the most radical challenges that such change brings for each of us, and for our communities and mission. The first step can only be to look at the world around us and try to identify some of the most important manifestations of this change. We'll have to try to identify the fears and hopes that the challenges arouse in us and in our communities. We will have to make further efforts in our reflection and creativity to come up with some answers that speak to the heart of man today, and fulfill the missionary objective of being transformative elements of culture (cf. EN. 20). I make bold to point out four expressions of this change which are laden with challenges for those who have been called to the missionary life.

### ***1.1. Globalization***

The first aspect that characterizes the historic moment in which we live is globalization, that has overcome distances and brought individuals and peoples closer together, and is capable

of starting activities and movements of diverse character that rapidly overcome national and cultural frontiers. It concerns an ambiguous reality, with great potential for the creation of powerful networks of solidarity, but with the real threat of being manipulated by those who hold the power with the aim of consolidating and increasing it.

In fact, we have seen, for example, how someone who has money can multiply his resources in a market that can be controlled without travelling anywhere, far away, therefore, from the people who will suffer the consequences of the decisions made solely for his own profit. The cry of the excluded in society is not heard directly and their faces are only contemplated from a distance. Globalization is proving to be discriminatory and seeks to impose models of thought and values. It is also expressed through migration in increasing numbers, which is changing the human geography of our world. The peripheries of large cities become culturally difficult to define, and are areas prone to conflict. Globalization presents itself as a phenomenon that tends to level everything to tax criteria that do not respect differences, and excludes those who do not fit those criteria.

Isn't it true that the phenomenon of globalization is something we also live and experience, in some way, within the Church and in our own Congregation, which is increasingly multicultural and multi-centric? Both the Church and the religious life, along with our own Congregation, have a long experience of "catholicity". We can not deny, however, that in its history there have been impositions and exclusions. We have experienced these painfully and tried to learn from them. Building a communion that integrates many differences is one of the great challenges of our own communities. In this patient and caring labour, we learn the language with which we can speak credibly

to our globalized world. We can also discover along this road the pitfalls that must be overcome in order to be able to live and build an inclusive communion.

Ultimately, this will force us to think about how, in our lives and our activities, we can be parables that awaken in others the longing for that kind of communion that respects and integrates differences. We'll have to think carefully about how living true to one's vows, and the experience of fraternal life in community, can become signs that speak of inclusion and solidarity in our globalized world.

### *1.2. Cultural and religious pluralism*

Another phenomenon that questions our life and missionary projection is the new awareness around cultural and religious pluralism. Globalization has put in contact a great diversity of religions and cultures. On the other hand, the tendency to level out, inherent in the globalizing process, has produced, at the same time, some powerful movements that affirm cultures that demand respect and that attempt to protect themselves, at times even with a fundamentalist bias, when they feel themselves threatened by other cultures, above all those that are more dominant.

The inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue is as passionate as it is difficult. The missionary history of the Church alerts to this. The new awareness around cultural and religious pluralism arouses questions that make us uneasy. In a world substantially marked by religious pluralism the proclamation of the Christian message that God saves us in Christ finds new resonances. In the midst of some new anthropological, cultural, social and religious paradigms the church confronts new missionary challenges. The dialogue with cultures and above all with

other religious traditions leads us to discover new ways of posing the fundamental questions of meaning and allows us to contemplate the beauty of the responses provided progressively throughout history. The experience of universal fraternity widens and strengthens and, contemporarily, deepens the experience of the maternity / paternity of God. Accompanied by Jesus, we recognize the love of the Father in the 'words' that have been filling the journey of so many of our sisters and brothers with meaning and hope. To live as disciples of Jesus so that everyone has life is a huge task that can only be credibly undertaken from total gratuity. A life completely dedicated to God ought to create in those consecrated people a special sensibility to know how to capture the signs of its presence and a strong capacity to support the calls that He directs to us through the richness of the cultures and religious Traditions that we encounter. It ought to be part of our service to the Church.

Isn't this new awareness asking us to walk more strongly in both directions? First, to walk alongside believers of other faiths and with people who have a different cultural universe, towards Jesus, "the Way, Truth and Life", who reveals the heart of the Father and invites us to join the new community of God's Kingdom. On the other hand, to be able to go, along with Jesus and motivated by Him, so as to meet with the human and religious experiences of these people and communities, and discover in their experience the merciful face of the Father who invites us to broaden our vision and enables us to know Him more deeply for what He really is: Father/Mother of everyone. All this will have an impact on the way we live our consecration and how we organize our missionary work.

### ***1.3. The challenge of secularism***

One of the features that has marked culture for many years, above all in some areas of the world but with an incomparable expansive force, is the strong affirmation of the autonomy of the secular. We have talked about it many times in our own Assemblies. Further, we speak of the processes of secularization that are questioning the traditional religiosity and the manner of living the faith of many people. In many of them it has also motivated the disappearance of the sense of transcendence in the horizon of their lives. It is something that is being translated in the construction of a culture and a world in which God is no longer necessary and in which his presence is not even considered convenient.

In any case, secularism is a process that also has its positive aspect; it implies the acknowledgement of the liberty, dignity and autonomy of humankind and their rights. Secularization is a great opportunity for purification of the image of God and the purpose of the religious. It purifies the religious of the social, political and ideological manipulation. It situates the sacred and the holy there where the Gospel and the experience of Jesus placed them. Secularism, nevertheless, becomes negative when it denies an openness to God and contact with Him. From this moment the horizon of life of human beings is blurred and is enclosed in a space where it is difficult to experience the love of God which enables us to love and fills the life of a person with meaning and hope. Secularism has also affected people in the consecrated life: it is not only a pastoral problem but it is also existential because it enters into us through the air we breath.

Consecrated life has related to the world in different ways in the various periods of history. At first, there was the “fuga mundi”, after which consecrated persons tried to “recreate the world” which was crumbling as a result of the fall of an estab-

lished social order and its institutions. Emphasis was then placed on “conquering the world” for Christ, through the deployment of missionary Institutes. Congregations, with their charisms, tried to “serve the world”, and later emphasized the need to “face the world”, denouncing those forms of organization and dominion which caused the exclusion of many, etc. In each one of these ways of relating to the world, there is a particular way of understanding the world and the mission of the Church. Over time, consecrated life has been learning to look at the world in a new way and to build a friendly relationship with it because it knows that it is the world ‘loved by God who gave his own Son’. The relationship with the world is an important element when reflecting on the mission of consecrated life. To engage with the world is not to give in to the challenge of secularism. The consecrated life wants to be able to continue provoking the question about God but wants and must do it in a way that is intelligible to men and women of a secularized society. Spirituality is incarnated much more in life and those in the consecrated life have understood that the connection with the mystery of God is not only present in the sacred spaces but also where our God is incarnate: “whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it to me” (cf. Mt 25,31-46).

All of this is also related to the experience of the eschatological dimension inherent in the consecrated life. This is testimony to the future world, it anticipates and makes visible the good things we expect in the future. The more intense our hope in the future life, the more we are committed to the transformation of the present world, according to God's plan. In this way we can address the issue of such a fundamental dimension in the consecrated life.

We feel a responsibility to think about what the challenge of secularism really means to us: how can our lives and our apos-



tolic activities raise the question of God and be an eschatological sign, superseding any kind of dualism that may tarnish the true image of God and of mankind. The reality of our world invites us to find a language capable of communicating the richness of the Gospel message in the secularized culture and in the different cultural environments in which we live.

#### *1.4. In search of true harmony*

It has often been repeated that fragmentation is another trait which characterizes this particular cultural moment, and perhaps this phenomenon has become even more accentuated in the so-called post-modern culture. Fragmentation is something that we experience in the personal, communitarian, ecclesial and social sphere, with different nuances according to the different places. It would seem that the certainties which kept together firmly the different dimensions of personality or that gave a strong sense of identity to those who belonged to a group or a community cannot withstand the upheavals caused by the new cultural trends. From another perspective we also see the harmony of the human family broken by an unending escalation of scandalous inequalities that contrast with the thirst for communion that exists in the heart of every human being and that are a cause of violence and death. To rebuild harmony in the different areas of life is presented as an urgent challenge.

We are not concerned by differences. On the contrary, they are a beautiful experience because they reveal the harmony that God gave to us in Creation. However, it breaks our heart to see this harmony being shattered by the selfishness and greed of those who feel they are the owners of the things God gave us to share. We long for that harmony that integrates diversity and makes all feel like they are the heirs of the same heritage, because they look at reality through the eyes of God. Religious

Life is also a way to rebuild this harmony in the heart of the individual, in relations between persons and people, in the joyful experience of belonging to the wonderful universe created by God and in which we all need one another. Placing ourselves at the service of this harmony is a way for us to live out our vocation in the world. True harmony is built from below, it becomes a reality when the “excluded” feel “included”, and when justice and fraternity are practiced in everyday life. We know that the real Christian community is that in which the small are at the center; that is why it is capable of living in true harmony (cf. Mt 18: 1-5).

We feel the urge to listen, and incorporate in our thoughts and in our missionary outreach, the integrity of the lives of individuals and peoples, paying particular attention to those who have suffered, or continue to suffer exclusion, or are condemned to live in the midst of violent situations. The process of immersing ourselves in different situations, and engaging in dialogue with these people and groups, presents us with new challenges and opens new horizons for our missionary outreach. It forces us to learn a new language and makes us look at each situation in terms of how the charism of consecrated life, and of each Institute (including our own), can serve the lives of these people.

Every continent and every community has its own wealth of wisdom and aspirations for the future; they also bear the wounds of a history that has had its violent phases and created different types of exclusions that continue to overshadow the reality of today. Some people suffer from the consequences of the scandalous injustice that exists in our world. All of this presents us with a challenge and requires us to look for ways to rebuild a sense of harmony.

## 2. SEARCHING FOR PATHS TO THE FUTURE

Inviting everyone to a shared reflection, I will try to offer a few guidelines to help us identify ways to consolidate, as religious, a truly missionary answer to the challenges we have identified. Then, from this perspective I shall try, in the next section, to identify the characteristics of our Claretian mission in the context of today. Each of these pointers to the future raises a number of questions, which I will also share with you, because I think they prepare us to be more aware of the radical demands of our missionary charism in this historic moment.

### *2.1. Our first contribution to the mission: to deepen the spiritual dimension of our life*

Given the challenges presented by reality, we feel truly small. In some areas we see how the number of the members of our Institutes is considerably diminishing. We know that this is true for some parts of our Congregation. Moreover, future projections are somewhat alarming. On the other hand, it would seem that our presence in the societies that have attained a considerable degree of economic progress and social well-being has become rather irrelevant. The services we offer through our works, are also being offered by others, and their quality is good. There are innumerable platforms from which youths can freely express their ideals like serving others and being committed to change the world. Elsewhere, mission patterns of the past are being replicated and are likely to lead to the same crossroads. What is then the meaning of our mission? In asking this question, we feel compelled to go back to the core essence of our vocation and recover the ‘theological dimension’ that gives meaning to our life and to everything that we do. Being

centered in God and his plan allows us to discover ways in which we can restore significance to our works and activities, in a world that seems to be fine without Him or that at times even tries to manipulate Him.

The experience of God brings us close to the essence of human persons, it forces us to hear their cries and express sympathy for their search. It makes us discrete in our journeying with them and helps us to appreciate the rich answers that people find progressively along the way. The experience of God compels us to approach the poor and the excluded, it invites us to be their travel companions and creates within us a space of freedom which allows us to look at our life and works in the light of their circumstances. The experience of God awakens in us a new ecologic and cosmic awareness that leads us to feel solidarity with the whole Creation and respectful of the dynamisms that the Creator himself has established. A profound experience of God fine-tunes our sensitivity and enables us to capture his presence in the life of people and cultures and to place ourselves at their service. It makes us less dogmatic and more ready to serve. The experience of God is the only force capable of arousing that hope that never dies, in spite of the many difficulties and of giving impetus to our commitment towards life.

This experience of God always occurs in a concrete context, and consequently, it is constantly threatened by the questions and doubts that arise in such a context. In this respect, it makes us sympathize with the doubts and searches of others, and invites us to humbly share with them our own experience of God

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Our first contribution to the mission of the Church will therefore be to deepen the spiritual dimension of our lives. The reflection on consecrated life has repeatedly underscored this

fundamental dimension, which not only refers to the spiritual sphere, but also has a decisive impact on the missionary projection of our communities and the activities of our Institutes.

We are thus being asked to undertake a deeper reflection on the experience of God of religious persons and how this forges their lives and is concretely expressed in their apostolic projection. As we look at the world from God's perspective, listening closely to what other people journeying with us in this moment of history are saying, we ask ourselves: *What questions should we be asking ourselves to give a true evangelical meaning to our missionary projects, in the different contexts in which we live and work? Does the testimony of our lives have the capacity to arise the question about God's existence in the hearts of the people and to introduce them to the experience of his love, which liberates and fills with hope?*

## ***2.2. Dialogue as the Place of Mission***

We must change our conception of dialogue as a simple “method” to carry out the mission, to a vision of dialogue as the “place” of mission. First of all, this requires that we place people and their situations at the centre of our concerns. It requires that we immerse ourselves completely into the questions that fill people's lives, and together with them look for the answers that can give meaning to this moment in history. This we do by bearing the message of Jesus in our heart, actions and words, knowing however that the first thing Jesus did was to listen to and become part of the history of his people, the history of humanity. It is a “dialogue of life” which can listen and tune in to the needs of others, that gradually discovers the words that it should utter at each moment in order to be a true bearer of life.

A frank dialogue involves a careful consideration of reality, analysis and reflection. It requires preparation and an attitude of openness to the contributions of other sciences and schools of thought, in an interdisciplinary effort which makes it consistent. Dialogue cannot be carried out without a great sense of humility, without recognizing one's own limits and be sensitive to other people's questions and attitudes. Our goal is not to increase our sphere of power or influence, but to walk together to fulfil the dream of the Father for his children and for all of Creation. Such a dialogue cannot take place unless each one of us deeply believes that in Jesus we can find the answer to the concerns of the human heart. This belief can only come as a consequence of the concrete experience of the encounter with Christ. In Him we have found the Word of Life, which fills us with hope.

This sort of dialogue urges us to reach out to those who belong to other religious Traditions, to those who have a different way of living their lives, and to the concerns, hopes and struggles of all of them. It takes the focus away from us so that we can turn our attention mainly to the life and reality of the world. Strangely enough, this will centre us much more on God's plan for his children, and on the "things of the Father" (cf. Lk 2:49).

Dialogue requires being open to the surprises along the way, and also demands creativity. Consecrated life and each one of the Institutes that incarnate it are aware that a wonderful heritage is available to them, namely many centuries of experience with proclaiming the Gospel. It is precisely this heritage that gives us the security and peace of mind we need to enter into an open and frank dialogue. However, we are aware of the need to adopt a new language that can convey the unfathomable and permanent richness of the Gospel message. We are to convey a Word, that of the Word of God who became man, and who is

“the Way, the Truth and the Life”. It is a life-giving Word, and we know we must continue to listen to it and discover it in all the ways in which it resonates in the heart of persons and peoples. It is a Word that we have meditated upon, lived and proclaimed in very different contexts, for many centuries. This enables us to continue to look for new ways to express and communicate it. We feel the need to speak about ourselves in a new way that will be more comprehensible to the people with whom we share the commitment to build history today, with a language that is capable of touching their lives. We know that this new language will see the light only through a frank and open dialogue with these people, with their struggles and achievements, as well as their questions and answers.

This dialogue will raise new questions, cause us some confusion and it will continually demand that we seek new paths. But it will help us to find new ways of expressing the potential for witnessing an “alternative” world, according to the Father's heart, that have the vows we have taken, and of creating new dynamics within community life capable of announcing the good news of the Kingdom more vigorously. It will give our lives a strong missionary identity.

*What effects do the situations and experiences of so many people we encounter along the way have on us: what do they find in us, what questions do they ask us, what do they invite us to do? What new approaches and strategies are demanded of us by the context of religious and cultural pluralism, which is now the hallmark of the state of our world?*

### *2.3. The Option for the Poor and the Excluded and the Commitment for Justice*

Those who are called to be witnesses of the Beatitudes and signs of God's plan for his children feel deeply challenged by situations of injustice and exclusion, so widely present in our world today. The option for the poor and the commitment for justice have become part of the praxis and theological reflection of Consecrated Life. This option is related to the dynamics of love lived according to Christ. The challenge for Consecrated Life is finding a way in which consecrated persons can promote justice, on the basis of their identity. This implies, on their part, being ready to constantly review their life-choices, their use of goods and the style of their relationships.

And here, the challenge of a socio-political commitment comes into the picture. The political dimension of Christian love, which seeks to transform structures so that justice may be done to the oppressed, has taken a more concrete shape in the awareness of the Church and of Consecrated Life and in the reflection of our own Congregation. Consecrated Life wishes to express its commitment to justice through a style of life and an apostolic action that go to the very root of domination and oppression, in the attempt to create and consolidate a truly inclusive world, in which no-one is marginalized from human fraternity. The credibility of the message proclaimed by the Gospel is partly at stake here. A commitment of this sort can only be honoured through inner freedom, which creates absolute and definitive self-giving to God and his plan of salvation. This commitment will lead us to discover new horizons in our experience of religious consecration.

We see this in the situation we have been experiencing in recent times. Perhaps never before has the word "crisis" appeared so



many times in means of social communication and rarely have its effects had such a strong impact on people's lives. The economic crisis has drawn the attention of governments and analysts, and has become a sort of heavy atmosphere, difficult to breathe but impossible to avoid. It has had concrete effects in each one of the places in which we live and work, affecting the lives of individuals and communities. Times of crisis are difficult, but they pose fundamental questions about the values and structures which prevail in our societies. At the same time, they pose new questions which strive for fairer and more inclusive models of relations between persons and peoples. We consecrated persons are inevitably immersed in this dynamics, though at times we are excessively protected by our institutions.

We feel strongly challenged by these situations because we believe in God and in our lives we wish to be faithful to his plan. The Word of God, which is a fundamental point of reference in our lives, constantly challenges us in this respect. However, we must always remember that the Word of God has a clear hermeneutic key, and if we fail to take it on board, it will never really touch our lives. This perspective is God's love for his children, God's passion for the poor, the passion which radically marked Jesus' life, "Evangelizare pauperibus misit me" (cf. Lk 4:18). It is a perspective to which we can gain access only by being close the plight of the poor and the excluded, and by opening our heart and all dimensions of life to the questions that it raises. Our life and our word will not have the ability to proclaim the Gospel, nor will they have a transforming power, unless we approach these realities which bring us back to the core of God's plan for his children. Renewing the option for the poor and the excluded, and being committed to restoring justice are prerequisites to fulfil the mission of consecrated life. It will thus be extremely important to support those projects that are

really at their service and collaborate with other persons who dream of a different world in order to create spaces of fraternity and true freedom, in which God is really glorified.

Consecrated life is carrying out many different types of initiatives. Indeed, the testimony of religious men and women, who in spite of difficulties and even after having suffered life-threats, are by the side of the excluded and the poor are one of the most powerful and comprehensible “words” pronounced by the Church. Not only do their lives convey a message of solidarity and generosity, but they are also capable of posing questions about the God that inspires them. On the other hand, Institutes and religious Congregations are increasingly present in social and political fora where decisions are taken which affect the life of millions of human beings, like the different agencies of the United Nations Organization, the World Social Forum, etc. Their presence bears witness, with new languages, to their commitment for justice, which is a crucial part of the evangelizing project.

*How are the option for the poor and the commitment to justice influencing our style of life and our apostolic choices? In which way do we feel challenged by the problems affecting humankind and the people living by our side? Which new perspectives do they offer us for a theology of vows and of the other essential elements of consecrated life? What are the privileged fora today in which as consecrated persons we can express this most fundamental dimension of the Church’s evangelizing commitment? How can we make more consistent our commitment to the poor and justice?*

#### ***2.4. Rethinking the Role and Location of our Activities***

Establishing “where to be” and “how to be there” is a difficult discernment exercise. We cannot dismiss the matter by defining a number of strategic criteria to simply guarantee the continuity of the Institution, its growth in terms of numbers or its geographic expansion. To come to this determination, we must first of all be aware of our own identity in a given context and have the freedom, wisdom and courage to adjust our activities and the way of doing them to the emerging needs of those contexts.

The charism of consecrated life has a prophetic dimension. It is clearly stated by *Vita Consecrata* (cf. VC 84). This prophetism is expressed by faithfully living out one’s consecration and generously giving oneself to the mission. In proposition 24 of the Synod on “The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church”, reference is made to consecrated life; its missionary vocation and its being in the frontline are emphasized. It is stated that consecrated life has always been on the geographic, social and cultural frontiers of evangelization. This is something that our Institutes endorse with their missionary history and the creativity with which they have sought to respond to the challenges they have encountered.

What is our specific place in this moment of the world’s history and of the Church? The charismatic heritage of each Institute has something important to say in this respect. We will have to allow ourselves to be questioned by the spiritual journey of the Founder or Foundress, which led them to express their commitment for the Kingdom of God in a specific way. We will have to carefully discern the permanent elements of the charism and its concrete expression in history and in the different geographic and cultural contexts that are part of the Institute’s life. At the same time, however, a new reflection will be necessary on the life and mission of the Church and on the articulation of the different charisms and ministries as well as the different

forms of Christian life which they generate. They are all gifts which the Spirit awakens so that life may grow and the mission of the Church may be fulfilled, consistent with God's plan. Deepening our reflection on the identity of consecrated life within the context of an ecclesiology of communion will help us to better define the traits that characterize the specific contribution of this charism to the ecclesial community on the whole. It will also foster attitudes of complementarity and reciprocity which allow for a harmonious growth of the whole Christian community.

To this end, we should carefully examine our place within the universal Church and in particular Churches. It may often be observed that, due to increasing lack of clergy, the originality of charisms is superseded by the need to keep up pastoral structures and carry out tasks that are not exactly the best expression of the gifts given by the Spirit to his Church through the Founders, Foundresses and the communities that developed around them. This is something that appears more evidently in the case of clerical Congregations as ours. We should not refrain from providing apostolic services necessary for faith to grow in the Christian community and for a more dynamic development of its mission. Rather, we should ask ourselves whether the place that we have come to occupy is due to a lack of the creativity that is needed to give new expressions to the charism of the Institute, and to thus let it continue to enrich the life of the Church and foster its mission in the world. We cannot ignore the calls for us to be present in the new areopagi of the mission, so often repeated by Pope John Paul II. These are issues which we must carefully address, so as to give truly significant apostolic answers and discern the role we are to play within the life and mission of the Church.

*What does it mean for us the vocation of consecrated life to be at the frontline of the mission? What would be the most appropriate places for consecrated life within the framework of ecclesial life and in its missionary projection? Where do we find the greatest difficulties when considering new roles and locations?*

### ***2.5. Gaining ground in Intercongregational Collaboration and Shared Mission***

Ours is a time of synergies. Globalization processes are imposing synergy in the different spheres of life and human activities. The complexity of situations and the complementarity of skills converts into a need whatever was just one of the many options until quite recently.

We have witnessed a considerable decline in the number of staff serving our Institutions in certain parts of the world. On the other hand, the globalization processes under way are posing new challenges to which it is difficult for individual Institutes to respond in a significant way. The time has come to undertake the path of intercongregational collaboration with greater determination. In recent years, the joint reflection fora and the collaboration efforts between religious Institutes have produced abundant fruit. Now is the time to take a further step forward and enter a new phase of intercongregational collaboration, in which we can plan evangelization initiatives that can respond more significantly to the challenges of the contemporary world. Some experiences are already showing the great potential of this approach.

This will involve a reflection on the interaction of charisms and their concrete incarnation in the activities that have character-

ized the life of Institutes in the course of their history. It will probably require new organizational models of community and new structures of government. The prospect of a greater inter-congregational collaboration will force us to also introduce a certain number of elements in initial and on going formation processes to prepare people for this type of experience. We will have to foster communion between those who are involved in the same project and at the same time make sure that each one consolidates the identity of the religious family to which he or she has been called. These new challenges may enrich the spiritual heritage of each Institute and consecrated life in general. Of course, they will require that a new impulse be given to the missionary dimension of consecrated life. Great clarity will also be necessary in the creation of projects, with discernment processes that will be enriched by the sensitivity of each one of the Institutes involved.

In this context it is good to look into the issue of collaborative ministry or “shared mission”. Here we find an important space for collaboration with the laity, especially with those lay persons with whom we share the same charismatic inheritance. With them we engage in a process that begins by looking together at the reality with a vision enriched by the particular perspectives of those who live their Christian vocation as consecrated persons and those who live it as lay people. We know that these ‘underline’ the secular aspect and the religious the eschatological nature of the mission of the Church. The laity accentuate in the ecclesial communion the value that things have, in God’s plan, that we encounter on a daily basis: work, family, politics, etc. While recognizing the importance of all these aspects, with our life we religious show how important it is to be aware that what really matters lies beyond all this. We cannot centre our lives around “the things of God”, and forget the “God of all things”.

It is very important to become aware of how relevant all this is for the mission of the Church and of consecrated life. In this collaboration process, we will learn the language of inclusiveness, which will make us clearer and more comprehensible signs of the message which we were sent to deliver.

*What do we need to undertake the path of intercongregational collaboration with greater determination? What steps should we take to see to it that the needs of the “shared mission” become a reality in the life of our Congregation?*

### **III. OUR CLARETIAN MISSION TODAY**

Both in the General Chapters as well as in the Chapters and Assemblies of the Provinces and Delegations, careful consideration about how to express our mission today has been one of the central points of reflection and consideration. It's only natural when you consider what we are told in the Constitutions: "Through our profession of the evangelical counsels by public vows, we dedicate ourselves to God and are consecrated by him, and thus we form in the Church an Institute which is truly and fully apostolic" ( CC 5). And it continues in the following number: "In the Church we are steadfast helpers of its Shepherds in the ministry of the word, using all means possible to spread the good news of the kingdom throughout the world" (CC 6). These are statements that can be found in the fundamental Constitution and they have their echo in Chapter VII of the first part of the Constitutions. In number 48 the following is stressed: "In carrying out this mission, our missionaries should use all means possible" (CC 48), pointing out forthwith that certain characteristics must be evident in our manner of evangelizing. It speaks about a sense of alertness, availability and catholicity.

The expression "all means possible" has always been one of the issues discussed in congregational forums. On the one hand, it is true that it opens up a wide horizon of possibilities for the evangelizing work of the Congregation; but, on the other hand, can cause major dispersion in the missionary project of the Institute, which would certainly prove negative. It is important to clarify the meaning of this Claretian expression so as to properly enunciate the Congregation's missionary project, as well as that of each of its Provinces, Delegations and communities. I



believe that the expression "all possible means" is like the seed of an ever-present prophecy that the Founder has left sown in the heart of the Congregation. It forces us to be ever vigilant to the signs of the times so that our word (also in the form of a gesture, action, book, presence, etc.) has prophetic substance. It demands that we be wide open to the Word of God and to allow his light to be the guide in our understanding of reality and in the ways we find of communicating the Gospel. We are committed to a serious community path of careful discernment that will define apostolic programmes and structures that must provide the operational basis for our missionary project. In this way, we will avoid dispersion, which weakens the feeling of congregational identity and serves to give justification to some commitments that have nothing to do with living out the Claretian charism. In our congregational history, we can see a veritable display of creativity which opens up new fields and continues to create new structures for evangelization from the guidelines emerging from the various congregational forums, group deliberations and decisions made by the organs of Government in the Institute.

Today, what are the characteristics that should mark the missionary work of the Congregation? Emerging from the guidelines of the most recent General Chapters, which always gather together the fruits of the debate shared by so many Claretians, I think we can identify four features that will help us to give a charismatic stamp to our ministries and should guide us at the moment of defining the apostolic presence and structures. I think they respond to the new missionary horizon for the consecrated life, which I have tried to explain in the second part of this letter.

However, I first want to emphasize two aspects which I consider essential in relation to the Claretian mission. The first is the

need to generously give oneself to the vocation of the consecrated life, and to place oneself on the front lines of the mission. I've mentioned before: those who have placed everything in God's hands in order to be effective tools for the building of his kingdom should not hesitate to place themselves on the geographical, social and cultural front lines of the work of evangelization. These are places that require inner freedom, which comes with the consecrated religious life and the continued support of the community. It is a call from the Church to the religious to go to places where the Gospel has not yet been proclaimed; to be witnesses of God's love through our committed and supportive presence in areas of society where the wounds of exclusion and injustice are most distressing; to enter into a frank and open dialogue with those who have the greatest influence in diverse ways and in different areas, in shaping the culture of our world. To be willing to take on this front-line vocation demands a deep sense of spirituality and requires a strong sense of missionary itinerancy. Do we feel this vocation for putting ourselves on the front line of the mission? Does this thought inspire fear in us or make us reticent at the point of decision?

Along with this, we cannot forget what we have been saying for a long time, and what the Magisterium of the Church constantly reminds the religious: the need to live the prophetic dimension inherent in the consecrated life (cf. VC 84). This is a dimension that must find concrete expression in our lives and in our apostolic activity. The consecrated life is a "prophetic word" for the church and for the world. "Prophetic" is one of those words (and when we say "word" we refer to anything that is able to communicate a message), which, because it is so strongly rooted in the Word of God and so deeply steeped in God's passion for his sons and daughters, is capable of bringing about change, "according to the Father's heart." The consecrated life will be

prophetic when all those who enter into contact with the religious and their apostolic activities will not be left unmoved. It will be prophetic when we are able to invite people to be converted, meaning they see reality from God's point of view and to plan their lives based on the values of the Kingdom. It will be prophetic when, within the Church, becomes a vibrant reminder of "Jesus's community" and its characteristics. It will be prophetic when we strive to be, in the world, the element of change towards a more just and fraternal society which we all long to see, and which the prophets repeatedly proclaim as part of "God's will". Anyone who has experienced the transforming power of God's presence and His Word in his own life and in the community, is called into the service of this "prophetic word".

Also, we as Claretian missionaries are called to be part of this prophetic presence on the front lines of the mission. This should be our primary concern. From this perspective we have to define our location, our lifestyle and our projects. We are going to need God's help. I think that if we can address these challenges with courage and generosity, we are going to be blessed with new vocations. Only from this perspective we will come up with the "means" suitable for developing our mission, in line with the missionary ideal that Father Founder wanted to leave us. We will avoid dispersion and, in our hearts and in our communities, there will be the rebirth of the missionary ideal. We will be in tune with what Mary said in the Magnificat, the Magna Carta of a truly prophetic evangelization.

## **1. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CLARETIAN MISSION TODAY**

When thinking about the characteristics of the Claretian mission today, I want to go back to something I spoke about in the

Circular Letter I wrote about the middle of the previous sexennium<sup>4</sup>. I am referring to things that need to be looked at more closely and deeply assimilated so that, in each of us and in our communities and apostolic activities, they become vibrant living things. I want to define these features as characteristic of our mission, which will help to underpin our own apostolic style (which does not mean it cannot be similar to others), and it will point us in the direction of those horizons where we should invest our greatest efforts and where we should locate our new presences.

### *1.1. Shared mission*

The mission, by its very nature, means collaboration. The mission does not exclusively belong to anyone; it belongs to God who pours out his love on all people; it means participation in the "Missio Dei" (cf. MFL 58). The difference of charisms is just a channel for expressing the richness of this mission, which is born of God and is a vehicle of his love for everyone. Mission is essentially "shared mission".

From this perspective we must consider the issue of shared mission. Our own specific way of living it and of identifying attitudes and mechanisms to help us in it, all this has to be rooted in a vision of the Church in which the charisms, ministries and ways of life they generate, feel indebted to each other. So, through the experience of communion, we all grow in a sincere desire to follow Jesus more closely, according to the vocation that each of us has received, and to serve the cause of a more just and fraternal humanity, in which the dignity of each person is respected and where no people are excluded; in the last anal-

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<sup>4</sup> WITNESSES AND MESSENGERS OF THE GOD OF LIFE. Rome, May 31, 2006.

ysis, in which God is truly glorified. The document of the XXIII General Chapter called the following to mind: "The aim of our Congregation is to seek in all things the glory of God (cf. CC 2); and this "glory" is the human person fully alive (Irenaeus of Lyon), the poor fully alive (Oscar Romero) and nature fully alive (Paul of Tarsus)"<sup>5</sup>.

There are several areas in which we are called to embody the experience of shared mission<sup>6</sup>.

*A first area we might call global* and which puts us in a dynamic partnership with all those who, motivated by different religious traditions or driven by other humanistic philosophies, are working for a more just and united world, and for a way of life that respects the harmony of Creation. In this area we are not, as a rule, the main protagonists. We are just "one more" and, therefore, it can often become for us an important school for developing the attitudes necessary for a truly "shared mission". This is a dimension that is expressed in the Constitutions when it says, in number 46: "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".

*A second area is the Church.* In this area we live the experience of a shared mission under two dimensions: the universal and the particular. As religious, we grow within the Christian community in our relationship with the Bishops, priests and other

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<sup>5</sup> THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE. Document of the XXIII General Chapter, n. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Concerning "shared mission", I suggest to go back to the booklet published by the General Prefecture of Apostolate and that presents the work done in a workshop about this topic held in Guatemala on 2005. DO WITH OTHERS; Claretian Publications, Bangalore, 2006.

ordained ministers, with members of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the laity. With them we have the experience of being sent out, and we try to bring into life a bold and generous response to the Lord's calling to be His witnesses in the world. We are available to serve the universal Church, but always engaged in the journey of a particular Church. When we open ourselves up to the Christian life experience of those who have received a different vocation in the Church, we come to better understand the beauty of the path to which God has called us and we can contemplate the harmony of the ecclesial body.

*A third area is that of our own charismatic family.* It is the area where we most often live out our shared mission, both within our own congregation and in relationship with other religious families or lay groups who feel, in some way, inheritors of the charisma that God bestowed on his Church through our Founder. In this area, both the requirements and the possibilities of the shared mission become closer and more real. On the one hand, it demands that we know how to organize our own religious community with regard to the mission, letting it mark out for us the different dimensions of our lives: common prayer, the planning and evaluation of apostolic activities through which we give life to this mission, the planning of our economy, and the routine of life within the community. Moreover, it opens up the possibility of living the richness of the Founder's charisma in communion with others who are inspired by him, whether members of religious institutes that go back directly to the Founder himself or through subsequent mediations, or groups of lay persons. Along with them we make up a charismatic family.

In this charismatic environment, the shared mission is going to have a whole variety of shapes and dimensions. There will also be different degrees of commitment which unite those who are

part of the mission project. They will each bring their own set of requirements which will modify our way of organizing, not only our apostolic work, but also our community. I believe that this experience of shared mission, even though it has been present throughout the history of religious orders and congregations, has grown enormously since Vatican II. Ecclesiological references have been changed which now let us express more fully what the Founders knew intuitively.

It is also true that one of the deciding factors that led us to re-discover the importance of this issue has been the downsizing of the Congregation, which has had a special impact on many areas of important work, which are now bereft of the Claretian staff that had hitherto occupied managerial responsibilities. So this is an opportunity to reflect more deeply on this issue and consolidate new models that will also shape the mission projects which are appearing in areas with an abundance of vocations.

I think it important to distinguish three models of carrying out a shared mission in a charismatic family, according to the degree of participation by lay members.

*A first model is one that integrates both religious and lay members into a single community.* It is a modality that can have several different facets. Sometimes, especially in areas traditionally called "missions", community-living is shared in the same house, or on the same "campus" of the mission, based on a community plan that clearly defines how the various dimensions of the group operate (prayer, responsibilities, economy, community dynamics) and a pastoral plan that specifies the objectives of their apostolic activity, operational criteria and lines of action to accomplish those objectives. Most of the time, however, does not include a "life in common", but rather a

community project that brings the group members together to share in prayer, to grow in understanding and experience of the charism that inspires this experience, to foster moments of deepening relationships amongst people who make up the group and to plan and evaluate the work being carried out. In both cases, and in the light of due differences, this requires:

- a. *A serious period of formation* to properly absorb the charism around which the group meets and which inspires the work being carried out.
- b. *Some community dynamics* that help strengthen relations amongst group members, help growth in the faith and spirituality of the charismatic family, and their commitment to the mission project.
- c. *Careful development of the mission project* which would include an analysis of the reality, the definition of the options and strategies, the carrying out of the necessary actions to bring them to life, and the clarification of the responsibilities of each person in its implementation.

The experience of fraternity amongst the group is, in itself, an eloquent and credible witness to the new relationships that arise amongst people when the Kingdom is at their hearts and all are at its service sharing the same charism, which is always a gift from the Lord to His Church and the world at large.

*A second model would be a jointly shared participation in the same activity or apostolic project.* This activity can be a parish, social work, publishing, a school, a youth ministry team etc. I emphasize the words "jointly shared" because it defines a type of collaboration that goes beyond mere transitory participation



in a mission project. This participation must integrate three key elements:

- a. *Joint planning of the activity*, which must begin with an analysis of reality and a clarification of those charismatic criteria that will guide the way people handle the challenges found there. From there, they will go on to define the objectives and lines of action, and the specific details of how to share responsibility for the implementation of the project.
- b. *The creation of a coordinating team* that will constantly follow the project, evaluating its performance both in the light of the charismatic criteria that gave birth to it, and other parameters pertaining to the activity itself.
- c. *Care for the unity of the team around the project and the charism that has given life to it.* This will require some kind of formation programme and the definition of appropriate dynamics that will give due care to the spirituality that inspires and sustains the people engaged in the project, and consolidates communion amongst team members, both religious and lay.

Lay people involved in the project have to feel part of the charismatic family through the team they have linked up with, but they also need to see that this family has a lot more to it than just the project they are working on. The experience of universality helps to create a very important sense of belonging. We're not just talking about people hired to work on the activities of the congregation; there should be an element of communion that goes far beyond the contract and brings with it other specific demands.

*A third model of this shared mission would be temporary collaboration in a project or in a particular activity, but without an explicit link to the charismatic family.* We are talking about a commitment to participate, bringing to the project one's own particular strengths. This type of participation in the mission calls for care in understanding the meaning of joint responsibility amongst those willing to join the project, and that they will grow into the vision that gave life to it. We must be convinced that a deeper knowledge of our spiritual and apostolic patrimony, which provides the foundation and support for the project, will help to solidify and drive the involvement of everyone. Moreover, we must also welcome, with open minds and hearts, those contributions made by those involved in the project and which make our work more meaningful for the recipients.

This naturally requires a deep spiritual and psychological maturity in each of us and an ability to share the life and mission within our own religious community. The shared mission can never be a camouflaged way of escaping from our community commitment. On the contrary, it will only be truly meaningful if it is born of a sincere desire, motivated by a genuine missionary requirement, to broaden the horizon of this communion. I want to emphasize this point, which I think is fundamental. We are not just talking about a gathering of a group of friends and admirers, but of a commitment to a dynamic that demands serious ascetic renunciation of oneself and an openness to the other person, and to other people.

Serious commitment to the issue of shared mission poses a series of questions. How is this feature manifested in the missionary life of my community or in the apostolic activity that I am involved with? What benefit does it bring with regard to stimulating the missionary commitment? How is it helping us to deepen our missionary motivation and to discover new ways of

evangelization? Do we feel this new departure as a "blessing" or a "problem"? In what sense is it helping us to grow as religious, as missionaries, as Claretians? Through the shared mission we will be able to discover the need for new projects and new locations for our ministry; our ability to find solutions to new challenges will grow and multiply. It is an aspect that should not be absent from the processes of congregational reorganization that are taking place.

### *1.2. Mission in dialogue*

The last General Chapter tells us in the document "Men on fire with love": "We will take as a criterion and key to all our ministries 'the dialogue of life' which always takes others into account and does not exclude anyone—women or men, one Christian denomination or another, one religion or another, one culture or another" (MFL 58.2). This is the path of evangelization. Taken in this sense, the final message of the Synod on "the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church" is beautiful and inspiring. After presenting the Word of God as the creative Word of life and of the people, whom he is guiding on this great pilgrimage that is the Old Testament; after inviting us to contemplate the Word incarnate - with a 'face': Jesus the Son of the Father, who is present among us; and after reminding us that in the Church we will find the community, the 'house', where the Word is welcomed, celebrated and shared, the message of the Synod tells us: "The embodied Word of God "issues from" his house, the temple, and walks along the roads of the world to encounter the great pilgrimage that the people of earth have taken up in search of truth, justice and peace"<sup>7</sup>. Dialogue is where evangelization really happens. It may be that we have

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<sup>7</sup> MESSAGE TO THE EPOPLE OF GOD OF THE XII ORDINARY ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS; n. 10.

wanted to do too much “teaching” and that we have “listened” too little. Maybe we have enthusiastically invited people to “come” to us, but we have not been so willing to “go out” ourselves. Only through relating to others can we accompany people on the road to encounter Christ. As a result, it is essential to cultivate certain attitudes, give a dialogical orientation to the way of implementing our ministries and activities, and create platforms and structures to facilitate dialogue. I will point out some aspects that can help us guide and evaluate our missionary task from this perspective:

- a. *Listening skills.* It is the first requirement of being able to engage in dialogue. We are talking about a way of listening that seeks to understand the meaning of what is said or the situation that is being revealed to us. It is listening which makes each person feel valued and knows how to keep mind and heart open to the questions that are uncovered in situations encountered. Dialogue demands attention to reality. We cannot simply proceed with a project and programme already finalized beforehand. In the process of finalizing the project of evangelization, we must show respect for, and patience with, the reality of the place and the situation of the people. True listening requires humility in knowing how to recognize existing wisdom and to let reality question our own opinions and methods. Listening is a demanding process.
- b. *Discernment.* However, we will not go empty handed. We have been entrusted with the treasure of the Gospel message. We hold in our hearts the experience of encountering Jesus which has broken new ground in our lives and filled it with meaning and hope. This experience, which is fundamental in our lives, has grown

within the ecclesial community which is called to be a sign of God's loving presence in the world, and to be a place of welcome for "seekers of truth, justice and peace" as we are told in the message of the Synod which I have quoted. The questions that arise from dialogue with people and from situations that we encounter along the way, call on our discernment. We must clarify them in the light of the Gospel in order to answer them adequately; and this must be done in communion with the Church, the community of the disciples of Jesus. Discernment requires fidelity to the Gospel and a deep ecclesial sense. For us, the religious community, the Congregation is our point of reference in this discernment.

- c. *Creativity.* We cannot keep repeating schemes and programmes. Dialogue requires us to be always open to the new surprises which happen throughout history and throughout the world. Projects of evangelization must be able to integrate the demands of dialogue with the local culture and with other cultures, with other religious traditions and with other Christian Churches. This obviously calls for study and reflection. Our ongoing formation programmes should be much more aware of the reality of our world and of the new cultural tendencies; they should be more directed to an understanding of the experience of those who have grown up and lived within other religious traditions, and a deeper understanding of the theological and pastoral approaches of sister Christian Churches should be ever present in our effort to better understand the world we live in and the questions of our contemporaries. Without study and reflection, without good preparation, pastoral creativity cannot be achieved, nor can meaningful answers. The

call to being on the cultural, social and geographical front lines of evangelization requires study, reflection and missionary boldness. The Congregation must continue promoting good formation for all its members. We should not be afraid of the new, even if it requires us to give up what we have become accustomed to or whatever we feel most comfortable with. Creativity also requires us to move to where the questions of concern to humanity today are resonating most strongly, and to those places where the yearning for peace and justice is most strongly evident, because there the oppressive weight of an unjust, violent world is felt most strongly.

In this area of dialogue we can also list the issue of *inculturation* that demands that we should respect the cultures of the peoples to whom we have been sent: their language, their history, their hopes and their struggles to build a solid foundation that will allow them to maintain their identity in a world where the imposition of dominant cultures is all too evident. In the history of our Congregation there are wonderful examples of missionaries who have become true specialists of cultures, some of which were minority cultures, in the places they had been sent to. We have to spend time learning the local language, studying their culture, feeling a sense of pride in the history of that people, and sharing their problems and their dreams for the future. It is true that we must do some critical reading of their history and culture, but it must always be a critical reading in which there is no lack of love because it is done by somebody who feels, deep in his heart, part of that people. I've noticed that, in this respect, there has been some decline in the Congregation. The possibilities of communication at a universal level offered by new technologies are providing constant emotional "escape", for some Claretians, to their countries of origin, avoiding a more radical engagement with the people

they have been sent to, and their culture. One is physically in a place, but mentally in another. On the other hand, with the pretext of being sufficiently effective in the work entrusted to them, some feel exempted from the effort of learning the local language. When it is possible to learn it, we have to take on this commitment with a positive attitude. It shows respect and love; it is part of the missionary witness.

We should ask ourselves what evidence is there that this dimension of dialogue is present in the missionary life and the activities we are each working in. We should constantly assess our missionary lives from this perspective. Do we know how to make best use of listening time? Are we willing to accept the consequences of a deep and sincere dialogue with those we share life with, and the desire to build a real brotherhood among people? Is the process of discernment present in our communities and apostolic activities? What are the benchmarks of our discernment? Do they respond to the demands that come from being on the front line of evangelization as befits the religious life, a missionary Congregation like ours? How do we embrace the challenge of inculturation?

There has been forever etched on my mind and in my heart the call of the Bishops of Asia (where I worked for many years) to a triple dialogue: with cultures, with religious traditions and with the poor. I invite you to consider carefully and share within the community, or within the mission team, the true nature and quality of our dialogue. The Bishops of Asia always spoke about a "dialogue of life", terminology that has already entered the lexicon of the documents of the Holy See<sup>8</sup>. I think the Con-

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<sup>8</sup> You can see number 42 of the document "dialogue and proclamation of the Pontifical Council for the interreligious dialogue published in 1991; also VC 102.

gregation should make a greater effort to create more opportunities for dialogue that will expand the horizon of our missionary commitment. It's something that can be done in the pastoral structures and platforms that we already have (there is much talk today, for example, about a pastoral experience called "Inner-court of the Gentiles") or, if necessary, creating some new ones. I want to encourage the consolidation of pastoral initiatives in some Organisms in the field of dialogue between faith and culture. These are areas that are taking on increasing importance. On the one hand, they demand solid theological and cultural preparation and, on the other hand, they require a sense of openness and respectful, serious participation in cultural dialogue that is taking place in society.

An important platform for dialogue is in our own educational institutions. They offer us the opportunity for very interesting dialogue with young people, families, teachers, etc.. However, we must seriously ask this question: are we really open to committing ourselves to a true dialogue with the young generation and to adapting our pastoral work and our way of relating to young people from the characteristics and concerns that we discover in the process? How do we handle peoples' family situations? What should we do to preserve the missionary character in these centres? We must continuously assess our educational projects to keep in constant dialogue with the people concerned.

### ***1.3. Jointly shared mission***

In "Men on fire with love" it is said: "We reaffirm, in the same way, the priority of the Congregation for prophetic solidarity with the impoverished, marginalised and those whose right to life is threatened, in such a way that this has repercussions in our personal and community lifestyle, apostolic mission and in



our in institutions"(MFL 58.3). These are words that renew a commitment that we have been repeating for many years, and which is intrinsically natural to the religious life. If our lives and our ministry do not reflect God's passion for the poor, we will have to admit that they are a long way from the example and the missionary mandate laid down by Jesus. This is an area where we, in large part, put the credibility of our missionary outreach at risk.

I want to bring to mind something I shared with you some years ago in the circular "Witnesses and messengers of the God of life". I said on that occasion: In his encyclical "Populorum Progressio" Pope Paul VI wrote that the Church "shudders" at the anguished cry of peoples living in situations of injustice, and he issued a call to everyone to respond generously to that situation.<sup>9</sup> This "shuddering" at the reality of the injustice experienced by so many millions of human beings is a first step toward making a serious commitment to justice and peace. In our own society we observe a very notable degree of insensibility. Many have become used to the notion that that's the way things are, and have fallen into a kind of fatalism that immobilizes them. Hence, for a decided action in favour of justice and for putting any true movements of solidarity in motion, it may be necessary to have some direct contact with the reality of the poor and oppressed..... Does the situation of injustice that so many persons are living truly affect us or make us shudder? Does it upset us? The Chapter document told us that it is essential 'to allow ourselves to be touched' by the poor.<sup>10</sup> Do these poor and excluded people have a face and a name for us, other

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<sup>9</sup> "The Church, *cut to the quick* by this cry, asks each and every man to hear his brother's plea and answer it lovingly" (PP 3). Some languages translate the underlined phrase as "shuddering," a literal translation "cohorrescens," used in the Latin original.

<sup>10</sup> See THL 67.1.

than the images that are transmitted to us by the communications media?"<sup>11</sup>. I think this is all still fully valid and current.

The Congregation, geographically and statistically speaking, is situated more and more amongst the poor. Congregational growth occurs mainly in areas of the world where the poverty rates are alarming. I am delighted to see the commitment of many Claretians alongside people suffering outrageous situations of exclusion, comforting them, accompanying them and working with a spirit of generosity for the recognition of their dignity and the improvement of their living conditions. I am deeply grateful for the witness of these our brothers. They are signs and instruments of the Father's love. But, at the same time, I must confess that I am concerned about a tendency towards institution-building, particularly (though not exclusively) educational, that takes us away from or, at least, distances us from the reality of the poor and excluded. I understand that the Provinces and Delegations that have been created in recent years have to work hard in order to build a foundation that allows them to move towards more stringent goals of self-finance. This is a topic that has appeared in the General Chapters, and General Government has been working hard to encourage it. I worry, however, when I see that in some Provinces and Delegations, the economic dimension begins to play an excessively important role in these projects, and when I see a tendency toward lifestyles that move away from the choices we have made. We'll have to be very careful that these new projects are planned and executed out of a real sense of solidarity with the excluded, and with a strong and clear commitment for justice, and for the transformation of the world. Moreover, it is obvious that they have to be well coordinated with other

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<sup>11</sup> WITNESSES AND MESSENGERS OF THE GOD OF LIFE. Rome, May 2006; nn 53 and 54.

presences and projects which place us much more clearly amongst those who suffer the negative consequences of an unjust social and economic system.

Amongst these presences I think there is one in which there is clearly a shortfall. I am talking about presences in the peripheral areas of large urban centres where there are thousands (and I do not exaggerate when I say hundreds of thousands or millions) of people living in deplorable conditions. In cities and countries that have experienced a degree of economic development, these people are sometimes concentrated in the historic centres of cities or urban areas which have experienced progressive deterioration over time. I believe that the Congregation has focused its attention well in missionary areas that are rural in character, through projects of human support and evangelization, which have been carried out with great skill and generosity. But it seems to me that we need a stronger commitment to these areas of urban exclusion which shout out more urgently than other areas for an evangelizing presence that is truly prophetic. I share this concern with you and I would hope that in the Provinces and Delegations, space is created for debating this point, and that the necessary decisions should be made.

Inspired by the decision of the recent General Chapter, we have striven to consolidate our presence in the forum of the United Nations. We had already begun to work on that issue during the previous sexennium, but the endorsement of the Chapter brought with it new terms of reference. We are located in the Department of Public Information of the United Nations, which is commonly called the DPI, which is a first step to gaining a more stable status within this huge world forum whose decisions have an impact on the lives of billions of people. The Province of the United States of America is generously supporting this important project. We are working to strengthen

our own organization with a committee which, coordinated by the General Secretariat of JPIC, will assume the different dimensions required by our presence in this new "Areopagus". We are learning from other Congregations, which have more experience in this field. The central, though not unique, issues in our work which we have chosen have been 'human rights' and 'peoples' rights'. I think that, both in the past and in the present, the Congregation has specific and important experiences in this regard. Making them known is the first task that the committee will have to address. Anyway, it would make little sense to invest human and financial resources in this project if it did not find a particular resonance in the communities and apostolic activities of the Congregation. This is now the challenge. We are now identifying specific experiences within the Congregation to develop them into a project to make our presence in this Institution more effective. We will provide more information, but we would also like to receive information more promptly about problems related to human rights and rights of communities of people located in your place of mission, and the initiatives that are being implemented. In the light of this, our committee for the work in the United Nations Organization will look for ways to address these issues and concerns. I insist that this is a 'mission project', because it is missionary all that is done for peace and justice in the world.

#### ***1.4. Mission with a vocational thrust***

Another important feature of our missionary outreach is the need to pursue mission with a "vocational thrust". I speak of "a vocational thrust" in a broad sense, that is to say in a pastoral action (educational, social or any other type) which seeks contact with, and a relationship with, the person and tries to promote a choice in life that is filled with meaning and hope, and which encourages him or her to draw out all the good that is in-

side them, making it serve a worthwhile cause. At a time when there is a lack of depth and people are being influenced by a strong tendency towards self-centred individualism, this pastoral approach is more necessary than ever. With regard to young people, for example, having numerous youth groups or filling churches and stadiums, should not make us complacent. This may just become "one more episode" in the lives of young people. What is required of us now is to enter into a close relationship with them that seeks to help young people live a deeper life, to feel loved, to be aware that they have an important mission to accomplish in this world. This is also the path that encourages them to enter into a process of maturing faith and responsible integration into a Christian community. "Converting us" to young people is one of the requirements of the here and now. In this context vocations of service to the Church and society may increase. In this context, vocations to the religious life and our congregation may also increase, because it brings with it the necessary conditions to warmly welcome the vocation to Claretian missionary life.

But this "mission with a vocational thirst" refers not just to young people but also focus our attention on pastoral action that tends to accompany people in their journey to make a mature choice for Christ and for the Kingdom. On our part, it assumes a profound experience of faith and a burning desire to share it. It also demands that we take the time to get to know people, to gently help them to express the questions in their hearts clearly, and to struggle together with them in their search for an answer that would satisfy them. We know that they will find the answer in Jesus. Pastoral work with a vocational dimension will also lead to the development of the Christian community, so that it will become a place of deepening faith and where the new relationships which are born amongst people when the Kingdom is at the centre of their lives can be ex-

perienced. This is how it will help to consolidate each one's faith and everyone will find the needed support to live his or her vocation as a disciple and witness of the Kingdom. Our ministry cannot simply be one of maintaining the status quo. It must try to discover the hunger and thirst for truth, justice and love that is inside every human being, and help build life in response to the calling that we all have inside us.

A mission "with a vocational thrust" will prompt us to revise our preaching and our catechesis, both for teenagers and young people, as well as for adults. They must truly be "a proclamation" of the Gospel, instrumental in supporting people towards experiencing a profound encounter with Jesus. We are at the gates of the Synod on the new evangelization. What does this "new" mean to us missionaries? What initiatives can respond to this call of the Church? What pastoral platforms can provide a working channel for the accomplishment of this new evangelization we are being asked to support? I hold as very important the effort being made in several Provinces and Delegations to create pastoral teams that can make a significant contribution in this direction: teams for the formation of evangelizers, of popular missions, of biblical instruction, of youth ministry, etc. These teams offer services that aim to inject dynamism and depth into ordinary pastoral activity. We must see this as a priority if we view it from the perspectives of our missionary charism and congregational tradition. I think it's an interesting road to take, which we must think about afresh in each location to see how to make it operationally effective. The option to give priority to these teams is going to ask for a review of positions, but it will be worth it. However, none of this will happen if, at the same time, we do not devise a plan concerning those indispensable areas of specialization that will enable the said teams to offer a ministry of evangelization that will be truly meaningful.

Within this mission "with a vocational thrust" we also include, naturally, the issue of vocations to the Congregation. I've made reference to this several times and the General Secretariat for Vocation Ministry is constantly working to promote this area. We still need a more solid base of commitment on the part of every Claretian. I have yet to encounter a strong concern for the subject of vocations in many of our Claretian communities or pastoral activities. In some places, it has to be said, people are simply accepting the status quo, or even bowing to defeat, and this is betrayed by the constantly repeated phrase: "it is very difficult". And indeed it is, but this should not be an obstacle preventing this concern from motivating us to work harder for this cause. Even in those Provinces and Delegations where we are being blessed with abundant vocations, it is worrying that most of the candidates do not come from our apostolic centres but from vocational campaigns carried out in other schools and parishes. All this holds up to question our pastoral approaches in our own centres from the perspective of mission "with a vocational thrust" to which I am referring.

## **2. PASTORAL PRIORITIES FOR THIS SEXENNIUM**

The last General Chapter laid out some pastoral priorities for this sexennium. The Prefecture of Apostolate is working on them and frequently reminds us of them. I will not expand on this point. I simply want to mention them and encourage you to take account of them with the greatest enthusiasm. For each of them a project has been developed and teams responsible for them have been appointed. During 2013, in the meetings of the Prefects of Apostolate of each of the interprovincial Conferences, we hope to finish converting them into concrete proposals and activities in each of the geographic areas of the Congregation.

- a. *The biblical ministry.* There is twofold development here: on the one hand, activities that help deepen the understanding of the Bible and the contact with it and, on the other hand, the biblical input in all our pastoral activities, meaning that we make sure that the Word of God is a real source of inspiration for our missionary commitment in all pastoral areas. A coordinating team has been formed and the General Prefecture of Apostolate is already providing interesting support pages on the internet. You can see them in the web page of the Prefecture. The Province of Colombia-Venezuela is providing a great support for this project.
  
- b. *Evangelization through new communication technologies.* There are already some very good experiences within the Congregation which already has been working in this area for several years. The intention is to promote and coordinate these efforts more effectively. It is making significant efforts to facilitate access to programmes of higher education and pastoral training through the internet, in order to reach people who otherwise would not have access to this type of qualification. Here, too, there is also a coordinating team. The Province of Brazil is helping to coordinate this project.
  
- c. *New generations and family.* We are addressing this issue primarily through the emphasis placed, in canonical visitations and other visits, on the need to develop an effective plan of ministry to children, adolescents and young people, and to appoint people to carry it out. As for family ministry, we continue to ask that concrete plans are drawn up in all our centres. Both issues will be the subject of discussion at meetings of the Prefects of



Apostolate at the individual interprovincial Conferences next year.

- d. *The consolidation of work in the area of "Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation"*. In addition to what I have already said about our presence in the forum of the United Nations, we are trying to encourage this dimension to be more present in our lives and in all the activities of the Congregation. The General Secretariat of JPIC will continue organizing training programs in this area, both for our Centres of Formation as well as for pastoral activities. We understand there is a need for greater coordination in this area and are looking for appropriate mechanisms to do this.

### **3. APOSTOLIC STRUCTURES AND ACTIVITIES**

At this point of the Circular Letter, let me go back to the theme of "all possible means". How can we prevent the dispersion that I referred to earlier, and, moreover, give a stronger identity to our ministries? I think it has to be done, in particular, through serious reflection on how to embody the four characteristics that I have presented in each of the places where we work, but understanding each of them harmoniously connected with the others. In some places, without doubt, it will be easier to emphasize some characteristics above others, but all of them must be evident on all our apostolic platforms. I am aware that some may use this to justify any pastoral position or, worse still, to cling on to the one they have and that are unwilling to leave. This is where there is a need for this debate to take place in the context of the whole Province. Not all our positions enable us adopting in the same degree the features that should characterize our apostolic work. In each context we will have to define which are most appropriate and give them priority over others.

It is often said that the biggest problem of our review of positions does not occur at the moment of closing of a particular position because it is not consistent with the criteria of the Claretian mission. If this is the case, we should not hesitate to withdraw from that position. The real problem is when you have to decide on the continuity of a position which can be fully justified from the characteristics of the Claretian mission, but which we have to give up in order to empower another, or create a new one, which, using these same criteria, is viewed as more urgent.

Several suggestions have appeared throughout the text of this circular letter. I hope you will be able to grasp them. It is true that the missionary dynamism of a particular activity or pastoral structure relies heavily on the team members responsible for it. But it is also true that there are pastoral structures that express better than others our missionary identity. In each context we will have to see which ones have this potential. If we take seriously enough this discernment, it will be easier to clarify the priorities of our missionary project and make it easier for people, especially young people with vocational concerns, to better identify the profile of our Congregation. These priorities must be small in number and should be well coordinated at the provincial, even interprovincial, level. The reorganization of Major Organisms in the Congregation offers a good opportunity in this respect. The review of positions becomes more difficult the smaller the framework in which it is conducted, because other factors, unrelated to missionary criteria, come into play with greater force. If the expression “use all possible means” is a prophetic seed that the Founder sowed in the heart of the Congregation, we cannot make it an excuse to distance ourselves from precisely this dimension of our mission.

## IV. THE MISSIONARY'S CALL TO HOLINESS

We Claretians are the ones carrying out the mission of the Congregation. Its dynamism, therefore, depends largely on the dynamism of the missionary life that each one of us has. Without a deep spirituality, our apostolic work would not be able to communicate the Gospel. The General Chapter pointed out as a priority the need to give special attention to our experience of God and to the mystical dimension of our missionary vocation (MFL 54). We have come to understand the urgent need to rekindle the inner fire that gives meaning to our life and dynamism to our apostolic commitment. This was the experience of our Founder, and this has been the experience of many of our brothers who are now points of reference for all of us. We know that our lives, without this fire, will not be able to transmit light nor heat. Without it, our work and our institutions will not be able to communicate the Gospel of the Kingdom. Without it, our processes of formation are nothing but more or less successful professional training courses. Without this fire, the concern that we might have for the financial resources needed to sustain the life and activities of the Congregation will not differ much from that of any other group of human beings. We must recover the mystical dimension in our lives: let God truly take hold of us, let us nurture our friendship with Jesus and be led by His Spirit. "To tend towards holiness: this is in summary the programme of every consecrated life", says *Vita Consecrata* in number 93. In order to live our missionary vocation, "rekindling the fire within us" is the "sine qua non" requirement.

"Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity": in the living of this ideal, our lives find meaning and become bearers of life through our apostolic commitment. Let me recommend that you look back at the spiritual and missionary experience of Fr. Founder. The life of St. Anthony M. Claret had a focal point: Christ. He felt loved by Him. He felt accompanied by Him. He felt also sent by Him. All human life needs a centre of gravity which gradually fills each of the episodes that make up its history with meaning. For Claret this unifying and dynamic centre of his life was his relationship with Christ: a relationship that he took great care of, and allowed to shape his whole life. Jesus was, without doubt, his absolute point of reference, the unifying and dynamic centre of his life. It was the love of Christ which urged him on throughout his life. So Fr. Founder comes across as a man who was deeply passionate about Jesus and the Gospel. His life was an expression of this passion that burned strongly in his heart. "A son of the Heart of Mary is a man on fire with love, who spreads its flames wherever he goes," he told his missionaries: a fire that he kindled through his assiduous meditation on the Word of God and through a deep Eucharistic piety. He looked at the people and felt, like Jesus, that deep compassion that inspires explicit action. He organized all his life around the fundamental choice he made to put himself unconditionally at the service of proclaiming the Gospel.

Given the state of our world, I said at the beginning of this letter that a thousand questions will assail us that might even cause us some discouragement regarding our missionary commitment. The times that Claret lived in were no less difficult. He refers to it often in his Autobiography. I am sure that even

in those circumstances many succumbed to discouragement. If Fr. Founder lived his mission with such intensity it was because he lived the experience of being loved by God with such intensity. In Christ he discovered the immeasurable love of God that is on offer to one and all. He could not sit still. He describes his experience with words and expressions that, today perhaps, do not always sufficiently motivate us, but we should be able to grasp the depth of experience that lies behind the words. It will, without a doubt, touch our hearts.

Remembering the figure of Claret today inspires us to assume the joyful task of proclaiming the Kingdom with a determined and generous attitude. The thirst for truth and love, the desire to live a meaningful life and build a more fraternal and united world, are all still present in the hearts of our people. There is, indeed, a host of people out there attempting to quench this thirst or fill this desire with proposals that are unable to respond to the deepest longings of the human heart. The proclamation of the Word, that guides people towards their own inner centre, where they can encounter God and find the keys to guide and interpret history, is more urgent than ever. We know that the experience of the love of God enables us to embrace one another as brothers, and Creation itself as a gift to share. If we were able to look at reality with the same compassion as Jesus, a compassion that also filled the heart of Claret, the overpowering desire to do something would be born in us. We shouldn't be concerned about holding positions of power or prestige, because we should only be interested in approaching those who seek a gesture of love amidst the experiences of exclusion they are suffering. We would not feel threatened by anything or an-

yone because our hearts would be filled with the peace of someone who knows he is loved by the Father and sent by Jesus, who promised to be with His disciples at all times. We would not be afraid to give testimony of our faith because we would know that it is the best service we can offer our brethren. We would not back down in our efforts to create a world that is closer to God's plan for his children because we would be carried along by the certainty of the Father's promise which feeds our missionary commitment: a new world "in which righteousness will prevail." The only thing that would disturb us would be seeing the situation of so many people who, for various reasons, never had the experience of being so deeply loved, and we would feel urgently called to be a sign of the Heart of the Father, in the specific context in which we each live. Our memory of the Founder puts us in a missionary dimension. Our spirituality is missionary, and our response to the call to holiness comes through our missionary commitment. Let us drink from the well where the living water springs, the only water that can quench our thirst, and makes of our lives an offering of abundant fruit for all.

## CONCLUSION

In one of the exercises in the second stage of the programme "The Forge in our daily life" entitled 'Patris Mei', we are invited to recollect those texts in Scripture which have greater resonance in our lives. I had no hesitation in choosing the text from the Gospel of Luke 1:46-55: the song of the Magnificat. I will conclude this letter making reference to it.

The Magnificat rings out strongly with the recognition by Mary of the greatness and holiness of God, who is merciful and faithful to his promises, who focuses on the "little ones" and is a guarantee of freedom for the oppressed and excluded.

In the Magnificat, Mary's acknowledgement that she has been blessed by God's grace springs forth with serene beauty. It is this grace that makes people truly great: all generations shall call her "blessed"; just as Jesus himself, in the Sermon on the Mount, called all those blessed whom God would fill with the gift of his presence in their lives marked by poverty, suffering or weeping, brimming with compassion, transparent, committed to justice, persecuted for remaining faithful to the message of the Kingdom. It is always the presence of God that opens up new horizons in life and makes it a vessel that brings hope.

In the Magnificat, we discover Mary's awareness of being one of her people. The blessing that God has bestowed upon her will be a blessing for her people, for God always keeps his promises and is now going to do it through her that totally surrenders to his plan. It is a blessing that will reach "all the descendants of Abraham forever", thus indicating the universality of the love of the Father.

In the Magnificat, we see Mary's conviction that God's presence will transform the harsh reality of those who are hungry, humiliated and exploited, because the presence of God is always a transforming presence, as she herself has experienced, being made the mother of His Son. The presence of Mary next to Jesus, on the way to Calvary, trying to make this "dream" of the Father a reality, fills the words of this song with credibility.

The verb "to proclaim" leads us into the song of Mary. Such an amazing experience of grace refuses to stay locked up inside this one person. It is proclaimed and therefore multiplied, and in so doing, it becomes a source of hope for many.

The Magnificat reveals a faith that becomes a prophecy of hope, and encourages a commitment that seeks to make a reality today what is proclaimed as a promise from a God who is always faithful to His Word. Herein lies the beauty of this song.

The Magnificat is the song of the prophet and of the missionary, and of all those who put themselves in the hands of God, to be parables of love and mercy and to oppose everything that denies or seeks to obscure His love, which wants to reach everyone. The Magnificat we recite or sing every day helps us to grow as missionaries and to consolidate our identity as a missionary community.

"Being missionaries" is our identity. I wanted to invite you to reflect on the deep meaning this has for us today and for the world. My wish is that we learn to live with enthusiasm this vocation, which is a gift from God to each of us, and through us, a gift for many others as well.

I have just finished writing these pages during the months of



July and August, a time during which we honour the memory of so many of our brothers who proclaimed their faith and renewed their consecration with the gift of their own lives. May the memory of the martyrs help us along the roads of our missionary work.

Rome, August 13, 2012

Feast of the Blessed Claretian Martyrs of Barbastro

Memorial day of the Congregation's martyrs

Josep M. Abella Batlle, cmf.  
General Superior

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