

# WITNESSES AND MESSENGERS OF THE GOD OF LIFE

Promoting the priorities set by the XXIII General Chapter

## *CIRCULAR LETTER TO ALL CLARETIAN MISSIONARIES*

### INTRODUCTION

*Dear brothers:*

1. At midpoint in the sexennium for which this General Government was elected, I thought it opportune to share with all of you a reflection that may help us to take stock again of the objectives assigned for this period and to spur us on to make a more decisive commitment toward keeping alive in each one of us, as well as in our communities and activities, the charism that the Lord has given us, both for the life of the world and for the good of the whole Church. To do this, I am going to highlight some aspects that I consider particularly important at this time, following the priorities that were set for us by the General Chapter itself.

#### **Keeping the Charism Alive**

2. The previous sexennium introduced the custom of offering the new Major Superiors some days in order to get together and study in the General Curia. This program aims at helping those newly elected to the ministry of governance in our community to discover the distinct dimensions inherent in it and to assume their new responsibility from the more universal viewpoint of the Congregation as a whole. One question that always arises in these gatherings is the one that seeks to define the primordial mission of the Major Superior. There can be no doubt, from an evangelical viewpoint, that the mission of the Major Superior is “to take care of his brothers,” that is, to accompany them on their way of growth as consecrated persons, as missionaries sent to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. Related to this fundamental mission is one unavoidable responsibility of the Major Superior: to keep our charism alive.

3. Our charism is the reason for our existing as a Congregation in the Church and in the world. God raised up our charism through Saint Anthony M. Claret and he keeps raising it up through those who feel called to join this family of evangelizers. It is a gift, a treasure that we have received from the Father and must painstakingly take care of. It is a charism, which, like all charisms, has some traits that are permanent and others that are conditioned by historical and cultural circumstances. We must learn, then, how to re-read and re-express this charism in each historic moment and in distinct cultural contexts, so that it can continue to be meaningful and life-giving, both for those who have been graced with it and for those who receive the fruits of the missionary action that it raises up.

4. The last General Chapter, summing up a long journey of congregational discernment, gave us some keys for living our charism during this sexennium and marked out for us a horizon toward which to orient the missionary action that this charism is giving rise to in our community: the service of life. The Chapter Document took as its title an expression from the Gospel of John: *“That they may have life.”* As you know, the document clearly spells out the priorities for the sexennium, as well as the proposals to make them operative.

### **Living radically the prophetic dimension of consecrated life**

5. In the audience that Pope Benedict XVI granted to men and women Superiors General on May 22, 2006, after expressing his gratitude to the consecrated for their commitment in spreading the “good aroma of Christ” (see 2 Cor 2:15) in the Church and in the world, he reminded us that today we have “the mission of being witnesses of the transfiguring presence of God in a world that is increasingly more disoriented and confused, a world in which shades have replaced bright and genuine colors.” The Pope singled out, as a characteristic of religious, their *belonging to the Lord above all else*, and he explained that “belonging to the Lord means being on fire with his incandescent love and being transformed by the splendor of his beauty.”<sup>1</sup> There lies the wellspring from which the consecrated life must drink in order to fulfill its prophetic mission in today’s world.

6. In the document that sums up the process followed during the “International Congress on the Consecrated life,” organized by the Unions of men and women Superiors General and held in Rome in November 2004, it was stated that *“our desire to respond to the signs of the times and places has led us to discover the consecrated life as a passion: a passion for Christ, a passion for humanity.”*<sup>2</sup> This beautiful expression struck a deep chord in our hearts and opened up our hope toward the future we want to keep building from the standpoint of this vision of the consecrated life.

7. We can only be impassioned for something when the object that gives rise to this sentiment really occupies the center of our hearts and our lives. The center that integrates our lives is Christ, his passion for the Kingdom—the great project of the Father—and his compassion for humanity.<sup>3</sup> This is the fount that keeps the prophetic dimension of the consecrated life alive. The apostolic exhortation on Consecrated Life invites us to meditate on the permanent wellspring of prophecy. “True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in different circumstances of history. Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard his word in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Discourse of Pope Benedict XVI in audience to men and women Superiors General, 22 May 2006. OSSERVATORE ROMANO, 23 May 2006.

<sup>2</sup> *“Pasión por Cristo, pasión por la humanidad.”* International Congress on Consecrated Life. Publicaciones Claretianas, Madrid, 2005, p. 357.

<sup>3</sup> “His only concern is how he may follow Christ and imitate him in praying, working, suffering and striving constantly and solely for the greater glory of God and the salvation of humankind” (CC 9). See also CC 4.

Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, for the building of the Kingdom of God."<sup>4</sup>

8. The International Congress of the Consecrated Life was a clear witness to the fact that this life is alive in the Church and that it ardently desires to radically fulfill the mission that the Lord has entrusted to it. It therefore wishes to let itself be transformed by Christ's passion, which leads it to embrace his passion for humanity. Only in this way will it be truly prophetic. In his discourse during the above mentioned audience, the President of the Union of Superiors General manifest this to the Pope: "We want to be a visible sign of the face of the Father and to remake the image of God so that it may be recognized and respected in each and every person, especially the poor and those who are suffering."<sup>5</sup>

9. During the Congress we were accompanied by two very evocative biblical icons: that of the *Samaritan woman* who goes to look for water and finds the living water,<sup>6</sup> and that of the *Good Samaritan* who feels compassion for his neighbor and allows this compassion to determine the course of his life.<sup>7</sup> It is true: at all the wells where we go in search of a water that will never cease to slake our thirst, and on all the roads that we travel at the urging of our preoccupations and projects, the Lord is waiting for us, offering us the water that will well up within us and appealing to our compassion in order to create new relationships that manifest the newness of the Kingdom. Our thirst, our conversation with the Master who penetrates the different spaces of our life with his Word, our readiness to abandon the jar that only holds water that can never slake our thirst, our care for a new relationship with God in spirit and in truth and the inner call to share the experience of liberation that arises from the presence of God in our lives: these are, among others, traits that we encounter in the icon of the Samaritan woman. Empathy, tenderness, nearness and mercy are accents that we encounter in the icon of the Good Samaritan. From him we learn a way of traveling that obliges us to pay attention to all the surprises that the road has in store for us, he teaches us to contemplate the face of God in the suffering face of our brother and to kneel down beside fallen humanity without "excusing ourselves" from the demands of the commandment of love, which is translated into concrete gestures and commitments. In this sense, only a "Samaritan religious life" will be able to express the prophetic dimension which our vocation encloses.

10. In the Japanese language, the ideogram for the word "busy" is made up of two strokes: the one on the left means "heart" (in the sense of soul or spirit) and the one on the right means "to lose" or "to disappear." Thus the ideogram describes the situation of a person who has forgotten what is most important, who has lost sight of the center that unifies all dimensions of his being and fills each one of his actions with meaning. He

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<sup>4</sup> VC 84.

<sup>5</sup> Greeting of Bro. Alvaro Rodriguez Echeverria, FSC, president of the Union of Superiors General in the audience granted by Pope Benedict XVI to Superiors General on 22 May 2006

<sup>6</sup> See Jn 4:1-42.

<sup>7</sup> See Lk 10:30-37.

walks about somewhat lost in his own projects. This is a wakeup call for the consecrated life. We have to keep alive “the soul” of the consecrated life so that it may continue being the source of the meaning and the dynamic power of the many wonderful activities that we of the consecrated life are carrying out. Out of this will come the future that we long for and that the Church is asking of us as consecrated persons.

### **A new congregational situation**

11. The Congregation has experienced some very important changes in its human geography during these last years. Today the Congregation is made up of 3,121 Claretians, distributed into 36 Major Organisms and 10 general houses on the five continents. Approximately one third of the Claretians are in Europe, another third in America and another third in Asia and Africa. However, the statistics project a strong diminution of the third part living in Europe, the maintenance of the third part in America and the continuing growth of the part in Asia and Africa. In twelve years we could reach a situation in which the distribution of the Congregation’s personnel might be one half in Europe and America, and the other half in Asia and Africa. All of this would entail consequences in the diverse areas of our congregational life. I will keep noting this throughout this circular letter, but it is good to take stock of it in an overall way at the beginning of this reflection.

12. There is a continuing decrease in the number of Claretians who have been formed near the geographic and cultural places and contexts in which our Institute had its origins. Doubtless, the integration of persons coming from new cultures with distinct sensibilities involves a great enrichment of our cultural and spiritual patrimony, but it also obliges us to seek new ways to keep alive the connection with our origins. The growing multiculturalism of the Congregation demands that we build a deeper communion in what gives us our cohesion and unity, namely, the missionary charism of Saint Anthony M. Claret.

13. Our formation processes have had to integrate the intercultural dimension in order to prepare persons to live in a Congregation that is deeply marked by this sign. There has been a multiplication of Formation Centers that receive students from diverse parts of the Congregation in view of the new assignments that have been made foreseeing the future of our Organisms. The growing number of missionaries in formation in recently constituted Provinces and Delegations has obliged us to make an effort in preparing formators, and it has required the collaboration of formators from other Organisms that have responded generously, despite their own lack of personnel. We have had to make a great effort to translate the texts of the Founder and of the Congregation that are fundamental in formation processes. The building of new formation centers is one of the permanent concerns of the General Government.

14. The apostolate of the Congregation is opening up to new fields and broadening its horizons. The greater presence of the Congregation in zones where Christians are a minority has led us to a more in-depth treatment of the theme of interreligious dialogue. Our growing location in countries that are suffering because of poverty and exclusion has

obliged us to organize more systematically our Mission Procures and to reinforce our action in the field of Justice, Peace and Solidarity. The new cultural situations of our world call for different pastoral setups that often oblige us to go beyond the boundaries of the traditional structures of apostolate. The intensification of collaboration with the laity, which is the fruit of a new ecclesial consciousness and also (though it pains us to admit it) of a lack of our own personnel, is asking of us a greater commitment to shared mission.

15. Perhaps the time is coming for us to redefine the Missionary Project of the Congregation, not because the options spelt out in “The Mission of the Claretian Today” (MCT) are no longer valid or necessary,<sup>8</sup> but because the situation of our world has changed, the evangelizing awareness of the Church has been enriched by reflection on newly emerging themes (interreligious dialogue, the dialogue with culture and the new questions arising from technological advances, etc.) and the congregational subject has been transformed, being much more plural now than it was in 1979. This is a theme that will have to be considered when we begin thinking about the next General Chapter during the meeting of Major Superiors in 2008. We want our missionary projection to continue being meaningful for the Church and for the world, and we desire that the Congregation should maintain and increase its prophetic thrust.

16. Finally, this new congregational situation has some very strong repercussions in the area of economy, which I will analyze in greater detail when I deal with this theme. I assure you that I am often strongly affected by the letters that I often receive from the Major Superiors and Economes of some Provinces and Delegations, sharing their concerns and asking for urgent helps in order to face the growing needs of their Organisms. It is true that we must learn to advance gradually. Excessive haste often leads us to very uncomfortable situations. One can't have everything at the start. It would be good to review the history of the Congregation and see how we went about building and consolidating missions and new Organisms as they were being created. The pioneers always relied on solidarity with their brothers, but they gave proof of a great spirit of sacrifice, which was expressed in their readiness to renounce many things and in their gladness to undergo the limitations inherent in beginnings. At any rate, the need to respond to the new economic situation of the Congregation is an urgent and preoccupying theme.

17. As I glance at the Congregation, even before I begin this reflection, I can do no less than to call attention to two important events: one of them we have already taken part in, the other we are preparing to celebrate. They are—as you will have already guessed—the beatification of Fr. Andrew Solá Molist, a Claretian martyr in Mexico, and the commemoration of the second centenary of the birth of Saint Anthony M. Claret this coming year of 2007. As regards the beatification, I sent you a year ago April, a circular letter in which I invited you to celebrate joyfully the memory of our brother martyr and offered you some guidelines so that the celebration might awaken a missionary

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<sup>8</sup> “The Mission of the Claretian Today.” Document of the XIX General Chapter, 1979, nn. 160-179.

dynamism in each one of us and in our communities.<sup>9</sup> As regards the commemoration of the second centenary of our Founder's birth, I will write to you later on. At any rate, the Center of Claretian Spirituality is already preparing some initiatives in collaboration with the Province of Catalunya. In another order of things, we are gladdened by two new foundations that we have been able to make recently: the community groups in continental China, and the mission in Mozambique. I spoke to you of these projects in my last circular, sent after the intensive Councils of March this year.

## **TO ADVANCE IN CREATIVE FIDELITY TO OUR CHARISM**

### **Being enthusiastic about our Claretian missionary vocation**

18. This is the first condition for building a future full of life: to live with enthusiasm for our Claretian missionary vocation. How often we have been told about love for our vocation!<sup>10</sup> To accept it as a precious gift, to take it up as a hidden treasure for which we should be willing to sell everything,<sup>11</sup> to live it as a way of personal realization that projects our life toward God and toward our brothers and sisters, as a way that makes us bear fruit and generate new life: these are fundamental aspects of love for the vocation we have received. The last General Chapter singled out as one of the priorities for this sexennium: *"We choose as a priority the cultivation of our own vocation in fidelity to our evangelical and charismatic roots, expressed in the Constitutions"* (THL 48).

19. Being enthusiastic for our Claretian vocation means joyfully assuming the project of life that is born of the virtues that define it, as expressed in the Constitutions. I believe that we have to turn more frequently to this "book of life." It is sad to see that all too often it remains as one of the texts we studied during the novitiate, but does not accompany us closely during the rest of our life. The Congregation, faithful to the orientations of the Second Vatican Council, made a great effort to integrate into the text of the Constitutions the fundamental aspects of the spiritual and apostolic experience of Saint Anthony M. Claret and offered it to us as a sure way for living the following Jesus in the community of evangelizers to which we have been called. The three volumes of the Commentary on the Constitutions, published some years ago under the title of "Our Project of Missionary Life," allow us to delve deeply, from a theological and historical perspective, into the riches of our constitutional text and help us to assimilate its contents in a more systematic manner.

20. Many initiatives have been taken during recent years in order to unfold the immense wealth of our spiritual patrimony and to offer it as nourishment for our daily walk. The Congress on Claretian Spirituality, held in 2001, was in this sense a moment of special

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<sup>9</sup> "P. Andrés Solá Molist, Mártir Claretiano en México." Rome, 28 March 2005.

<sup>10</sup> See CC 67.

<sup>11</sup> See Mt 13:44.

richness, both in the great number of Claretians who participated in the whole process and also in the quality of the contents that it offered us. Besides this, we can cite the weeks of Claretian studies held in Vic, the workshops organized by the General Prefectures, the two workshops on Claretian spirituality organized by CICLA, various experiences and programs of Claretian renewal (Encounters of Claretian Renewal, the Forge, etc.), and the many studies that have been published in the last years. The Circulars of the Superiors General have constantly invited us to take up this marvelous heritage to incarnate it in our lives today and to express it in our projects as word and prophetic action able to raise up new life. And after all this effort we may well ask: Has it been given a sufficient response on the part of all of us? We can count on a rich teaching, able to stimulate a vocational response in each and every one of us and to fill our pastoral commitment with prophetic dynamism. But this teaching has not yet managed to penetrate sufficiently the minds and hearts of many Claretians. It is little known. It is, however, heartening to know that there have been Provinces, Delegations and communities that have carried out systematic programs that have helped them to assimilate all this great trove of charismatic stimuli. Other brothers have learned to set aside in their personal project of life the times needed in order to allow all of this literature to become a stimulating message for their spiritual life and their missionary action.

21. The spiritual itinerary which these documents propose leads us to a truly missionary spirituality that opens us up to the challenges of places and of history read and discerned in the light of the Word shared in community and with the people, and helps us to respond to them. The importance that we want to give to our spirituality is also reflected in the creation of the General Prefecture of Spirituality and of Provincial Prefectures in some Organisms.

22. I want to issue a call to everyone to value this great doctrinal wealth that we have and to assimilate the fruits of the huge effort that has been put forth. In our personal project let us concretely set aside special times for this purpose. A person always knows better what he truly loves. I would like it if every day, in every community, some explicit reminder of the Constitutions were made in one of the moments of community prayer. To listen every day to the reading of one number of the Constitutions would help us to keep closer contact with this text that sets forth for us the project of life to which the Lord in his Providence has called us, inviting us to grow ever deeper in knowing and living it.

23. Two years ago, in order to promote a greater and deeper knowledge of the figure of our Fr. Founder and of the spiritual patrimony of the Congregation, we established in Vic a Center for Claretian Spirituality (CESC), which gathers and broadens the objectives were established for the Claretian Secretariat. A team of Claretians is working full time in this Center. They have already initiated several projects aimed at fulfilling the objectives assigned to them. Besides this, the General Government has invited the recently created Provinces and Delegation to send some of their members to specialize in Claretian themes. The Organisms of IBERIA have committed themselves to assume the costs of this project. We have spoke insistently on inculturating our charism. We have expressed the desire that the Claretians of the new cultural contexts in which the Congregation has

become present during the past few years should offer us their own keys for reading our charismatic patrimony and help to discover in it new dynamic elements for our life and for our missionary commitment. This will not be possible without personnel who are seriously prepared to carry out this task. In all Formation Centers of the Congregation we have begun to hold yearly Weeks of Claretian Studies, animated by the General Prefecture of Formation. I would remind all Major Superiors and formators of the importance of this initiative, which aims at familiarizing our future missionaries with the Tradition of the Congregation and by so doing to keep alive the contribution that we must make to the evangelizing task of the Church from the standpoint of our specific charism.

24. The efforts carried out in recent years to reinterpret and enhance our Cordimarian sonship have to keep on bearing mature fruits. As Sons of the Heart of Mary we want to receive the Word, incarnate it in our life and announce it with new ardor. We feel sent forth by Her to fight against all that is opposed to the Kingdom of God.<sup>12</sup> Our original name –“Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary”—expresses our missionary identity. One would hope that the progressive substitution of our other official name –“Claretian Missionaries”—would never lead us to forget what our Founder meant to tell us with the original title.

25. The putting into practice of the General Chapter’s request for a project to intensify the living of the Eucharistic dimension of our charism is still pending.<sup>13</sup> The Eucharist is a fundamental reference for religious community. In it we keep growing, with Jesus, in our desire to be “bread shared for the life of the world.” The Eucharist profoundly marked the spiritual experience and the apostolic projection of our Fr. Founder. For each of us it should be the fount from which we drink the water that nourishes our spirituality and enables us to bear those fruits that the world needs in order to walk toward a fuller life.

26. To live our Claretian missionary vocation with enthusiasm is the first condition for building the future that we all long for. It is not a matter of promoting some vain forms of triumphalism, but rather one of feeling glad to have been called to this family of evangelizers and of consolidating our sincere adherence to the project of life that has inspired that family and given it meaning. Our Founder conceived of us as men on fire, who burn with charity and spread its fire wherever we go.<sup>14</sup>

### **An always-missionary community**

27. There have been great changes in the consecrated life relating to the theme of community. In the CIVCSVA’s document, “Fraternal life in community,” published in 1994, it was stated that “the climate of living together has improved; the active participation of all has been facilitated; we have passed from a life in common, overly based on observance, to a life that is more attentive to the needs of each member and

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<sup>12</sup> See Aut 270.

<sup>13</sup> See “That they may Have Life” (THL 70.2).

<sup>14</sup> See Aut 494.



more caring on a human level.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we will all agree that there is still a long way for us to go in order to create the kind of living and life-giving communities that we long for.

28. I will cite the last General Government’s diagnosis in its document *“That they may have life”*: “Many of us Claretian Missionaries feel a deep gratitude toward the Congregation as our life-giving environment: we value its people, we appreciate its works and we are moved by its symbols. Nevertheless, the Chapter has detected a considerable degree of dissatisfaction in regard to the development of community life. Dissatisfaction with community leads us to look for other types of belonging or to lock ourselves into our own responsibilities, assuming individualistic and competitive attitudes” (THL 49-50). This gave rise to one of the priorities for this sexennium: *“Therefore, we choose as a priority to strengthen the community as an environment that fosters life and apostolic commitment”* (THL 51).

29. It is curious to note the contrast that often exists between the desire for greater depth in community life and the lack of commitment toward it that is sometimes manifested in the very persons who express this desire. Nevertheless, we have all experienced some intense moments of fraternal life that have helped us to consolidate in our hearts a deep and sincere adherence to the community with which the Lord has gifted us, and to remain firm in our commitment to communion with our brothers. Community is a gift from God, a precious gift from God. In it, each one of us becomes for the other a sacrament of our heavenly Father’s infinite love for his children. Moreover, as community, we are a parable of the newness of the Kingdom, a sign of the new relationships that arise between persons when the interests of the Kingdom occupy the center of their lives. In the World Congress on the consecrated life held in 2004, we heard loud and clear the voices of young religious who were asking for greater quality in community relationships. They were expressing a longing that was deeply rooted in the heart of each one of us.

30. How beautiful it is, during visits, to meet with Claretians who feel happy in community and desire the same experience for the rest of their brothers! In his circular letter *“Toward a Renewed Missionary Commitment,”* Fr. Aquilino Bocos invited us to conjugate some verbs in our everyday life: trust, qualify, build, make credible, inculturated, expand and collaborate.<sup>16</sup> He would now have to look for ways of amplifying this dictionary and of learning to conjugate these verbs in “distinct languages” in the midst of a community that is becoming more and more multicultural. In conjugating all of these verbs there is only one subject: “we”: a “we” that is a gift and a vocation, a “we” that we have an obligation to care for and deepen, a “we” that we have – and these are two new verbs to add—to “be thankful for” and “celebrate.”

31. What gives rise to most community conflicts? Much has been written on this subject. There are endless books and articles with analyses and proposals. The problem arises when we want to incarnate these proposals into the daily run of our communities. We

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<sup>15</sup> VFC 47.

<sup>16</sup> Circular Letter of Fr. Aquilino Bocos, Rome, 1994, nn. 49-56.

need a large dose of sincerity and humility in order to tackle the theme of community. The first question we should ask has to do with our own selfish tendencies. As long as we think of the “I” as cut off from the “we,” the way to a solution is closed. As long as “my project” is not fully inserted into “our project,” and ours does not have priority over mine, then any move toward the “new community” is far off.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, there is a faith-dimension related to this theme: we have to believe that God himself, in his infinite Providence, has given me today these particular brothers so that with them and through them I can deepen the experience of his gratuitous love. What a beautiful vision of faith that illumines our life and helps us to discover in our everyday existence and in our brothers the presence of the Spirit of the Lord who nourishes our walk, which is always somewhat reticent and indecisive! It is important for us to examine in prayer our own experience of community. This will help us to acknowledge before the Lord, who knows all hearts, the prejudices that dominate us, and it will impel us to ask him to purify us and enable us to love. A community is made up of persons with quite concrete names and biographies, with histories marked by joy and suffering, and with deep desires to love and be loved. When we learn how to accept one another, without imposing demands or projecting on others our own deficiencies, this desire for love will be satiated.

32. There are many other aspects on the theme of community that we could reflect on. Nevertheless, I would like to refer to one of them that is surely not the most important, but is observed with a certain frequency. I get the impression that one of the motives that hinders some of the most positive and gratifying relationships among religious --among ourselves, concretely—is a sort of psychological immaturity that underlies the attitudes and behaviors of some of us. This seems to be an echo of a growing phenomenon observed in society in general, which some specialists have labeled as “middle-escence” (a play on the English word “adolescence”), characterized as a stage in which persons who are old enough to be fully included in the world of adults keep manifesting certain traits of dissatisfaction, lack of balance, boredom leading to evasion, etc, that makes the psychologically closer to the stage of life that we call adolescence. This is something that we have to face lucidly and decisively at the beginning of our formation processes. What is it that prevents some people from growing toward the maturity that we might reasonably expect of consecrated persons, and often enough, of persons who are carrying out important tasks within apostolic activities? The cultural components that I referred to undoubtedly play some role in this matter. We have to recognize that these phenomena can affect us, too, and this obliges us to look for instruments that favor the processes of personal maturation not only in programs of initial formation but also in all the stages of our life.

33. Our communities are becoming increasingly multicultural. This is an undeniable statistical datum. In many parts, our life is being shared by brothers who come from diverse cultural contexts, and who therefore have distinct sensibilities in many areas: culture, politics, religious and ecclesial experience, etc. I have referred to this on different occasions. The great challenge is to pass from multiculturalism, which is a *de facto* situation, to interculturalism, which is a process that demands a concrete commitment on

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<sup>17</sup> See “*Caminar desde Cristo*,” n. 12. See also IPM 29.1.

the part of the persons who make up a community. This fact stood out clearly in the last General Chapter, which was itself a parable of the plurality of cultures that exist today in our Congregation. Hence the Chapter did not hesitate to point out: *Therefore, we choose as a priority in the Congregation –in its structures, institutions and lifestyle—the necessary process of intercultural dialogue*” (THL 29). This dialogue demands an attitude of openness on the part of all who are involved in it. In the conversations I have had with many Claretians incorporated in Province and Delegations distinct from the Organisms they came from, I have time and again discovered the challenges to intercultural dialogue. Those who receive brothers coming from other parts are asked to have an attitude of openness, readiness to be questioned and flexibility to adjust their criteria so that they can accept the contributions of those who will contribute to the enrichment of their own cultural, ecclesial and congregational tradition. Those who are arriving are asked to have the humility to recognize their need to learn respect for the language, traditions and values of the peoples who welcome them, and openness to the pastoral models of the churches where they are going to work. Both need to be profoundly rooted in the founts of Claretian identity from which will arise the water that will allow the fruits of true communion and of effective missionary projection to grow and mature.

34. Finally, I want to recall that our communities, as such, must be “missionary.” They themselves must be a sign and an announcement of the newness of the Kingdom. Their lifestyle should be a transference of the values that Jesus wanted to impress in the heart of those whom he called “to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the Gospel.”<sup>18</sup> The structure and program of our communities must make possible a daring and efficient missionary action, one that is able to respond to the most urgent pastoral challenges of each place. The community should be constantly questioning its tendency to become too settled and to keep repeating pastoral schemes that might have been introduced into our pastoral activities. The community must also be a space of welcome for those who are seeking God and for those who feel the need for a loving care and respect that society may for different reasons deny them.

35. To keep working on the theme of community is one of the great challenges that we have to assume in this congregational moment. In many countries the motivation for vocations is not so much a desire “to do” something, as it is a search for consistent ways of spirituality and for spaces that allow one to live the experience of communities in which the disciples truly “love one another.” May the Eucharist that we celebrate every day be a source and expression of the commitment of each one to the community.<sup>19</sup> The Constitutions offer us, in Chapter I of the first part, some texts that can enliven this very fundamental dimension of our life. The road toward the future passes through cohesion in the community. A hope-filled future is born of a community that knows how to reproduce the traits that Jesus wanted to be distinctive of those who were called to be his disciples and who opted for the project of the Kingdom. Cordiality, a characteristic of those who

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<sup>18</sup> Mk 3:14. See VC 51.

<sup>19</sup> See CC 35.

are known as “sons of the Heart of Mary,” must leave a permanent imprint on our fraternal relationships.<sup>20</sup>

### **Vocational promotion and formation**

36. The vocational situation constitutes the main preoccupation in several Provinces and Delegations. New members are not coming into our community. The growth in the average age and the slim outlook for new entrants produces discouragement in many of our brothers and gives rise to a certain concern, and even anguish, over the future of the Claretian presence in some places and on the continuity of some dearly beloved works which were created and carried on with great dedication and sacrifice. Moreover, the longer this vocational drought goes on, the harder it gets to bring in new candidates to enter a community dynamic that is increasingly less flexible for the very reason of age or weariness.

37. I know that our Congregation is not “indispensable” in the Church and that the Reign of God will keep forging ahead, impelled by very different mediations, both within and without the Church. But I firmly believe that if the Lord has raised up our charism in the Church and keeps raising it up, it is because, in his Providence, he wants us to continue contributing something that He himself considers important for the Church and its mission in today’s world. As I think about the theme of vocations, I always start out from this solid, basic conviction. In analyzing the declining number of vocations in some countries, we may rightly adduce a whole set of demographic aspects and sociocultural and even ecclesial situations that are unfavorable. Perhaps these are calling on us to think about new forms of consecrated life. I do not rule out the possibility that they may even lead us to deign new ways of integration into our own community. But it is also tight for us to ask ourselves about our way of living the Kingdom and its values, about how our community can become a transparency of them and be capable as such of attracting those who are searching with a sincere heart. I am not surprised when, in some Province or Delegation where the Superiors are facing serious difficulties in sending young religious to their most committed mission, there may also be a shortage of vocations. The Lord wants us to be missionaries and he is only going to send to our community men who feel called to live this charism if we ourselves are disposed to be faithful to it. Won’t we sometimes need to be more detached from many things that we have been accumulating, either personally or as a group? Might not all these things be robbing us of freedom to fulfill the mission that the Lord has entrusted to us as missionaries?

38. In other parts of the Congregation we are experiencing a notable growth in vocations that fills us with joy and moves us to give thanks to the Lord. Thanksgiving is the adequate attitude. We are content and grateful to the Lord because he keeps raising up, through different channels, young men who want to add themselves to the project of missionary life that draws its inspiration from the spiritual and apostolic experience of Claret and his companions. The next step is discernment: a process that has to be carried out with great care. Pope Benedict XVI has himself insisted repeatedly on the need to

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<sup>20</sup> See IPM 20.

examine diligently the motives that lead some young men to knock at the gates of Seminaries or of religious families.<sup>21</sup> The *Claretian Vocation Directory* gives some solid criteria to guide us in the selection of those who aspire to the Claretian missionary life.

39. I want to insist on one point: it is not enough for candidates to want to be “priests” in order to let them enter the Congregation. They must ardently desire “to be missionaries” and to accept all the consequences that this vocation entails. The image of “priest” that prevails in some cultural or ecclesial contexts, an image that is all too zealous in underscoring the dimension of dignity or is overly focus on the management of pastoral structures, does not express the most fundamental aspects of Claretian identity. For us, the service to the Christian community through the exercise of the priestly ministry is one form of realizing our missionary vocation, but certainly not the only one. We live to announce the Gospel and make of our life a service to humanity. This must be the fundamental point of reference for delineating our way of being missionaries as ordained ministers or as consecrated laity. We must not rest easy over the thought that we have many vocations. We must take care in selecting them and always be very attentive to the processes of discernment so that they may help us to evaluate the motivations and the right understanding of the Claretian identity on the part of candidates.

40. It is necessary to insist on vocation ministry. Let us recall how the General Chapter formulated it: *“Therefore, we choose improvement in our vocation ministry as a priority: the consolidation of the formation process, the formation of formators and spiritual accompaniment to better assure vocational consistency in all stages of life”* (THL 56). I want especially to encourage those Organisms that cannot palpably feel the fruits of their efforts not to slacken in their endeavors, but rather to enhance them. I proposed to you a renewed commitment to vocation ministry as a congregational response for the gift that the Lord gave us in the beatification of the martyr Andrés Solá.<sup>22</sup> I pointed out that in its next Assembly or Chapter each Organism should make an in-depth assessment of the situation of its vocation ministry in order to reaffirm its commitment in this area and to look for new ways of action. I ask the Major Superiors to give it priority in their respective Organisms. You can count on my support and you can also count on the collaboration of the General Secretariat of vocation ministry.

41. The Congregation can rely on the General Plan of Formation, which marks out some solid guidelines for the formation processes of those who are preparing for the Claretian missionary life. Based on the GPF, the Provinces and Delegations have been formulating and reformulating their own formation plans in keeping with the demands of their own cultural and ecclesial contexts. This whole effort is positive and I am sure that it is going to produce abundant fruits. There are some aspects that I would like to underscore

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<sup>21</sup> Allusions to the theme can be seen in his Discourse of 25 July to the priests of the Diocese of Aosta (Italy). See also discourses to some groups of Bishops on ad limina visits: Bishops of South Africa and Botswana (10 June 2005), Bishops of Papua New Guinea (25 June 2005), Bishops of Ghana (24 April 2006), etc. The careful selection of candidates to the priesthood and to the consecrated life, and vocational discernment are recurrent themes in the interventions of Benedict XVI.

<sup>22</sup> See op. cit., section 5, p. 19.

relative to the theme of initial formation, because I believe that they will have a strong impact on the future of our Congregation.

42. The first refers to *the preparation of formators*. This is the foundation for building a good formation project. First of all, I want to express my thanks for the generous dedication of many Claretians in the task of formation. The Constitutions clearly indicate the importance of their mission.<sup>23</sup> The lack of vocations in some Organisms might lead them to neglect the preparation of some Claretians to undertake responsibilities in formation. The high number of candidates in other congregational contexts sometimes leads to improvisation, with the negative repercussions that this entails in an area of such capital importance for the future of the Congregation. Both of these situations are negative for the Congregation. Each Organism must work on its formation project and foresee the preparation of the personnel needed to carry it out. It is necessary to define well the plan of specializations in function of formative and apostolic needs of each Province or Delegation. The collaboration between various Organisms in formation programs should also envision the preparation of persons who are going to undertake the responsibility in formation. Provincial Conferences and Formation Encounters are the adequate forum in which to define such collaboration. The General Government is offering the program of the “Escuela del Corazón de Maria in order to deepen the specifically Claretian aspects of formation programs. All formators or persons preparing to be formators should participate in the school.

43. There can be no doubt that the best base for being a good formator is fidelity in living his own religious commitments and enthusiasm for his own vocation. An attitude of welcoming and listening is also a necessary component for being able to build a fluent relationship with our missionaries in formation. The formator’s presence in the formation center is another point that must be insisted on. Formators often take on other ministries to the detriment of their dedication to the primordial mission that has been entrusted to them. This is not a matter of an outright rejection of any other ministerial services, often related to teaching in the academic centers where our young men are studying, but one of accepting them only if they are compatible with the fulfillment of their fundamental responsibility as formators. The frequent personal accompaniment of the formandi is one of the keys to success in formation, and it requires many hours of dedication, above all when the number of students is high. This is one of the aspects that must be evaluated well in canonical visits and in meetings of the formation team. I want to issue a call for availability in accepting formative responsibilities. We all know that these are positions that call for a large dose of sacrifice. We must decidedly support the work of formators and collaborate generously in the services that they ask of us. As the Constitutions tell us: “Missionary formation is a matter of such grave concern that responsibility for it rests on the whole Congregation, the Province and the formation community.”<sup>24</sup> Let us spare no efforts in the field of formation.

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<sup>23</sup> See CC 68; 77.

<sup>24</sup> CC 76.

44. The dominant cultural atmosphere in our society does not facilitate the cultivation of a deep interior life, which constitutes the irreplaceable base on which a vocational response is built. Therefore, in our formation project, we have to give a privileged place to times of silence and personal prayer as indispensable spaces in which to deepen our contact with the Word and friendship with the Lord who has called us and keeps calling us. The daily joyful and careful celebration of the Eucharist is another of the privileged moments of the formation program. Frequently approaching the sacrament of reconciliation is another fundamental aspect of growing in fidelity to our vocation. If, as Vita Consecrata says, “the primary objective of the formation process is to prepare people for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church’s mission,”<sup>25</sup> we must insist on an educative itinerary that helps them to achieve the spiritual consistency that will allow them to pronounce their “Yes” to their calling from the depths of their heart and with a forcefulness that will help them to repeat it in each of the stages of their life.

45. Another aspect that I would like to stress has to do with *the dimension of human maturation in our formandi*. Never have our formation centers, including those in Organisms whose economy depends on the General Government or on other Organisms, had such a wealth of means to carry out their formation programs. We must be glad of this and also be thankful for the generosity of countless Claretian missionaries who have worked hard and saved in order that nothing necessary should be lacking in our formation centers. Even so, this “having everything at our disposal” seems sometimes –not always, fortunately—to be a negative factor in the maturation process of some persons. There are very few young men between ages 20 and 30 who can have at their disposal some ten years or more to dedicate exclusively for their preparation, without being preoccupied by economic questions or by other aspects that have to do with the ordinary unfolding of everyday life. It is true that our formation has to attend to many aspects that are not contemplated in the process of preparation of other university students, but it is at least possible that this privileged situation may not help some to interiorize the values that define our missionary life. Sometimes there remain certain attitudes of personal claims or demands that in some way manifest the situation of lack of maturity that we spoke of earlier. Without ceasing to attend to the different aspects that concern the formation of our students, or to the necessary priority of their dedication to study, we might have to seek some way of integrating into our formation programs the dimension of work, not excluding manual labor --inside or outside the house of formation, in pastoral structures or in other centers-- to help our formandi become aware of their responsibility toward the functioning of the formation community. At the very least, we would have to clearly indicate to those who do not show the degree of maturity one might expect of persons who opt for the religious life and, concretely, for the Claretian missionary life, the suitability of their giving a different focus to their life.

46. Within the area of human maturation, the General Chapter asked us to pay particular attention to the affective and sexual dimension,<sup>26</sup> not only because of its objective

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<sup>25</sup> VC 65.

<sup>26</sup> See THL 55, 73.3.

importance in the maturing of persons, but also because many of the contradictions of our time are concentrated in it: on the one hand, the tendency to permissiveness, and on the other, the great demand for authenticity and coherence. For this it is necessary to help each formandus, by means of self-evaluation, personal conversations and revisions of life in common, to face the truth about himself and the reality in which he lives, avoiding escapist, defensive or closed attitudes. I ask everyone, especially superiors and formators, to take very much into account the Guidelines given on some matters directly related to the vow of chastity.<sup>27</sup>

47. Our formation communities are becoming increasingly intercultural. We have made one option in this sense. It facilitates a mutual enrichment for formandi that come from diverse cultural contexts and it prepares them for processes of inculturation that always involve some difficulty. I insist on the need for all formandi to learn a language other than their own, in order to facilitate congregational interchanges and missionary services. For students assigned to Provinces or Delegations different from the Organism of origin, we have provided a formative itinerary that allows us to guarantee both a systematic initiation into the Claretian missionary life and the time needed for their obligatory inculturation in the place where they are going to exercise their ministry. I want to thank the formation teams for their generosity in assuming the supplementary effort involved in attending to these types of intercultural communities.

## **ACCENTS IN OUR PASTORAL PROJECT DURING THIS SEXENNIUM**

48. The General Chapter pointed out to us three elements as aspects to be enhanced during this sexennium in the field of the apostolate: shared mission, mission in dialogue, and solidarity with the poor and outcast. I would like to comment briefly on each one of them.

### ***Shared mission***

49. This is a theme about which we are all still in the phase of clarification and search. There are some elements that seem to me to take into account in speaking of it. First, I believe that it is fundamental to be aware of the concept of mission that we are dealing with. “Mission” is the noun and “shared” is the adjective that indicates a way of understanding mission and carrying it out. It involves the mission that “belongs to all” and to which we add ourselves from the standpoint of our specific vocation. This seems obvious, but it is important. It is “our” mission, but with and “us” that goes beyond the limits of our Congregation or Province. It is, above all, the mission of the Church which, faithful to the mandate of Jesus, keeps announcing the Gospel of the Kingdom to all men and serving the cause of those to whom, according to Jesus himself, it belongs: the poor, the peacemakers, those who work for justice, those who suffer... Still more, it also means the mission that God entrusted to all humanity, to take care of his creation and to build a

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<sup>27</sup> I refer to the document sent to the Major Superiors on 23 November 2003, charging them to comment on it in the forums they considered most adequate for making it known to the members of their Organisms.



fraternal and solidary history. To that mission we “join ourselves.” From this comes the attitude that prepares us to assume the demands that can be drawn from this “shared mission.” Later, we will have to see what part each one of us should contribute, how to harmonize our charisms, how to articulate our actions on behalf of a common project, which is decisive for the future of humanity.

50. This means that we can't think of our projects simply from our own standpoint and the interests of our own institution, but from the standpoint of global evangelizing urgencies, taking into account the complementarity of vocations and charisms in the Church. Hence the Chapter urges us to “*choose as a priority that shared mission be our normal way of carrying out our mission and that we all, as Claretians, accept the consequences this has for our spirituality, vocation ministry, formation processes, community life, apostolic work and institutions of government and economy*”(THL 37). Shared mission will demand that we analyze the concrete situation of the place where we are working and of the world in general, and to discover how and with whom we are called to share the task of carrying out God's Project, and to discern what our specific collaboration ought to be. Starting from there, we would have to define how to embody this awareness concretely in the works of our Congregation or through collaboration in the initiatives of other groups. This means opening channels for a co-responsible and dynamic participation of the laity.

51. The Chapter asked us to open up new avenues of shared mission<sup>28</sup> and encouraged us to promote the presence of lay people on the pastoral councils of our Organisms, on animation teams and in apostolic positions.<sup>29</sup> I value very positively the efforts of many Provinces and Delegations that are implementing these guidelines in a systematic and creative way in diverse areas of our apostolate: missionary teams, youth ministry, vocation ministry, social ministry, educational ministry, parish ministry, etc. The participation of the laity is helping them to infuse a new dynamism into their pastoral activities and is obliging them to better define the specific nature of the contribution that we ought to be making from the standpoint of our charism. We have to program well the formation process of the laypersons that are going to form part of our pastoral councils and teams responsible for apostolic activities; but we must also prepare ourselves to learn how to accept the contribution of the laity and to second the decisions they make in the exercise of the responsibilities that have been entrusted to them. The Prefecture General of Apostolate has held a workshop on the theme of “shared mission” that is going to help all of us to deepen our understanding of this concept and to find new ways to provide it with operative channels in all apostolic positions.

52. I want to make special mention here of the *Movement of Lay Claretians*. I get the impression that in some Organisms and communities of our Congregation this movement has not yet managed to receive the welcome it deserves. Some of us are still asking:

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<sup>28</sup> “That those communities with apostolic works promote and decisively open up new avenues of shared mission, and regulate their operation” (THL 66.1).

<sup>29</sup> “That superiors and those responsible for apostolic works in the Congregation, after due consultation with the community, promote the presence of lay people on the pastoral councils of the Organisms, on animation teams and in apostolic positions” (THL 66.3).

“What is a lay Claretian?” The “Sourcebook of the Lay Claretian” offers a clear and well-articulated answer to this question. Nevertheless, I will be so bold as to sum it up: Lay Claretians are lay men and women who feel called (it is a vocation, then) to live in a more radical way the missionary dimension of their Christian identity and who find in Saint Anthony M. Claret an inspiration and powerful motivation for doing so (this is the specifically charismatic aspect). They come to connect with the spiritual and apostolic experience of Saint Anthony M. Claret through various means, which the Lord in his Providence has disposed. This often comes about through their relationship with some Claretian missionary or with some community or activity of the Congregation. The persons who have received this call from the Lord share it in a group that helps them to grow in response to it and that sustains them in the missionary commitment through which, as laypersons, they express their Claretian vocation. This calling gave birth to the Lay Claretian Movement, to which many of these lay men and women belong. The Movement offers them an experience of universality in living their charismatic gift and a guarantee of fidelity to the vocation they have received in discerning the project and mission of each group. Accompanying the formation processes of these laypersons and the life of their groups is one of the tasks that are asked of us, and we ought to undertake it with enthusiasm and loving concern. An active collaboration with them in no way lessens the autonomy that ought to exist in the relationship between the Congregation and the Lay Claretian Movement. Looking for space in which to share prayer and the way of understanding and living the Claretian charism with these laypersons is going to help us, too, to discover new traits in that charism and it is going to encourage us to live these traits more radically and with greater enthusiasm.

### ***Mission in solidarity***

53. 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>30</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 favor 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. In number 4 of the same encyclical, comments precisely on his own concrete experience of this situation in his journeys to Latin America, the Holy Land and Asia. In the greetings that I addressed to Pope John Paul II during the audience he granted to the members of the last General Chapter, I told him that: “Our reflection and search are directed by the words of Jesus: ‘that they may have life.’ And the reality of so many situations of death that we discover in our world causes us to shudder. The sad situation

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<sup>30</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.

of millions of men and women with who we share our lives every day has led us to make ‘service to life’ the major thrust of the life of the Congregation in the years to come.”<sup>31</sup>

54. For this reason the Chapter stated: *“Therefore, we choose as priority solidarity with the poor, the excluded and those whose right to life is threatened, so that this impacts our personal and community lifestyle, our apostolic mission and our institutions”* (THL 40). What has changed in our life? What concrete steps have we taken to express this priority? Or perhaps we may have to ask ourselves more radically: “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>32</sup> Do these poor and excluded people have a face and a name for us, other than the images that are transmitted to us by the communications media? I can testify that I have seen Claretian communities and Claretians who are radically and generously living this commitment. They are contributing to keep us awake and vigilant, and they are pushing us to integrate into our own pastoral action, whatever it might be, this dimension of solidarity with and commitment to justice that are inherent in any credible announcement of the Kingdom. But I must also, sadly, confess that I still find some of our brothers who are overly unconcerned with this dimension, which is so fundamental in a ministry that aims at being truly prophetic.

55. Collaboration with those who are striving to transform the world according to God’s design is, for us, a constitutional watchword.<sup>33</sup> Why does it still cost us so much to give concrete shape to this priority in our community and pastoral projects? One of the keys that guided us in the reading of the bible that we made through the WORD-MISSION Project was, precisely, the commitment to life. Recall the title of the six volumes of the project: I. “Pentateuch: so that man may live”; II. “Prophets: so that the people may live”; III. “Synoptics and Acts: the Kingdom has come” (it is the kingdom of life); IV. “Paul: an announcement of life for different cultures”; V. “John: witnessing to life in a hostile world”; VI. “Wisdom Literature and Psalms: rivers of life.” Have we ceased working for this Word that has accompanied us throughout the last few years? It was, then, perfectly natural that the theme of the General Chapter was spelled out explicitly in the phrase from the Gospel of John: *“That they may have life.”*<sup>34</sup> We have to take interest in themes related to Justice, Peace, Care for Creation and Solidarity. We must learn to work on them and to encourage others to take them up passionately. In our youth ministry, in our parishes, in preaching and in educational ministry, in centers of higher ecclesiastical studies, in social ministry and in our publications, this priority should have a strong resonance. The General Secretariat of Justice and Peace, as well as those in charge on the provincial level, are ready and willing to help us to reinforce this dimension.

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<sup>31</sup> “That they may Have Life,” Greeting of the Superior General to John Paul II, p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> See THL 67.1.

<sup>33</sup> “Sharing the hopes and joys, the sorrows and trials of the people, especially those of the poor, we readily offer to join efforts with all who are striving to transform the world according to God’s plan” (CC 46).

<sup>34</sup> See Jn 10:10.

56. With other Congregations we are making ourselves present in world forums where decisions that affect the life of millions of human beings are being forged.<sup>35</sup> Our contribution will be small, almost insignificant, but it must not be lacking. These are new Areopagi, to which the light and savor of the Gospel must be brought.<sup>36</sup> They are spaces for dialogue and for building networks with people who are looking for alternative to the situations of injustice and oppression that are in our world, and they are also spaces for the kind of denunciation that has always accompanied the prophetic ministry. In our Congregation we have to keep enhancing this dimension, and we have to do so creatively, contemplating, within the process of revision of positions, the possibility of starting some new initiatives along this life. One sometimes gets the impression that we lack the lucidity to undertake new missionary services outside of the traditional structures of apostolate. A missionary action that wants to be relevant in our world must be open to go out to these forums for dialogue with civil society and with many groups of persons who, although moved by religious traditions different from our own or by ideologies of a deeply humanistic character, are seeking to transform the world according to God's plan.

57. Almost all Provinces and Delegations are creating or consolidating Mission Procures as a concrete instrument for expressing solidarity. This is something that fills me with a deep sense of joy. The Procure creates missionary awareness and helps gather economic resources needed to carry on many projects on behalf of the disadvantaged, above all in the missions. Thanks to all for the efforts you are putting forth. We can do still more. In some sites we have not yet done a sufficiently in-depth study of this theme. Our missions need support for many of the works that they are carrying out. Our seminaries need economic help to be able to respond to the demands of a good formation. Without Claretians take responsibility for projects and work alongside the poor and the excluded, we will not be able to carry the works of solidarity forward. In the Procures we have to learn how to integrate both the work of mediation with institutions that provide funds and direct contact with persons with whom we have or have had some relationship (ex-alumni of our educational centers, collaborators in different apostolates, etc.) and are disposed to collaborate on behalf of the works that the Congregation is carrying out. Let us never forget the horizon of the universal mission of the Congregation when we are planning the work of our Procures in Provinces and Delegations.

58. I do not want to close this section without asking a concrete question on our lifestyle. We have to be always on our guard, because consumerism is getting through to us, and what was once considered a luxury for us (and still is for many who live around us), is beginning to seem "normal." In the audience I referred to earlier, the Pope told us Superiors General: "Along with an indubitably generous commitment that bears witness of total self-giving, the consecrated life is today experiencing the insidious inroads of mediocrity, of bourgeois values and of consumerist ideas."<sup>37</sup> A small fraction of the world's inhabitants consume the greater part of what would be necessary for all. We all

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<sup>35</sup> I refer to the participation of the head of the Secretariat General of JPIC and of other Claretians in some sessions of commissions of the United Nations, in the association "Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network," in world forums continental alternatives, etc.

<sup>36</sup> See Rmi 37; VC 96ff; CdC 45.

<sup>37</sup> Discourse of Pope Benedict XVI to men and women Superiors General in the audience granted on 22 May 2006.

know the statistics. Where do we stand? There are concrete questions that make us feel uncomfortable. Some would answer that we need not be minimalists. But I believe that we must sincerely confront these questions. It is true that ours is an “apostolic” poverty, which demands that we have the necessary means for our pastoral work. But this can never be an excuse for adopting lifestyles that cannot stand a serious confrontation with the situations of poverty and exclusion that are, sadly, all too common in our world. Lifestyle is also a barometer measuring the solidness of our commitment to justice and solidarity, and of our ecological consciousness.

### *Mission in dialogue*

59. The unstoppable process of globalization has changed the parameters of relationships among peoples. Mobility has become one of the main characteristics of our time. Cultures and religions meet and have to learn to live together. We are witnessing conflicts that alert us to the danger of attitudes closed to dialogue or of the manipulation of people’s religious and cultural sentiments by those who control the centers of power and want to increase their own spheres of dominion or influence. All of these factors have contributed to make the theme of dialogue central to our preoccupations and priorities. The General Chapter was a parable of the interculturalism that so deeply marks our historic moment. *“Therefore, we choose as a priority the inculturation of the Gospel through ecumenical, interreligious and intercultural dialogue in all our missionary works”* (THL 45).

60. On the horizon of the apostolate of the Congregation and on the horizon of the evangelizing mission of the Church, *interreligious dialogue* is an undeniable demand. It supposes some changes both in our mentality and in our pastoral strategies. On the one hand, it obliges us to look with great respect on all religious traditions and to learn how to discover in them the ways through which many people have mediated their relationship with God and have forged the values on which thousands of years of history and culture have been built. On the other hand, it obliges us to think on the meaning and method of an evangelization based on this recognition. The Congregation is becoming increasingly present in areas where Christianity is the faith of a very small minority of the population. In Sri Lanka, in 1997, there was a workshop on “The missionary service of the Word and dialogue with religions,” organized by the Prefecture General of Apostolate.<sup>38</sup> The workshop was born as a response to the concerns of Claretians who were carrying out their apostolic activity in contexts where Christianity was a minority religion. But besides this, it meant to set in motion a reflection on the implications that the Church’s new attitude toward non-christian religions might have for our own mission as servants of the Word. The workshop wanted to shed some light on the Congregation’s option for the “*Missio ad gentes*,” which is also frequently defined as “*Missio inter gentes*.” The theme of interreligious dialogue is going to be ever more present in our congregational culture. We ought to encourage some concrete experiences in this field and promote the study of this theme in all our formation centers and programs. The dialogue between religions

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<sup>38</sup> The workshop was held in Kandy (Sri Lanka) from 25 February to 5 March 1997. The conclusions were published in a booklet edited by the Prefecture General of Apostolate, and all the works of the workshop were collected in a dossier that was sent to the Provincial Prefectures of Apostolate.

should be a very important contribution to the creation of a true culture of peace in our world.

61. *Ecumenism* is another area where the Church is carrying on a serious and responsible exercise of dialogue. It is a joy to see that in many Claretian activities this dimension is very present. However, we still have a long way to go. We lack experts in this area in the Congregation. According to the different cultural contexts, ecumenism takes diverse forms and we have to learn how to act decisively in connecting with the many initiatives that exist in particular churches. Ecumenism builds on a base where Christians of different ecclesial traditions, united in the same faith and committed to proclaiming the same Gospel, meet to listen to the Word of the Lord and to praise him. It is a pity that we cannot share the Eucharist, the sacrament of communion, but our sorrow over this should be a constant motivation for us to engage tirelessly in ecumenical work.

62. *Dialogue with culture*, with all cultures, constitutes another point of maximum interest for a missionary Congregation like ours. It requires us to respect the cultures of the peoples to whom we have been sent: their language, their history, their longings and their struggles to build some solid bases that allow them to maintain their identity in a world in which they perceive the imposition of dominant cultures. In the history of our Congregation there are marvelous chapters on missionaries who have become true specialists in the cultures of the places to which they have been sent. Even today the people recognize them as “their own,” expressing that sense of communion with the people that distinguished them, which is something that ought to be the most heartfelt desire of every missionary. We have to devote considerable time to learn the language of the place, to study its history, to feel proud of the history of its people and to share their dreams for the future. It is true that we have to do a critical reading of the history and the culture in question, but it should always be a reading that is touched by the love of a person who feels, at heart, a part of that people.

63. The dialogue with culture entails various demands. Culture evolves -- it is not static. Hence it keeps producing new paradigms of thought, new forms of living and of self-expression and new models of society. The dialogue with culture demands attention to reality and dedication to study. I believe that this is a word that all of us Claretians need to internalize more. Our programs of ongoing formation should contemplate an attention to cultural reality that can help us to acquire a language that is relevant to people and that enables us to take a critical and evangelical stance in face of the new cultural challenges of our society. There are some quite complex themes in which we do not have to be specialists, but we do need to know about them, because they are a source of concern for many persons who want to live up to the demands of their faith in this historic moment. Besides, without an attentive following of the cultural movements of our time, it will be very hard for us to engage in fruitful dialogue with today's people – a dialogue in which our word may shed light and awaken a genuine passion for the search for truth. In order to engage in serious and open dialogue with a culture, we have to love it. We can't just walk through life condemning everything. We have to be critical, certainly, but we have to love all of the great deal of goodness that there is in this world where we happen to live.

64. Finally, I am happy about the efforts that both the General Government and some Organisms are making in order to qualify their personnel and to create works that can have a strong impact in the area of theological, juridical and philosophical thought, or in the different spheres of culture and science. New Institutes of Higher Ecclesiastical Studies have been created and some projects aimed at the establishment of educational centers on the university level have been set in motion. These are very interesting projects that can help to make our evangelizing task more incisive. This should not make us forget, however, the commitment that we still maintain in the missions, which we want to keep consolidating and promoting with all our might.

### **The reorganization of the Congregation and its implications**

65. We have been speaking about the reorganization of the Congregation for several years. It is a theme that preoccupies many Congregations that are taking decisive steps in this sense. The General Chapter pronounced its views most clearly: “*Therefore, we choose as a priority in the government of the Congregation a more balanced and effective organization of our Organisms and the revision of apostolic positions*” (THL 26). And it asked the General Government, concretely, “*to act decisively and to lead the processes of reorganizing the Major Organisms and the revision of positions within each Organism, according to the criteria contained in our legislation*” (THL 74.1). We are attempting to deal responsibly with this mandate of the Chapter. It is a theme on which I spoke at the meeting of Major Superiors held in Vic in September of 2004, a year after the conclusion of the Chapter. I refer you to the text of the Dossier of the Encounter.<sup>39</sup> However, I want to recall in this circular letter the objectives and criteria that I set forth on that occasion, which were endorsed by all the Major Superiors and enriched with their contributions.

66. As for the *objectives* that we aim at in the process of reorganization, I stressed the following:

- a. To facilitate a better attention to the urgent missionary needs of our world.
- b. To assure the missionary vitality both of Organisms that are growing and of others that are shrinking in the number of personnel.
- c. To facilitate a better organization of communities and teams, with attention to the needs of their personnel and the demands of their apostolic work.
- d. To facilitate more significant pastoral projects and to help them to give a more decisive impulse to the revision of positions.
- e. To seek a better organization of the formation processes of the Organisms.
- f. To rationalize the number of persons dedicated to the exercise of government.
- g. To facilitate a better attention to houses and activities of general rule.

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<sup>39</sup> “*Dossier-Informe. Encuentro de Superiores Mayores.*” Vic (Spain) 2004. The booklet of the Dossier was sent to all the communities of the Congregation.

67. To carry out the reorganization there should be some *criteria* that allow us to overcome the difficulties in processes of this sort and to advance to a reasonable pace toward the fulfillment of the objectives proposed. We point out the following criteria:

- a. To take into account the statistics of the personnel of the Organisms and the outlook for the future, with reference both to their vocational situation and to the age of the members.
- b. To take care that in projects of reorganization the cultural characteristics of the Organisms are respected.
- c. To contribute to the consolidation of new foundations.
- d. To take care that the reorganization of Organisms is accompanied by the revision of positions.
- e. To give importance to dialogue with the members of the Organisms involved, especially with their Governments, who will most likely be the animators of these processes in their Provinces or Delegations.
- f. To inform, insofar as it affects them, the laity who form part of the animation teams of the different pastoral areas of the Organisms, about the processes of reorganization.
- g. To set in motion processes with clear short-term (less than three years) and middle-term (up to six years) objectives that will allow them to advance toward the proposed goals and to evaluate the steps that are being taken.

68. On the theme of the revision of Organisms, important steps were taken in the preceding six-year periods and they have continued in the first three years of the mandate of this General Government. Limiting ourselves to these last three years, the Independent Delegations of Indonesia-East Timor and of Central Africa have already been constituted. We have already determined the date of constitution of the new Province of Santiago, in Spain, which will join into one the three present Provinces of Aragón, Castile and León. The processes for the constitution of the Independent Delegations of Northeastern India and Northwest Nigeria have been drawn up. The General Government has also set about revising the houses and activities that depend directly on it. The house and works of Buen Suceso in Madrid (Spain) will pass to the new Province of Santiago. In Rome we are seeking a reorganization of the houses dependent on the General Government and we foresee integrating some other works and missions that are under the direct care of the General Government into the Major Organisms of the zone. We are enhancing the coordination of the formation and pastoral programs of the Missions of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, with the thought of constituting a future Claretian Delegation or Province of East Africa.

69. Some Provinces and Delegations, although at different rhythms, are committed to process of reflecting on a possible restructuring. These are open processes in which we, keeping in mind the criteria established, are looking for the best solution in view of the objectives assigned.

70. Reorganization, above all when it involves joining various Organisms into only one, entails considerable difficulties. A Province or a Delegation is not simply a sum of



houses, activities and individuals. It is a living reality in which its members know one another and have lived together and in which what we might call a “provincial culture” has been created. Hence the thought of taking the step toward something new can be frightening, because one fears to lose what one has, without the security of gaining something more positive. It is impossible to advance in this process if we are not able to situate ourselves in a more universal perspective. It is very hard to convince ourselves of the need to create these new structures if we do not analyze in depth the challenges of mission and the real possibilities that we have of responding to them. An in-depth reflection will surely show us that the capacity to respond to the new challenges of mission and of formation increases when we can avail ourselves of more ample bases for designing our projects. The very nature of a missionary Congregation demands flexibility in determining its organizational structures, which must always be subject to a process of revision in terms of its missionary objective. Besides, there is a certain inertia that leads us to accommodate ourselves, to not changing, especially when the years that we have remained in one site or the time that a determined structure has been in existence become longer and longer. Prolonged permanence in the same place or the years of a structure’s duration are not, in themselves, either good or bad. It all depends on the demands of the mission entrusted to us, which sometimes demands stability. But we must carefully see to it that this does not diminish the availability that is proper of the missionary life.

71. To oppose these processes of reorganization some have brought up the wounds that were suffered, years before, in the division of Provinces and Delegations that are now being asked to reflect, among other possibilities, on their fusion into a new Organism. I can certainly understand their fear of being immersed once more in the sorrowful experiences of other times. The wounds need to be healed, but generally speaking, there has been time enough for this. I think that these circumstances should not constitute a reason for blocking the new future possibilities that are opening up at this moment. Now we must face the future with a new spirit, drawing to the center of our heart the reality that unites us, the Claretian charism, and the reality that gives meaning to our life, the mission of announcing the Gospel. I believe that with an open spirit it is possible for us to advance in the direction indicated to us by the General Chapter and to do so in relatively short times.

72. As for the General Government, we will keep working along this line in the normal dynamics of the exercise of governance: canonical visits and Provincial Chapters and Assemblies. But we are not going to neglect visits of animation or participating in significant moments in the life of Provinces and Delegations, such as retreats, meetings of superiors and other forums that help them to internalize the decisions made and to foster the necessary attitudes for carrying them out.

73. Connected with this theme is that of whether the Congregation should or should not remain in places where the average age of the Claretians who form are part of an Organism is quite high and where vocation prospects are not promising. Should we main present in such places? Does it make sense to continue our efforts to maintain a presence in a place when, in the final analysis, we do not know how long it will last? I am referring mainly to some presences in Europe and America, and perhaps to one or another in East

Asia. The General Chapter told us: *“The General Government will see to it that each Organism has sufficient personnel and the resources necessary to adequately develop their own project of life and mission, in accord with these Chapter directives: (THL 74,2).* Before determining the strategies that are going to make it possible for the Congregation’s continuance in these places, it is right to ask about the opportuneness of these presences. I am convinced that many of these presences are very important for the present moment in the life of the Congregation.

74. Three main reasons move me to make this statement. First of all, there are some obviously urgent pastoral needs. In the case of Europe, for example, it is necessary for us to redouble our missionary efforts on behalf of peoples who are building their future on the margin of the religious dimension that is present in the heart of every human being and is a decisive factor in the true humanization of society. We have to return their soul to many European societies, so that they may not abandon their solidarity and so that they may learn to appreciate the gift of life and put themselves at its service. We have to accompany those people who, in the midst of this new cultural situation, are making an effort to deepen their faith experience and to orient their whole life around it. A second reason involves congregational strategy. No one is unaware of the fact that, thanks to the generosity of the German Province, many of today’s Claretians are able to keep exercising their mission of the poor in various parts of the world. Likewise, we are all agreed in affirming the importance of our presence in France at a time when the Congregation is experiencing a notable growth in the nations of French-speaking Africa. These are just two examples. Finally, there is a third motive that leads me to affirm the need of remaining significantly present in Europe and America, and that is the deepening of intercultural dialogue in the heart of the Institute, I am surely enthused to see how the voice of Asia and Africa is growing and becoming consolidate in the Congregation as a whole. In order to develop a true intercultural dialogue we need to take these steps. But our dialogue would remain very limited and our Congregation would be tremendously impoverished if the voice of America and of Europe were weakened until it became almost imperceptible in the overall life of the Institute. America and Europe continue to be sources of thought and generators of culture. And it is important that this voice be kept alive within the great dialogue that must enrich all of us.

75. I do not have the least doubt that the problem of a shortage of priests as foreseen, for example, in the European Church, should find its solution in new pastoral and disciplinary approaches in its own bosom. We cannot seek this solution simply by sending in priests from other parts of the world. But neither do I doubt that the presence of our brothers from other geographic zones of the Congregation in the Provinces and Delegations of Europe or America can facilitate the continuation of a relevant missionary activity in those places, which will, moreover, be enriched by their contribution. As I already said, they are going to be asked to make an important effort to become inculturated among the new peoples to whom they are being sent; and those who receive them will be obliged to have an attitude of openness and of deep fraternal feeling. Now if we want these assignments to be significant in the sense that I have been talking about, it only remains to hope that the commitment of those assigned will envision a prolonged

permanence. This is the reason for orientation toward the incardination of those assigned into these Provinces and Delegations.

### **Called to share**

76. It still remains for me to comment on another priority pointed out by the General Chapter relating to the economy of the Congregation. The Chapter established: *“Therefore, we chooses as a priority a greater solidarity of Major Organisms with the General Government and that the General Government increase as much as possible its own patrimony and funds so as to respond to the global needs of the Congregation”* (THL 63).

77. Congregational statistics show a tendency of growth in zones of the world that are most marked by economic difficulties and a tendency of decline in zones that are most well off. This undoubtedly has a strong impact of the economy of the Congregation. Whereas only a few years ago about 75% of the Congregation has to support 25% economically, this ratio is presently undergoing some notable changes. It may be that at the end of the present sexennium the ratio may be state in terms of 50%: one half will have to support the other half.

78. Both in the meeting of the General Government with the Major Superiors, held in Vic in September of 2004, and in the Encounter of Provincial Economes held in Colmenar Viejo in September of 2005, the theme of economy was studied in depth. In the last circular letter that I sent to you after the intensive sessions of the General Government last March, I pointed out to you some of the projects that we are promoting. These could not be understood unless we situated them in a universal congregational perspective and felt the needs of the new Organisms as something that also affects each one of us. Because we mission challenges us and because we are interested in the future of the Congregation, we take these steps that are going to involve sacrifices for some. We take great care to see to it that the activities affected by these changes do not suffer; on the contrary, in dialogue with the interested parties, we will strive to see to it that these changes should be converted into an opportunity for renewal and for opening up these activities to new horizons.

79. I want to insist on what I said to the Provincial Economes gathered in Colmenar Viejo last year. I reminded them of some principles and lines of action that I considered and still consider as crucial for the Congregation at this time in the area of economy:

- a. Affirmation in personal and community life of the values we assumed on consecrating ourselves to God in our religious profession and in committing ourselves to observe the Constitutions with all possible care. I have said it repeatedly: this is the basis, the condition “sine qua non.” Without a fidelity to these values, lived in profound joy, it will not be possible to advance in this field.
- b. A more universal and inclusive congregational outlook that will allow us to feel the needs of others as our own.

- c. Serious and rigorous economic planning, which is impossible without a strict budgetary discipline and a continual control of the application of budgets.
- d. Programming a further effort to optimize the income of the patrimony and other economic resources.
- e. Strengthening the General Administration.
- f. Organizing a solid Mission Procure both on the general level as well as in each one of the Organisms.
- g. Close accompaniment on the part of the General Government of Organisms that are not economically self-sufficient.
- h. Studying and applying the norms of Part IV of the Directory, which deals with the organization of economy in the Congregation.
- i. Integrating the theme of economy into the processes of initial formation.

80. Our economy must always be open to a dimension of solidarity with the poor. This is an aspect that cannot be lacking and one that should find some resonance in our attitudes and some concrete expression in our budgets and in our lifestyle. In canonical visits and in meetings to evaluate our community life, we should confront this theme and see how we are expressing this dimension of solidarity, which is an essential part of the demands of Christian life.

## **CONCLUSION**

81. We are still living in the liturgical time of Easter. During these last weeks we have been accompanied especially by three books of Scripture: the Gospel of John, the Acts of the Apostles and the Apocalypse. In them we find some keys that invite us to live the present with a profound attitude of faith and to face the future filled with hope. The Gospel of John has kept introducing us into the mystery of communion with Jesus and with his project. The marvelous meditation that John puts on Jesus' lips in the context of the Last Supper brings close to us the very beating of the Master's Heart, which John himself listened to that night: a communion of love that steep us in the experience of the Father's love and opens us up to the fraternal love that distinguishes the community of Jesus' disciples. The Lord promises us his Spirit, who transforms our hearts and opens our minds to understand his Paschal Mystery. The Acts of the Apostles has brought us close to the walk of the first Christian community, characterized by listening to the Word and the breaking of the bread – the memorial of the paschal self-gift of the Lord, the communion of hearts and of goods, and projection into mission. The book of the Apocalypse increases our longing for new heavens and a new earth where our hearts' desire for love will be fully satisfied by the experience of the tenderness of the heavenly Father who himself wipes away our tears and spurs us on to the commitment to be today, in the here and now of our history, credible signs of the homeland we all yearn for.

82. Mary has accompanied us as an icon of total trust in the love of the Father. At the foot of the cross she kept repeating her Magnificat, accompanied on this occasion by the weeping of a Mother who loses her Son, but is sustained by her unfailing trust in God's

promise to his People. To Her, to her Heart filled with the Spirit, we entrust our present and our future.

83. I conclude by recalling that definition of the missionary that our Father Founder gave us and which he wanted each one of us to carry around with us always: *“A Son of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is a man on fire with love, who spreads its flames wherever he goes. He desires mightily and strives by all means possible to set everyone on fire with God’s love. Nothing daunts him: he delights in privations, welcomes work, embraces sacrifices, smiles at slander, rejoices in all the torments and sorrows he suffers, and glories in the cross of Jesus Christ. His only concern is how he may follow Christ and imitate him in praying, working, suffering and striving constantly and solely for the greater glory of God and the salvation of humankind”* (CC 9). These words show us clearly the future toward which we should walk. Rereading them and living them in the different contexts in which we, the members of the Congregation, are living today, demands great daring and generosity. I ask the Lord that we may not be lacking in them. Our capacity to generate a future that is at once new and fully faithful to our charismatic sources will depend on our commitment to make this vision of our Founder a reality in our own lives.

Rome, 31 May 2006  
Feast of the Visitation of Mary

Josep M. Abella Battle, cmf.  
Superior General