

Are we credible witnesses of the Joy of the Gospel?

Our Congregational journey after the XXV General Chapter

Letter of the Superior General after Council Meetings of October 2018

Dear brothers,

The General Government completed half of its mandate in September 2018. We have taken this moment for an honest evaluation of our journey as a Congregation in the direction that the XXV General Chapter and the pontificate of Pope Francis have invited us to undertake. We also tried to objectify our own service of authority by getting feedback from the Provincial Governments and others besides our own self-evaluation. I also invited the Major Organisms to undertake a similar process to see where we stand in relation to the call of the General Chapter. When we compete with our own previous level of functioning as individuals and as communities, we can walk forward without being settled in habitual and obsolete ways of living and missioning. Often, the sense of complacency and self-assured wellbeing about ourselves turns off the inner radar that tunes us to the working of the Holy Spirit in our persons and in the Congregation.

1. The health of the Congregation

In general, we experience the gift of reasonably good missionary health in the Congregation evident in the self-giving life of many of our missionaries in different peripheries of the world. It is also seen in the beautiful way our elderly missionaries spend the evening of their lives praying and suffering without losing the joy of their vocation, and availing their service in the measure their health permits. It is edifying to see how many of them at the end of their lives surrender their spirit to the Lord leaving behind the fragrance of a holy life lived for the Lord and his people. Our charismatic health and holiness depend on how free we are to allow the Spirit of Christ to guide us in active ministry and in retirement, in joy and sorrow, in achievement and failure, and admiration and accusation. Pope Francis reminds us, “Do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Holiness does not make you less human, since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God’s grace”¹. Our path to holiness is Claretian.

We come across difficulties, inter-personal conflicts, tensions in teamwork as well as the threat of persecutions and animosity poised against the Church in some contexts. We too have our share in wounding the mystical body of Christ by failing the mission of the Church and the Congregation to bring life to the last and the least. Unaddressed sins and aberrations of the sons of the Congregation erode the vitality and credibility of missionary life and keep wounding themselves and others even after decades. Our limitations and sins challenge us to be humble, vigilant and invite us to walk on the road of holiness.

2. The service of the General Government

I thank the Major Superiors for their feedback in the biannual reports about the service of authority exercised by the General Government. Most of you commented that the General Government team was working single-mindedly for the good of the Congregation complementing each other with their gifts and talents. I am grateful to God for each of the Consultors and the love and commitment they have for the Congregation. We thank the Lord for the spirit of teamwork among us and the way we work with our differences for the common good. We realize that the common ground of authentic

¹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 34.

love for the Lord and the Congregation brings our diversities into a harmonious unity. We have also taken time to give and receive feedback from one another in order to improve our service to the Congregation and the Church. We are aware we can walk the talk only by confronting our own shadows and limitations and take care of our continuous formation and conversion.

In the reports, many Major Superiors expressed that they would like closer accompaniment from the General Government. There was also one opinion to give more space for subsidiarity to the Government of the Major Organism. To achieve the right balance of subsidiarity and subordination, coordination and collaboration, encouragement and intervention we need to make honest communication and open dialogue very natural in our everyday life. We shall strive to be a “sacrament of presence” (visible sign of God’s love, care and correction) to each other through community discernment and mutual accompaniment creating a “culture of encounter” as termed by Pope Francis. This “culture of encounter” which values presence, relationship and dialogue is important for healthy community life and effective apostolates.

During one of my visits a curious Claretian asked me what was the most difficult thing for a Superior General. The spontaneous response that sparked in me was, “The most difficult thing for me as Superior General is to protect the Congregation from myself: from my own likes, dislikes and idiosyncrasies”. It is to say that in the Congregation the Spirit of Christ should command and guide the course of our journey forward. I think this is valid for not only the Superior General, but also for the Major Superiors, local superiors, parish priests, directors of institutions, and all forms of leadership in the Congregation. Hence, discernment and accompaniment should be integral to our form of life.

I am certain that only by consciously tuning constantly to the Lord and the gift of his Spirit that we can live truly as his missionaries. We need to learn the art of listening, discernment and mutual accompaniment to heed God’s call and be willing to be sent in mission. Often it is difficult to harmonize the God-given wisdom of different points of view and the right role of emotions and reasoning to arrive at what is true and good in each situation. We need the fire of God’s love to open in our hearts a large holding space to contain our diversities and vulnerabilities and bring out the best of life and love into our communities and into the ministry. Without the love of Christ, personal differences and fragilities work in favour of the devil who designs divisions and destruction. Roles compete rather than cooperate to reach the goal. The norms of the Church and the Congregation give us orientations to deal with delicate situations and boundary violations. I ask the Lord for wisdom of heart to discern the way of the Lord for our times and walk forth courageously to those peripheries where He wants us to be present.

3. Our Congregational Journey after the XXV General Chapter

Most Major Organisms conducted their chapters and assemblies within the two years after the General Chapter. It has helped the Major Organisms to walk forth in the spirit of the General Chapter. The three processes of transformation have become part of the normal way of planning and evaluating in the Major Organisms. I have asked the Major Superiors to evaluate the life and mission of the respective organisms based on the three processes of transformation. We will be able to know how far we have walked the talk after getting the reports from the Major Organisms.

3.1. A Congregation going forth

All the Major Organisms have created suitable structures to reinforce youth and vocation ministry. The online course on youth ministry and vocations, and the workshop now being held in Rome (November 18-28) are significant steps to enhance this ministry. The work we do together with other branches of the Claretian Family is very fruitful. As a Congregation, we shall imbibe the spirit of the

recent Synod of Bishops on “Young People, Faith and Vocation Discernment” and walk with the young people to radiate the joy of our Faith in Christ. We shall let the youth challenge us out of our slumber, and we shall accompany them on new roads to the future in the charismatic spirit of our Founder.

There have been closer accompaniment and coordination in the area of our service to consecrated life, publications and Bible ministry. Different conferences have different rhythms of growth in the Bible ministry. The Conference of MICLA held the Bible Assembly (ReBiClar) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 15-26 May 2018. It strengthened the resolve to work in collaboration and benefit from initiatives such as IBICLA (Instituto Bíblico Claretiano para las Américas), an initiative of USA-Canada Province, which is affiliated to Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago. Continental workshops on Bible Ministry will be held in Asia in 2019. *Claret Publishing Group*, in their meeting in Bangalore in January 2018, resolved to collaborate closely and start the *Claret Digital Project* to make use of the digital platform to reach a wider audience including the Youth. Our service in the area of Consecrated life is progressing as we have laid foundations for TICLA (Theological Institute of Consecrated life in Africa) in Abuja, Nigeria, with workshops on Consecrated life. The initiative to contribute to the reflection on and the support for Consecrated life in America is being taken at the level of MICLA. We shall follow the spirit of our Founder who was committed to the evangelization of evangelizers.

We are making efforts to be a Congregation going forth to the peripheries through the different apostolic platforms. The encounter of Claretian evangelizers in the peripheries held in Guatemala from 28 May-2 June 2018 was to deepen our good practices and reflection in this direction. The main conferences, multimedia witnesses and other resources made by the participants are available at www.apostoladocmf.org. “Solidarity and Mission” is gaining gradually more momentum and space as a joint effort with those seeking the transformation of the world. The Prefecture of Apostolate with the Secretariat of JPIC, the Claretian presence at the United Nations and the Mission Procure, have been organizing and offering workshops on this new dynamic at the level of the Conferences (Nairobi, Kenya – ACLA, Quezon City, Philippines – ASCLA EAST, Bangalore, India – ASCLA WEST). More are planned for the upcoming years. Evangelization through education has been a preferential option in so many new Major Organisms. Besides all the new schools built on the last years, a good number of Claretians have been trained and skilled in such ministry. Claretian Educational Exchanges between Africa and Europe (Santiago Province) just began as a unique opportunity to learn together and to grow in networking. A Congress of Educators from the Claretian Family in Africa (scheduled for the first week of November 2020) has begun to be prepared in Equatorial Guinea. The new SOS fund for emergencies and natural disasters functioned well on two occasions that sought help. They were flood situations in Kenya and India respectively. The generosity was well appreciated and crucial to respond immediately and properly.

The parishes entrusted to the Claretians are authentic missionary platforms of new evangelization and an arena to enrich the local Church with our presence. The six charismatic traits in mission are nowadays a good mirror of pastoral discernment, planning and evaluation. It is sad to see a Claretian church remaining closed outside of liturgical celebrations. I would suggest that there be a praying zone in our Churches for the people to enter any time during the day and pray to the Lord, while assuring security for them and for the goods of the Church.

It gives me joy to see our missionaries available and very close to the people they serve, sharing leadership roles with others, and being so committed and creative in their initiatives to respond to God and to their neighbours. All our apostolic ventures need passion, vision and strategies in line with pastoral conversion. Recalling the life of our Founder, we shall keep our hearts on fire with passion for Christ and passion for humanity.

3.2. Being a community of witnesses and messengers

Fraternal life in communities is progressively valued as an effective witness of the Gospel. There is better recognition of the richness of intercultural communities, which are on the rise in the Congregation. However, an area that continues to be a concern for many Major Superiors is the fragility of many of our communities. There is a growing number of “two-member communities” in many Major Organisms for various reasons. The “one-man” projects that allow no space for community is also a concern. There is an urgent need to address these situations.

When teamwork tends to be conflict provoking, councils and leadership teams function as a collection of responsibilities without the necessary shared vision, dialogue and collective discernment of action steps. It is not rare to see community members with different responsibilities (superiors, economes, parish priests and assistants etc.) live together under the same roof with wounded hearts and wounding attitudes in spite of good will. We need to grow the Claretian community mystique in these communities, which help us accept and transcend the normal frustrations and miscommunications of inter-personal relationships. Claret’s attitudes and approach to living in community with different kinds of personalities offer us a good example of living the Claretian spirit of community². Of course, our times are different. The modern cult of self that promotes personal style, self-advancement and self-realization have also made their entry into our communities through the backdoor.

As a response to the mandate of the General Chapter (Cf. MS 70.5) we shall together take up a program of reflection to enhance the quality of our community living by making use of the monthly community moments (recollection, ongoing formation etc.) in the year 2020. It could be our way of honouring our Founder in the year of his 150th anniversary of his death.

There is remarkable progress in the economic functioning of the Major Organisms. A few of the Major Organisms need to improve in the sharing of goods from the communities. In general, we have a healthy and responsible way of handling the temporal goods of the Congregation. Economic Self - sustenance is still a major difficulty in some of the young Major Organisms. The generous sharing of goods in the Congregation helps us to meet both ends. The need to prepare Claretians to administer the economy effectively and responsibly as Custodians of the temporal goods is being addressed by the online course for economes.

The pilot course for economes that began in March 2018 is coming to its completion in December 2018. There were 20 participants who began it but only 10 continued to the second semester. The normal course started in September 2018 with 100 participants in three languages: Spanish, English and Portuguese. I invite the Major Superiors to look into why the participants from their Organism fall away as the course is on progress and how can we help the participants to run a good race and complete the course. The mini version of the course should be made part of initial formation. We are facing economic challenges as political conditions in some countries impede the sharing of goods.

Though there is growth in communication technology, we have difficulties getting news in time for NUNC. Secretaries of the Major Organisms are often over loaded with responsibilities or due to lack of expertise fail to feed data into SECLAR. It results in communicating wrong information about us. For example, the statistics published by the Vatican about Claretians was far below the real number. I ask the secretaries to give timely information and update your websites regularly.

² Cf. Auto 691-613 and note how Claret speaks of his companions. He writes, “I often wondered how it was possible for so much peace, joy and harmony to reign so long a time among us in such a large group. I always ended up saying the same thing, *It is the finger of God*”. (Aut 609).

3.3. Men who adore God in the Spirit

The preparation of the program of “The Claretian Year” meant for 2019 to help us know and love our Founder and our history is nearing completion. This program is not specific to any particular year. Hence, it can start at any time and any year. Nonetheless, we shall start the program on a suitable date in 2019 when the material will be made accessible to our members.

We find the renewed forge program forming more Claretians in the Spirit of our charism. The Congregation has invested personnel and money to realize this project with the help of the Santiago Province. I hear very positively things about the program from the participants. You will know better from the fruits the participants bear in their respective Organisms. I invite all the Major Organisms to send missionaries who could benefit from it and contribute to the life and mission of your Provinces/Delegations.

Many of us think of formation in terms of initial formation. Here we need a paradigm shift. There is only a single formative Claretian journey that covers one’s entire life. Of course, there are different phases in it. We are more concerned about ongoing formation which suffers discontinuity with the initial formation and many vital life issues are processed without adequate support and fraternal accompaniment when they occur at different stages of life. Our missionaries go through many trials and temptations, and the issues of loneliness and activism. We should take each phase of life as important moments of spiritual and pastoral conversion. The plan of formation is now being revised and this holistic approach should be sufficiently integrated into the plan. The renewed plan of formation will have also a workbook of practical applications. The *Heart of Mary School of Formators* and the course of formative accompaniment are two of the Congregational projects to support the formation of formators. We should continue to give priority to the selection and formation of formators in all the Major Organisms.

All formative processes should aim at helping the formandi to cultivate a lively and intimate relationship with Christ and a filial relationship with the Heart of Mary. Our formation should enable us to love the Church and present the authentic face of the spouse of Christ to the world. Pope Francis said at the end of the recent Synod of Bishops, “our Mother is Holy, but we children are sinners.... And this is why it is time to defend the Mother and the Mother is defended from the Great Accuser with prayer and penance”. I recall how our martyr brothers loved and sang for the Church in the midst of violent persecutions and martyrdom.

4. Sexual scandals in the Church and the lessons they give us

One of the painful moments that the Major Superiors and the Superior General go through in our responsibility is facing the situation of scandals and abusive behaviours of some of our confreres (both living and dead) and the consequent damage in the lives of many people. We have clear norms of the Church and the Congregation that prescribe honest investigation and action to reach out to the victims to support their healing, take appropriate legal actions, and prevent any future occurrences. Often the abuser himself carries the wounds of his own story of abuse and spiritual or moral collapse. I believe we should draw very important lessons from the painful situation that the Church is facing in this regard. Most cases of abuse of minors in the Church occurred in the last quarter of the last century, an epoch of many changes in moral and sexual mores in the society. There was also serious ignorance about the pathology of the abuses. It was a time chastity and virginity were ridiculed and trivialized. Promiscuity and pornography began to be revered as adult recreations while virginity was scorned as loveless life. Healthy solitude and silence gave way to noise and emptiness. Many unhappy celibates fell into the traps that the goons of the sex market set to lure the weak to sexual diversions and addictions. Even respected people fell for their charm. The present generation, in spite of better knowledge, is challenged by more sophisticated allurements to diversion and addiction. We already

have instances that causes concern about the abuse of social media and the internet. Economic abuse is another social pathology that was also identified in the ranks of clergy and religious. Our communities should discuss these matters openly without waiting for the worst to happen. I consider that the following lessons should be taken from the scandals in the Church.

1. We need to grow in our own appreciation for the beauty and joy of virginity received as a gift from God that characterizes our consecrated life. We should enjoy the “fecundity of virginity” in our community and ministry, and chaste love in our relationships. What is not loved cannot be lived.
2. We need to cultivate the necessary alertness and vigilance as well psychological and social conditions that help us to live our vows meaningfully (Cf. CC 22). Healthy austerity, formative accompaniment in the maturing process of affectivity, professional support to deal with past wounds, and mature use of social media must be part of our congregational culture.
3. We need to care for one another in supporting the life and ministry of each other. The cult of “privacy” provided hiding space for addictions. The brothers in the community are the first to see the red alerts of the corrosion of the spirit of a confrere who may be dancing like the drunken captain of a sinking ship. Often these signs march in legion: Lack of prayer, absence in community, lack of transparency, enduring melancholy, covert associations with particular persons, aggressiveness towards superiors etc.: Let us not forget the adage, “a stitch in time saves nine”.

5. Canonical visits of 2018

The General Government held canonical visits in the continent of Asia where vast majority of humans live and the Claretian presence is improving progressively. Asia needs to contribute to the universal Congregation from its Asian cultural and religious richness. The meeting of the Governments of Major Organisms with the General Government will be held in December in Indonesia to explore ways of greater collaboration and networking among the Claretians at the level of Asia.

6. The major deliberations and decisions of the council sessions of October 2018

6.1.Reorganization of our Claretian Presence

- 1) Constitution of the Province of Fatima to begin on 1st January 2019 and naming the Provincial Government consisting of Fr. Carlos Candeias (Superior Provincial), Manuel Segura (Provincial Econome), Paul Smyth, Jorge Sánchez, João Luís Escaleira Alves (Consultors).
- 2) Constitution of the Independent Delegation of Angola-São Tomé e Príncipe to take effect from 1st January 2019.
- 3) Decision to Constitute the Independent Delegations of Kolkata in July of 2019 and Sri Lanka in the end of 2019 or the beginning of 2020. The New Major Organisms may choose names not identified to a nation.
- 4) Permission to start a Claretian presence in Bangladesh as a response to the petition from the Province of Chennai.

6.2. Special Programs under implementation

- 1) Claretian educational exchanges between Africa and Europe (Santiago): two groups from Africa will go to Spain (10-18 November 2018, 10-18 February 2019); a group from Santiago will go to Africa (November 2019). Fr. Artur Teixeira and Fr. Miguel Ángel Velasco coordinate the program.
- 2) Workshop on Accompaniment for Formators, Brazil from 20-29 November 2018 directed by Fr. Leo Dalmao and Carlos Sánchez.
- 3) Formation for youth program in Rome November, 19- 28, 2018. Coordinated by the Claretian Family under the General Prefecture of Youth and Vocations.
- 4) A Congress on the Heart of Mary was planned in Rome from 22-24 February 2019 as a joint endeavour of the Congregations charismatically related to the Heart of Mary especially Eudists, Good Shepherd Sisters and Claretians. The concluding Mass will be in the Basilica of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Rome on 24th February 2019.

6.3. Important encounters and projects planned for 2019-2020

- 1) Meeting of the Governments of Major Organisms of America and the General Government in Medellin, Colombia, on 1-12 December 2019.
- 2) Meeting of the Major Superiors for the preparation of the next General Chapter and to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Claretians arrival in America in Santiago de Chile. January 2020.
- 3) Workshop on Interculturality and Mission Sending for the missionaries assigned to universal mission. September 2019.
- 4) Project of the “The Claretian Year” to be launched in 2019.
- 5) A project in 2020 for an inter-disciplinary reflection regarding community life as experienced at all levels (local, provincial/delegation and worldwide (MS 70.5). A commission Consisting of Carlos Verga, José Cristo Rey García, Callistus Joseph, Emmanuel Edeh and Paulson Veliyannoor is formed to prepare the program.

6.4. Other deliberations and decisions

- 1) *Protocol for Investment* by the General Government prepared by the Economic Council was studied and approved.
- 2) The *Statutes of the Archconfraternity of the Heart of Mary* was renewed and accommodated to our times and approved “ad experimentum” for three years. It could be made use of for promoting Cordimarian spirituality in our parishes.
- 3) Approval of the initiative of MICLA to start a *Centre for promoting the Theology of Consecrated Life* based in Bogota, Colombia. A team of three missionaries, Frs. Carlos Julio Rozo (Colombia-Ecuador), Antonio Santillán (San Jose del Sur) and Alfredo Plaza (Colombia-Venezuela) are nominated as proposed in the Meeting that Fr. Superior General held with a committee of Provincials and the Vice-President of MICLA.

- 4) Approval of the starting of a *Claretian University* in Nigeria after the meeting of the General Government with the Provincial Superior of East Nigeria and the President of the Steering Committee of the Education trust. The University is to start in a modest way within our possibilities suited to the context and need of the mission.
- 5) The reform of the *Statutes of Fundus Credititius* in Rome proposed by the Economic Council was studied and approved.
- 6) The *Statutes of the Aid Fund* were also reviewed and approved with modifications.
- 7) The *Claretian Mission Day* to be celebrated in all our missions on the second Sunday after Easter, (Sunday of Divine Mercy) to create awareness of Claretian Missions and raise funds to support them, unless a more suitable date is fixed by a Major Organism with the approval of the General Government.

7. A few Final thoughts

There has been lot of reflection in the Church about “the path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the third millennium”³. Missionary synodality is the manner of living and working in the Church which differs from the model of democracy or autocracy. It is a way of living and acting as God’s children with the involvement and participation of the whole people of God in the life and mission of the Church. Our way of living and acting should also be informed by this growing consciousness of the ecclesiology of communion. Applied to our Institute, it means that the whole Congregation together with all the members is the subject of the Claretian mission in the world. The different roles and functions act complementarily towards it. Our fraternal communion harmoniously integrates the universal and local dimension of our charism. Each cultural and personal specificity is lived deeply and inserted into the transcendent gift of our charism. The charism finds “flesh” in each missionary and in each ecclesial milieu. This sense of communion and joint responsibility makes it possible for effective sending of missionaries from one part of the world to another. We hope to have more fruitful sharing of personnel and resources to fulfil our mission in the world in an integral way.

Pope Francis has declared the Month of October 2019 as an extraordinary Mission Month. As we walk forward, these special moments in the Church prepare us to qualify our missionary presence in the world. The 150th anniversary of the arrival of Claretians sent in mission to America (1870) is an occasion for us to focus on what it means to be a missionary in our times. Entrusting us with the missionary mandate, our Founder consummated the mission of his life in that same year. His life sheds light on the way we walk forward with the motto “*Caritas Christi Urget nos!*”.

Mathew Vattamattam cmf
Superior General

Rome, November 20, 2018

³ Cf. Pope Francis, 17th October 2015, AAS 107 (2015) 1139).