

CLARETIAN MAJOR SUPERIORS MEET (MSM)

Nairobi, 4-18 September 2022

ADDRESS OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL

Dear brothers,

We celebrated the XXVI General Chapter in the context of the global pandemic and experienced the hand of the Loving Lord leading us. With you, I would like to read it as a sign from God inviting us to trust him and walk forth amidst the many challenges of our times with courage. We can convincingly communicate the joy of the Gospel to others only when we have heard, seen, and touched the life-giving presence of the Risen Lord in our lives.

Undoubtedly, we are passing through very challenging times of unprecedented changes in human history with unbelievable technological successes in every field. The hopes with which humanity stepped into the third millennium with the lessons learned from the last century wounded by two world wars and untold bloodshed, were soon eclipsed with the 9/11 attacks in the US and the consequent security issues worldwide and the escalation of conflicts among nations amounting to what the Pope termed, a real “third world war fought piecemeal”¹. The current war in Ukraine is affecting the world economy and balance of power. The health of the planet earth is deteriorating, causing global warming and frequent natural disasters. The global pandemic covid-19, after having shocked the world with its deadly blow in the last two years, is now taking its place on the list of common viruses. What I consider most alarming is the confusion between facts and their interpretations/ misinterpretations and the erosion of commonly accepted ethical principles in social life. Pope Benedict XVI termed this situation the “dictatorship of relativism”, which “does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely on one's ego and desires”². In the abundance of information and news created and circulated on social media, it is often difficult to distinguish truth from lies, news from fake news as the manufactured “post-truth” prevails over facts.

The Church too triumphantly entered the new millennium with the firm pontificate of St. John Paul II, but the euphoria did not last long. The explosion of scandals and abuses within the ranks of clergy questioned the credibility of the Church and humiliated her in public. The ills of society also crept into the Church through her children and debilitated her prophetic voice in the world. The divisions in the hierarchy in the different contexts impeded their joint efforts to fight the evils in society³.

The Lord of history acts in favor of his people in diverse ways through events and persons constantly inviting the Children of God to return to covenantal love. The various reforms in the Church initiated by Pope Francis are providential and opportune responses to the ills of our times. The magisterium of the Pope has touched on the core dimensions of the life and

¹ Message for the 2016 World Day of Peace (8 December 2015).

² Benedict XVI, in the opening Mass of the conclave *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, April 2005.

³ For example traditionalists against Pope Francis, divided hierarchy in Cameroun and Sri-Lanka in the conflicts, Indian Church regarding liturgy and other issues, the political crisis in Nicaragua, German Church in relation to Universal Church, etc.

mission of the Church: Mission of the Church (*Evangelii Gaudium*), care for the poor and the common home (*Laudato si'*), protection of family bond (*Amoris Laetitia*), attention to the youth (*Christus Vivit*), the holiness of life (*Gaudete et Exultate*) and social friendship (*Fratelli Tutti*). Pope repeatedly called the Church to dream, to be joyful witnesses of the Gospel, to go to the peripheries of human struggles, to accompany one another and the people of God, to discern God's will for our times together, and to walk the synodal path.

The four principles of discernment highlighted by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*⁴ invite us to create a culture of discernment and collective progress in society based on these principles. He also called evangelizers to move from clericalism to vocation to service, worldliness to authentic discipleship, and comfort zones to peripheries.

For Your Reflection

- *What are the three most important factors happening in the world that make you rejoice as a missionary? (gifts of God for our world today)*
- *What are the three things that you would consider the most important challenges that the missionaries need to face in the world and the Church today?*

The General Chapter and its Important Invitations to the Congregation

1. To be Rooted in Christ and be Audacious in mission

To be rooted in Christ and be audacious in the mission are the two essential sides of authentic missionary life. Without roots, we cannot be audacious, and there cannot be a rootedness in the Lord without being affected and moved by the suffering of humanity. The acid test of our missionary authenticity is how each of us fares on these two factors. Our Founder used the image of the compass with one leg firmly fixed at the center of Jesus and the other freely moving in the various apostolates⁵. The words of Pope Francis to priests at Chrism Mass in 2013 are valid for us missionaries: "It is not a bad thing that reality itself forces us to 'put out into the deep, where what we are by grace is seen as pure grace, out into the deep of the contemporary world, where the only thing that counts is 'unction' - not function - and the nets which overflow with fish are those cast solely in the name of the One in whom we have put our trust: Jesus". The beauty of our beloved Congregation is in the holiness of our missionaries as they minister to others, rooted in Christ.

2. Audacious Rootedness in Christ

We have a beautiful charism to draw energy from, which our Founder himself exemplified in his untiring missionary commitment. The lives of numerous Claretians of the past and the present give witness to the joy of a life rooted in the Lord. Unless a missionary finds his roots in Christ in the ground of our charism, he likely falls for the temptation of activism and

⁴ The four principles are: Time is greater than space; Unity prevails over conflict, realities are more important than ideas, and the whole is greater than the parts. Cf. EG. 222-237.

⁵ St. Claret, Retreat resolutions May 1866. Cf. MSS Claret II, 113-116.

pastoral individualism. This temptation led many missionaries to get involved in numerous activities and personal concerns or interests to the extent of disconnecting from the source and running the risk of finding their cisterns dry and empty, as prophet Jeremiah says about Israel of his time (cf. Jer 2:13). At a closer look, numerous cases of petitions for leaving the Congregation after an enthusiastic phase of ministry or sad events of destructive conflicts in communities arise from spiritual aridity.

3. Rooted Audaciousness in mission

Our Founder likened a missionary to a man on fire with God's love who spreads its flames wherever he goes. The definition of a missionary that he wanted every Claretian to interiorize in his being is the best expression of how we should approach our mission. *Rooted audaciousness* characterizes Claretian mission. One of the things I enjoy during the visits is hearing stories from our elderly missionaries about how they endured difficult missions to lead people to the Lord. Unrooted audaciousness follows time-bound fads and fashions and has only a short life. I recall instances of failed missions and missions in *survival mode* because we lacked audaciously rooted missionaries in those peripheries. When self-referent concerns and issues consume much of the energy in a Major Organism, rooted audaciousness in the mission would be impossible. Pope Francis has this advice for missionaries, "Strip yourselves of your pre-constituted ideas, your dreams of greatness, your self-assertion, to put God and people at the center of your daily concerns"⁶. Joy and enthusiasm for the mission amid suffering and difficulties are important signs of rooted audaciousness.

4. Rooted and Audacious in personal lives and communities

The proverb "The strength of a chain is the strength of its weakest link" highlights the importance of the integrity of members to build up a healthy missionary community. Mahatma Gandhi is credited with saying, "be the change that you want to see in the world". In our changing world, the change that we want to happen in our beloved Congregation needs to begin in each Claretian, especially the leaders in the Congregation. How do we anchor ourselves in the Lord as individuals and as communities? We need to be audacious to live simple lives and move out of our comfort zones and self-referent world vision. Each Claretian is the primary link to strengthen the congregational presence in the world. The XX General Chapter (1985) affirmed that the major richness of the Congregation is the person of the Claretian and that each of us is an undoubted newness of the Spirit. It also stated that a missionary grows and finds fulness in communion with his brothers and inserting into our history and develops his Claretian personality in communion and community mission (no. 49). We shall begin the transformative and dynamic process with the action of the Spirit in the individual Claretian who enriches his community with his gifts. The community, in turn, facilitates his unfolding as a person. This dynamic moves to the level of Major organisms and the universal Congregation, creating a congregational culture where members are anchored in the Lord and create community. Decadence also begins in the lives of individuals contaminating communities. Thus the seeds of life and weeds that choke life are planted in the hearts of the person of the missionary.

5. The discovery about ourselves

⁶ To French priests in Rome on 7 June 2021.

The *Discovery phase* in the General Chapter and subsequent provincial Chapters and Delegation assemblies has revealed how the Lord has adorned us with more blessings and vitality that surpass the weeds and the infirmities in our life and mission. Among the blessings, the most important are our missionaries. Every Claretian raised in their respective loving families is called to be part of our beloved congregation to be conformed to Christ, sharing in Claretian charism and mission. The Congregation, with a mother's tender heart, receives each of them and accompanies them in their vocational journey offering them the warmth of our charismatic family. We are grateful for our missionary charism, community life, and missionary presence in various peripheries of human struggles. We are also aware that we need to journey synodally, overcoming forms of individualism, acedia, and spiritual aridity. It involves unlearning mental models that do not help communicate the gospel message and learning to walk the path the Lord indicates in our time. The appreciative, synodal and narrative approach that we employed during the Chapter is part of our effort to learn new ways of journeying together as disciples of the Lord in the style of our Founder.

It would be naïve to pretend that we will be free from weeds and problems through our efforts. An important discovery is that we are as human and vulnerable as any other human group. Our missionaries and our communities have many limitations. You know it without having to enumerate them. Some organisms have several missionaries in irregular situations. Jesus, with the realism of the logic of the Gospel, narrates the parable of the wheat and weeds (cf. Mt 13:14-30) and tells that the wheat and weed grow together. The person of the missionary is always a precious gift, an image of God in different degrees of configuration with Christ. However, sinful attitudes and unhealthy tendencies also grow in him, choking his vocation and missionary commitment and debilitating his community. The word of God repeatedly speaks of vigilance, alertness, and awareness about the ploys of the evil one (cf. Mk 13:33; 14:38; Mt 24:42; 26:41). We need to create a formative and spiritual culture in the Congregation that is integral and transforming so that we accept our vulnerability and limitations and, with God's grace, transform them into channels of grace and growth. God's ways with humans are not to make them superhuman but to make fragile human collaborators and co-creators realize His dream for humanity. Jesus did it in the lives of the apostles. We have also received a vocation like that of the apostles (cf. CC 4).

6. Sharing in God's Dream for the Congregation

The XXVI General Chapter used the term "dream" in the sense it was used by Pope Francis to invite people to rise above mundane criteria of life and look at the purpose of their lives in the light of heaven. Our Founder traces the seed of his missionary vocation in his thoughts at bedtime at the age of five about eternity and its consequences for humans (cf. Aut 8-9). His vocational interest, which was dormant in him during his early youth days, was again fanned when Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God and the futility of pursuing worldly gains made an impact on him. I remember how our enthusiasm for our missionary vocation came alive when we were weaving the Dream of God for the Congregation during the General Chapter and later the respective dreams of the Provinces and Delegations in the light of it.

I have noticed that the vocational spark within me is ignited when I read the Dream prayerfully as it evokes what the Lord would want me to be in the present context and the role assigned to me. I presume that you too experience something similar. The content of the Dream is not anything new. It is contained in our Constitutions. The newness is in the approach and the perspective, which, I believe, the Spirit is inviting us to embrace. The

approach takes the future as contained in the present. In other words, we see, judge, and act in the present from the perspective of the future which beckons us. That is why we attend to the seeds that will grow to bear their fruits and the weeds to be checked from taking control. Another aspect of the dream is that it invites us to see reality from the perspective of God. Therefore, the constant query is what the Lord asks us in each situation, making discernment the obligatory method to pursue. When our major concern is to do the will of God (obedience) and we let the Lord reign in our hearts and minds (chastity), and all our gifts and talents are placed at the service of the Kingdom (poverty), we become collaborators of the Holy Spirit as a missionary community and offer all that we are and we have, in communion with all the charisms in the Church to realize the Dream of God for humanity. Jesus names this Dream “the Kingdom of God”⁷. The experience of the Kingdom as “already” present through the manifold blessings and the “not yet” of the Kingdom is clear in the presence of weeds and illnesses in us. This reality creates a necessary tension that is part of our life until we join our brothers who are already in the home of the Father.

Exercise

We go around reading the different dreams worked out in the Provincial Chapters and assemblies of Delegations, which are publicly exhibited in the hall. The members take note of the common elements and differences in them.

7. Design and Commitments

Design and commitments constitute a two-fold movement from both perspectives of the future and the present. The designed future beckons us to walk towards it by taking the present realities seriously and navigating the course. One without the other perspective amounts to aimless blind walking. However, it is the commitment that makes the difference. Jesus often refers to doing the will of God and praises those who do it rather than call “Lord, Lord” (cf. Mt 7:21; Mt 21:29-31). Jesus applies the criterion of doing the will of the Father to describe his mother and brothers (cf. Mt 12:50). Are the commitments we are making rooted in the Lord and have the missionary courage of the Spirit?

I like to offer some considerations for your reflection in this regard:

a) Priority attention to vocations and formation

In 1985 we were 2,931 Claretians (149 novices, 472 students, 362 brothers, 3 deacons, 1,931 priests, and 14 bishops) in 378 communities missioning in 44 nations. After 37 years, in 2022, we are 2,977 Claretians (113 novices, 446 TP students, 45 PP students, 114 brothers, 2233 priests, and 24 bishops) in 527 communities in 70 countries.

This statistical change speaks of the change of times. In this biennium, we shall give much attention to the area of welcoming and accompanying vocations. It is a delicate art of discerning and nurturing God’s call. Rootless vocations do not last long. Vocation promotion

⁷ The term Kingdom of God is used 68 times in the NT and Kingdom of heaven is used 32 times exclusively in the Gospel of Matthew.

and formation is a collective task in which everyone has a role to play. Prayer for vocations and witnessing presence among youth to stimulate their search for God will find God's favor.

b) Caring for the roots

Even a robust tree will fall easily if the roots are decayed or eaten by worms. The roots that supply the strength of our vocation should be taken care of well if we want to be audacious in our mission. Our vocational roots should reach the sources of our charism, in the Eucharist, the word of God, and the Marian sonship. This is why we should spare every effort to help our missionaries draw from these sources and be primarily adorers of God in Spirit. It is not to be admirers of Jesus and our Founder, but followers of the Lord willing to lay down our lives as did our martyr brothers. We need to strengthen the services of CESC and Forge and deepen our identity as servants of the Word. Without a sound spirituality, our missionaries will not be able to withstand the challenges of a progressively growing secular culture indifferent to religious quests. It is when we love our missionary vocation and generously give ourselves in the mission against all odds that we can call our missionary fraternity "querida congregación" like our first missionaries and martyrs.

c) The role of the peripheries in our mission

One of the most cited terms which have acquired theological significance during the pontificate of Pope Francis is "peripheries". Jesus' birth and the Paschal Mystery make better sense when we see it as God present amid the peripheries of human sin and misery with the offer of salvation. The mission of the Church originates from that project of God. Pope's call to go to geographical and existential peripheries of human struggles should affect our way of being missionaries today. I invite your reflection on the peripheries in three ways:

- i. To look at reality from the perspective of the peripheries to situate ourselves and our mission to see them through the heart of God. For example, the perspective of the General government would be more holistic if we view the Congregation from the peripheries, where most of our missionaries are sharing the joys and struggles of the people. Seeing it only from Rome would be reductive. A parish, for example, will be better serving the people if the parish priest views it from the perspective of those who keep away from the Church rather than seeing it through the eyes of the regular churchgoers.
- ii. Every missionary platform has its peripheries, and we should pay attention to them. For example, in the education ministry, it could be the children who perform poorly due to their suffering from dysfunctional families.
- iii. The world has regions and contexts where people and the planet suffer injustice, exclusion, and neglect. Pope Francis has been calling attention to the people in Amazonia and their plight. The deteriorating health of our common home or human trafficking etc., are peripheries of human struggles. An effective networking of SoMi and audacious commitment in some of the geographical peripheries are important for our beloved Congregation to be faithful to our missionary mandate.

d) A paradigm shift in leadership style and exercise of authority

All Claretians exercise authority, power, and leadership in the different responsibilities they hold. It is pointed out that the organizational structure of the Church is conducive to power abuse. The abuse scandals in the Church made it more evident in recent decades. Though

there is no human system that cancels human capacity to hurt others, we can create a culture of care, mutual accompaniment, and timely fraternal corrections which would prevent or limit power abuse in Claretian contexts. Spiritual and psychological maturity, as well as competencies of listening and dialogue, are necessary for the proper exercise of power and authority in our institutions.

The pyramidal understanding of power arrangement shifts responsibility to the Provincial government even on matters to be dealt with by local superiors. Often major superiors finish their terms tired and burnt out, and the members end up with their expectations frustrated. Collective ownership of the charism and mission of the Congregation requires everyone to come up with his best and help one another to carry the burdens of one another. Jesus' style of servant leadership needs formation both for leaders and the members.

8. The Meeting of Major Superiors

This meeting is significant for marking the rhythm of our synodal journey in this sexennium. The General government has worked out an action plan to concretize the capitular dream, the designs, and the commitments to aid its ministry of animation to the whole Congregation. We will present the action plan within the framework of the three processes of transformation initiated by the XXV General Chapter. The various action plans proposed in each process could be deepened, improved, and appropriated together in the light of our collective discernment. There are several platforms of evangelization where we can be audacious missionaries. Let us explore them together.

We know well that our Blessed Mother accompanies us holding us in the forge of her Immaculate Heart, teaching us the art of loving God and his people with tender love, and helping us to walk forth like her with a firm *fiat* to God's designs for us.

Exercise

*What are the important insights that have struck you as you listened to this address of the Superior General?
Note down and share with your brothers.*

Mathew Vattamattam, CMF

Superior General