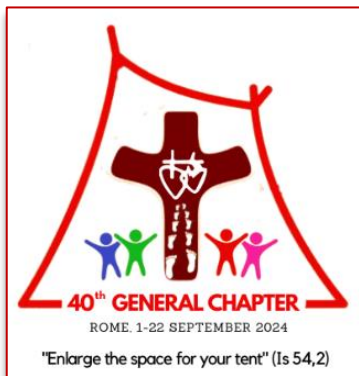




Rome, 7 December 2023



PREPARING FOR THE 40TH GENERAL CHAPTER

Dear Brothers,

Through this letter I invite the Congregation to enter into the journey of preparation for the 40th General Chapter (Brothers) to be held at Villa Aurelia, Rome, between Sunday 1 and Sunday 22 September 2024.

The agenda of this Chapter, defined at the Enlarged General Council in Bandung (Indonesia), has set as its central theme the *SSCC Vocation and Mission*. We want to do so in harmony with the synodal journey of renewing our ways of being and serving in the Church. The *magisterium* of Pope Francis also inspires and challenges us to do this. Today, the Congregation is more aware of its smallness and its fragilities. At the same time, we see that, in many places, the charism and mission of the SSCC is shared with the laity. Today we need each other more and we need to move forward. May we have lighter structures that effectively animate the mission of the brothers and sisters.

We also feel called to renew ourselves in the exercise of authority at all levels of the Congregation, so that those who are in these roles are nourished by this service, are close to the life of the sisters and brothers, and have greater power to intervene in the implementation of orientations and in the resolution of conflicts that cause us to lose apostolic fruitfulness. We also wish to be able to move forward in placing the brothers and sisters available for an increasingly congregational mission at the service of it, to administer more in common and with an organised plan the goods and resources at our disposal. In all these areas, we believe that brothers and sisters can learn from each other. Moreover, in our works and also in missionary animation, we have competent lay people who are committed to SSCC spirituality.

In our preparation for the General Chapter, we want there to be continuity with the journey we have made as a Congregation since the last Chapter. In this regard, we still consider the two major documents of the 39th General Chapter "Our Inner self is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor 4,16) and "The Pastoral and Missionary Conversion: new paths to Emmaus" (2 Cor 4,16) as inspiring and valid.

SSCC Vocation and Mission is the central theme for the next General Chapter, a theme that we will reflect on in line with the synodal journey that Pope Francis is promoting. God forms a People and walks together with it. It is his people - men and women, brothers and sisters - who make God the pilgrim God visible in history.

Thus, journeying alongside our local churches, we want to take up the calls and challenges to renew our SSCC vocation and mission to be useful to the Church and to strengthen the bonds of fraternity, to care for our brothers and sisters, to care for our common home and to be tireless artisans of the longed-for peace.

“GOD HAS PITCHED HIS TENT AMONG US”

This scriptural quote offers us an image of a God who accompanies his people. God is a living God who ventures out on a journey. God is setting out gradually and patiently accompanied by multitudes. In this way, God forms a people, his people, who convert to Him and who wholeheartedly seek to do his will.

On this journey, God and his people are out in the open, sharing the itinerant and nomadic condition, that of having no fixed abode, and travelling lightly. As such, neither God nor his people are tied to a place. What is sacred is to walk with Him and listen to his voice.

God is encountered in the tent of meeting. There the living God meets Moses and speaks to him "as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex 33:11). He trusts in those who speak for him or who are his mediators. Accordingly, God speaks to his people through Moses.

God is also the compass and the destiny of his people who promises a new land, peace, life and descendants. When the people grow tired of waiting or find themselves disoriented, God renews his promises, sets them on the way again, accompanying them on the journey.

When the people no longer know what to offer God as a sign of gratitude, he asks them through the prophet Micah for the gift that pleases him most: to become once again a pilgrim and righteous people: "You have been told what is good and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God". (Mic. 6:8).

When the people feel that there is no future because God seems to have abandoned them or because there are no descendants or posterity, God calls his people to a new fruitfulness, to trust more in more in what God wants to do with them than in their own strength: "Shout for joy, O barren one who does not give birth; break forth with shouts of joy and gladness, she who has had no sorrows; for the children of the deserted one are more than the children of the married woman, says the LORD. "Enlarge the space of your tent, stretch out the awnings of your dwelling place, do not restrain them, lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes" (Is 54:1-2).

In Jesus, God becomes at once the presence, companion, fulfilment and amen to all his promises. Thus the flesh of Jesus - his participation in our fragile and mortal human condition - becomes the new tent of encounter with the human face of God. "And the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us" (Jn 1:14).

In this flesh, Jesus makes visible what God wants to do with every creature. This is what Jesus' closest disciples contemplate on the way to Jerusalem, at the transfiguration. They are given a foretaste of what their eyes will see and touch again in the risen body of Jesus.

To meet the risen Lord, his disciples must go out to walk with Him along the roads of Galilee, and be with the crowds and his disciples, confident in his promises.

The tent speaks to us then of a God who comes close to us and meets us in our intemperance, precariousness and searching. God is always greater than our sinfulness and is with us in the times when we feel discouraged.

TENTS THAT ARE EASY TO CARRY

This is what our founder, Father Coudrin experienced in 1819-20 in Paris in his relationship with the parish priest of the parish of Saint Marguerite where the house of Picpus was located. Behind the demands of the parish priest, the Good Father perceived that the Congregation no longer enjoyed the confidence with which the pastors of the diocese of Paris had honoured it until then. The Founder also sought to understand the ways in which God was inviting him to continue to be useful to the Church:

"A warning from the Sovereign Ruler of our fate, who prescribes, as it were, that we raise our poor camp and take elsewhere the feeble efforts He deigns to inspire in us for his glory and for the education of the poor. We can say, thanks be to God: *non habemus hic manentem civitatem*. Our tents are easy to transport, and indeed we may find some of them erected wherever we are called."

And he continues with an act of renewed trust in God who calls him to set out on the road:

"God will not forsake us, any more than the work to which Providence has employed our feeble resources, if this work is pleasing to him. It is in the name of the Lord that we have undertaken it; we abandon the success to him." (Letter of the Good Father to Father Dominique Eliçagaray, Paris, 27 June 1820, LEBP 628).¹

For her part, the Good Mother was sensitive to the gifts and graces that God granted and distributed among the members of the community. These gifts and graces grew and bore fruit to the extent that each one knew how to use them for the edification of the community and the common mission. Each member was called to collaborate with God who guides their work with his hand. Discovering the gifts that each one had and the community that knew how to appreciate them was a joy for the family as a whole. But when the personal response to the many graces received weakened: faith, the taste for the Gospel, the joy of serving in his name, the various gifts and charisms, etc., the Good Mother exhorted them to rely on the community and to count on it. In this spirit, she addresses a letter full of wisdom and fraternal

¹ Letter of the Good Father to Father Dominique Eliçagaray, Paris, 27 June 1820, LEBP 628.

affection to Father Philibert Vidon, "my good Brother", when he is assailed by thoughts of leaving the Congregation:

"So stay with us, my good Brother, for our happiness, our satisfaction, our edification. I am sure that if I could roll call all the individuals who make up our society, there is not one that I did not agree with. So try to calm your troubles and to attach yourself even more strongly to this divine Heart of Jesus which is and will always be our strength, our support. Pray for me who needs it so much. Just think that we are in solidarity with one another, and that it is perhaps on account of your prayers, your virtues, that God wants to grant special graces to the society of which you are a member. I hope you will tell me that you think like me. I will rejoice according to God and for you and for us."²

In order to continue to collaborate with his work and to widen our tent and our heart to the variety of peoples from which God is forming his people, to the diversity of religious, cultural, social, value-oriented and sexual sensibilities that inhabit us, we need to make our own the criteria of Jesus: to lose our life for Him and his Gospel in order to receive it enriched and forever.

The Synod's working document for the continental phase reminds us of this:

"The readiness to die to self for love, finding oneself in and through relationship with Christ and with one's neighbour: «Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit» (Jn. 12:24). The fruitfulness of the Church depends on accepting this death, which is not, however, an annihilation, but an experience of emptying oneself in order to be filled by Christ through the Holy Spirit, and thus a process by which we receive richer relationships, deeper ties to God and each other. This is the place of grace, and of transfiguration."³

Accepting the life that the Lord offers us implies several deaths: death to ourselves, to placing ourselves at the centre, to the habitual ways of looking at one another, to the criteria by which we spontaneously appreciate our own culture and despise that of others; a death to places where the Congregation has been present for a long time and has already scattered the seeds of the Gospel that the Lord will bring to fruition; a death to certain structures of the Congregation that do not conform to the requirements of the mission and to our reality; a death to our ways of consuming and inhabiting our home, the Earth. But such dying should not cause us fear and discouragement, because it calls us to a new life that comes from a closer relationship to the Lord Jesus and to our brothers and sisters. The Lord meets us in his own tent, fragile, like ours, and at the same time divinely glorious, and in those other tents that God has already pitched elsewhere that the Good Father had confidently hoped to find.

² Letter of the Good Mother to Fr. Philibert Vidon, Picpus, 23 January 1818, LEBM 610.

³ Synod Working Document for the Continental Phase No. 28.

THE PROPHECY OF FRATERNITY

We are brothers, sisters and lay people, fragile yet increasingly attentive to the most vulnerable. We are also growing in awareness and feeling more responsibility for the well-being of our planet. The Lord Jesus redeems those he loves; he welcomes them with their uncertainties and failures and he heals their wounds. In turn, those who are loved by God become more available to continue the reparative action of Jesus in every person, in the whole of society and in the whole of creation. Those we see on the edges of our streets, or who feel excluded or alienated from the Church call out to us in the name of Jesus.

Let us, then, make our own the ways in which Jesus made himself close to them, listening to them, welcoming them and putting himself in the place of those he meets. He feels with them and is moved by their faith, their longing for salvation. Seeing this and allowing ourselves to be affected by this reality and drawing closer to it, we will then rediscover with the poor the ever new ways of God's mercy. We do this as brothers and sisters, fragile ourselves and in need of God's mercy and the mercy of others. Only then will we become brothers and sisters, the Good Samaritans of whom Pope Francis speaks, repairers of the bonds of fraternity and builders of peace and social friendship:

"Today we have a great opportunity to express our innate sense of fraternity, to be Good Samaritans who bear the pain of other people's troubles rather than fomenting greater hatred and resentment. Like the chance traveller in the parable, we need only have a pure and simple desire to be a people, a community, constant and tireless in the effort to include, integrate and lift up the fallen." (*Fratelli tutti*, 77).

In this journey of death and new life we are not alone.

"Since its foundation, our religious family has had but one charism, one mission and one spirituality. Aware that it constitutes a significant value, the brothers and sisters assume together the responsibility to maintain and strengthen their unity." (Const. 8).

"We see ourselves as pilgrims together with the whole People of God ... In equality and shared responsibility, we wish to move towards full communion among ourselves, with our sisters and with all Christian laity" (Const. 153,2).

In the synodal process that we are living in the Church, there is a renewed awareness of the common dignity and responsibility of all the baptised in the mission of the Church. We are recognising and promoting the gifts and charisms that the Spirit continues to raise up in his Church. Our religious family of sisters, brothers and lay people is also called to make its contribution and to receive new energies, as we share the gift we have received from our Founders, as we walk together with the People of God and the men and women of our time:

"Laymen and laywomen, those in consecrated life, and ordained ministers have equal dignity. They have received different charisms and vocations and exercise different roles and functions, but all are called and nourished by the Holy Spirit to form one body in Christ (1 Cor. 4-31). They are all disciples, all missionaries, in the reciprocal vitality of local communities who experience the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing."⁴

May this time of preparation for our 40th General Chapter be a time of grace and missionary renewal, rooting our SSCC charism in us, in the holy land where the Lord calls us to serve. And, at the same time, may it make us grow in greater interdependence and collaboration with one another. Let us ask for the intercession of our Founders on this journey. May they help us to be attuned to God's action in our world and to collaborate with it with generosity and constancy. Let us unite in prayer in our communities, together with our sisters and the lay people with whom we journey.

PRAYER FOR THE GENERAL CHAPTERS

*God, our Father,
you have called your servants
Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie and Marie-Joseph Coudrin
to found a new religious Congregation in the Church,
to spread throughout the world
the infinite riches of your love
manifested in the Heart of Jesus, your Son
and in the Heart of Mary, his Mother.*

May their witness help us to love and to make others love the Gospel.

May their ardent zeal and confident prayer sustain and enlighten us.

*May their audacity inspire brothers, sisters and lay people,
as we prepare for the forthcoming General Chapters,
to walk with Jesus alongside all men and women
who promote peace and justice.*

We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. AMEN.



Alberto Toutin Cataldo ssc
Superior General

⁴ A Synodal Church on Mission, Synthesis Report, Convergences, 8b, 29 October, 2023.