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OUR SS.CC VOCATION AND MISSION

In the light of our
New Constitutions

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The publication of our new Constitutions was quite an important event in the life and history of the Congregation. As you know, tremendous effort, prayer, time, study, energy, expense went into them - it was only right, because the Constitutions express the very meaning of our vocation.

My purpose in writing is to invite each one, now that we have had the Constitutions in our hands for quite some time, to look again at the meaning of your life as an ss.cc. religious - what it means, where you are going, what your mission on this earth is, how you can enter into mission with other brothers and sisters who have been called by God to the same mission.

I think we can say that these Constitutions represent what the Spirit has been saying to our Community through the events and the experience of the life of the members in recent years. We can believe that the Holy Spirit was at work in the hearts of so many people of good will. It is therefore worth taking a good look at these Constitutions and see if they can really help us to make sense of our vocation, so that we might discover what God expects of each one of us as we live out our lives on this earth at the end of this twentieth century. For all of us this is important - what priorities we should have, what orientations we should give to our lives. After all, it is a question of our very calling and how we want to live it!

I realize that some people don't worry very much about the Constitutions -but I think it is worth reflecting on them all the same- not so much as a body of law- but insofar as they enshrine the values that should be motivating our lives. They can give us a sense of identity, and a sense of direction that can be very valuable indeed, as we go about the mission confided to us by the Lord. I think each of us feels the need for a bit of clarity about the spirit in which the Lord wants us to live. We feel we want to live in conformity with the spirit of the Congregation to which God called us. We want to be in some way sure that we are living in continuity with the spirit of our Founders, yet in a way that responds to the times in which we live.

I think that we have managed (with the grace of God, and the good will of so many) to arrive at a text which, while necessarily containing a legal dimension, nevertheless is not a really heavy document. I believe it manages to capture the spirit of our Congregation today.

These new Constitutions can be an instrument, even a sure guide for us, on the direction we should travel. I hope you will discover, as indeed I have, that there is a richness in our spirituality that will strengthen you in your convictions. Since we have been given the grace of the charism of the Congregation, there should be a certain coincidence, affinity, resonance in our hearts. As you reflect on their content, both personally and in your community, I think you will deepen your understanding of our calling, discovering aspects hidden heretofore. Such a reflection can be the occasion of a real

renewal in your vocation at a profound level of your being.

I would like to thank those whom I have quoted and those whom I have consulted in writing this letter, including the members of the General Council who offered their helpful comments on the original draft.

Obviously, this letter contains many points that were considered in previous circulars. Nevertheless, I think they bear repeating, especially, since they are now presented for your reflection in the context of our new Constitutions, which are after all, the latest expression of our spiritual patrimony.

I feel confident that not only our brothers, but also our sisters will be able to identify with the reflections expressed in this letter, for we have received the same charism and we share the same vocation and mission. This is well expressed in the first common chapter of our Constitutions.

I. A BRIEF HISTORY

The very first Constitutions of the Congregation were approved on December 20th 1816 at a Plenary Assembly of the then Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. They were confirmed by Pope Pius VII - during an audience on January 10th 1817, to the great joy of the Good Father and indeed the whole Congregation. Despite their evident imperfection, the Constitutions were recognized as a way of perfection inspired by the Gospel and by the Rule of St. Benedict. In the very form in which they were redacted, the first Constitutions express the essential structure of the new Institute, that is to say, a Congregation of two branches. The purpose of its foundation and the means to achieve that purpose are already expressed in the title and in the Preliminary Chapter of the first Constitutions. (This Preliminary Chapter is published again in the edition of our new Constitutions).

The Bull "Pastor Aeternus" dated November 17th 1817, although it did not add anything to the text of the Constitutions previously approved, conferred the character of a solemn approbation to that text (necessary at the time for recognition by the French Bishops).

The General Chapters of 1819 and 1824 completed the Rule of 1817, making more precise some points of the first Constitutions. The Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars approved these new dispositions, and Pope Leo XII confirmed them on August 26th 1825.

Despite an enormous work in giving the Constitutions a

more logical order, revising, correcting and completing the earlier rule, the General Chapter of 1838 offered to the brothers a rule (approved by Gregory XVI), substantially identical to that of the Founders, and that rule remained in force until 1909.

The General Chapter of 1908 modified the text of the Constitutions introducing articles on the organization of the Provinces. The Holy See also requested changes in accordance with the new Decrees on the novitiate, admission to profession, introduction of temporary vows for three years and the administration of temporal goods. On April 5th 1909, when these changes had been made, the new rule of the brothers was approved by Pius X.

The new code of Canon Law came into force in 1917, and the work of adapting our rule to the new Church law was undertaken by the Superior General, Fr. Flavien Prat, and his Council. On February 14th 1928 our new rule was approved by the Holy See.

A generation later, "the Chapter of 1953 decided upon a 'revision of the Rule', leaving it to the Superior General to set up a commission for this purpose. After the next Chapter of 1958, which took a stand on certain questions of principle, and thanks to a growing agreement among the Provinces, the Commission drew up three consecutive projects in 1960, 1962 and 1963. The last of these projects was again submitted to the Provinces to serve as the basis of discussion at the General Chapter held in Rome August 22nd/October 22nd 1964".¹ The Constitutions were approved by the Congregation of Religious on May 26th 1966.

"Meanwhile, the Vatican Council opened new horizons... at the time of the Chapter the Council was still in session. Thus, we had to be content with following the general orientations of the Council without being sure of the concrete points of the religious life which the conciliar texts would demand for renewal and adaptation".²

As we all know well, Vatican II profoundly modified our vision of the Church and of the world, and, with it, our understanding of religious life. Shortly after our Constitutions were promulgated, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* (Norms for implementing the Decree on the Renewal of the Religious Life) was published by Paul VI. This document required each Religious Congregation to celebrate a special General Chapter to be followed by a period of experimentation. We were permitted by the then SCRIS to delay that Special Chapter until 1970, since our Constitutions had only been approved in 1966. In fact, things moved rapidly. In these years, a strong movement for decentralisation was born. The newly-established Provincial Chapters began to regulate more and more the lives of the Provinces. Yet there was a real awareness that we belong to one international community, that we share the same charism and have a common mission. This was a major challenge namely, to find a healthy balance between the needs of an international community with its proper identity and the commitment of our provincial communities to their local Churches and cultures. The General Chapter of 1970 recognized this by inviting all the members of the Congregation to live according to the general orientations of the Constitutions of 1966, and it saw the need to continue to experiment until the following Chapter.

The General Chapter of 1976 in its turn, expressed the desire to prolong the experimentation until the Chapter of 1982. At the Assembly of Major Superiors, January 1981, the question was posed: should we opt for completely new Constitutions, or simply for a revision of the Constitutions of 1966? The Assembly opted for a revision. However, when the revised text, which incorporated all the changes in legislation since 1964 was examined at the 1982 General Chapter, the compilation was regarded as too juridical, too cold, without life. Thus the General Chapter of 1982 ordered a whole re-writing.

I don't have the intention to attempt a detailed history of the formulation of these new Constitutions. Suffice to say that the General Government requested authorization from the Vatican to delay the final text until the Chapter of 1988, so that the content of the new Constitutions "would not only be studied by the members and the communities beforehand, but also be experienced in their everyday lives".³ We hoped that the writing of the Constitutions could become a focus for mission, seeing the re-writing as an opportunity for all to re-think their vocation in the light of the priorities of the Chapter of 1982. The community was challenged "to regain, recapture, renew, restate our vocation".⁴ The hope was that each one might re-discover what it means to be a Religious of the Sacred Hearts today, as our Founders and predecessors were ss.cc. religious in their time. All our brothers and communities were asked to participate in the fullest possible measure in the program outlined, in order to discover together what the Spirit was saying through the brothers, so that we might be really credible witnesses of the Gospel in our day.

The Constitutions Commission did a magnificent job in organizing, documenting, and gathering together the reflections of the brothers of the Congregation -taking into account the reservations expressed by individual brothers, by the Continental Conferences, and by the Assembly of Major Superiors in 1986. The whole Congregation had an unprecedented opportunity to express itself, so that we came to the Chapter of 1988 with a draft text which the Chapter accepted as a good working document. After more than three weeks of deliberations and dialogue the Capitulants made the amendments and changes which they saw fit, and appointed a Redaction Commission to prepare the definitive text for the General Government. After reviewing this text the General Government presented the final redaction to the Holy See for approval on May 29th 1989. In a letter dated May 3rd 1990 we received the "observations" of the Holy See. The General Government in turn studied these observations, and after a very positive and cordial dialogue with the Congregation of Religious, we received the Decree of Approbation of our new Constitutions on the feast of Our Lady Queen of Peace, July 9th 1990.

As I believe that the text can be a valuable instrument for the animation and indeed for a profound renewal of our religious lives, I would like to share some thoughts with you in this letter - on their significance, on the values they enshrine and on how we might use them to good effect.

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEW CONSTITUTIONS

Approval by the Church

In his beautiful letter to the brothers and sisters (April 14th, 1817) after our first Constitutions were approved by the Holy See, Fr. Coudrin expressed his great joy and gratitude to the God of all mercies in the words to the shepherds: "I bring you good tidings of great joy". He saw our approbation by the Church as another miracle of God's Providence, the goodness of a God who *leads us by the hand*.⁵

We had some of the same sentiments, when we received news of the approbation of our new Constitutions. From the very first lines: "*In the communion of the Church, the People of God.*" (Art. 1) to the last lines: "*We see ourselves as pilgrims, together with the whole People of God*" (Art. 153,2), our new Constitutions see our charism as a gift and a vocation in the Church. We do not exist only for ourselves. We are part of the life of the Church and of its mission. We are at its service. We have our own ecclesial identity, and we enjoy a certain autonomy, yet we are part of the wider Church, which recognizes, confirms and authenticates our way of life. This is only right. It is the responsibility of the officeholders to watch over the charisms. We are really happy that the Church has confirmed us in our mission. The Church has verified that our new Constitutions are in accord with the norms of the Vatican Council - faithful to the Gospel, faithful to the spirit of our Founders, and adapted to the times in which we live. I could not put it better than one of our brothers who wrote to me

recently: "I would like to say to you in all sincerity that to be able to count on such an excellent guideline for our religious life is a precious gift from the Heart of our Lord Jesus and His mother, Mary. It was really worth the wait, for the actual text is incalculably rich: in such a short number of lines we have a whole theology and a spirituality, together with the laws and statutes necessary for the practical life of our communities".

These new Constitutions can serve as guide and inspiration, not simply because of some decree from Rome - rather the Church has rendered authentic the convictions of the brothers. After more than two decades of questioning and of experiences, of returning to the sources and studying the signs of the times we have a text, which in effect says to us: this is what your vocation means today, and the Church has in effect said: yes, this is your life, this is your mission together today. Without doubt, this will help us to move into the future with a growing sense of oneness of mind and heart - at the service of the Church and of the Kingdom.

Change and Response

Most of us are a bit wary about change - and in our times change is taking place more rapidly than ever. That was one of the reasons why the Church gathered in Council to renew its life in the light of its mission "in the world of today". In fact, the Council gave a real change of direction to Religious Life. Up to Vatican II the stress had been more on the juridical and institutional, so that religious life had been seen as life

according to the rule - "keep the rule and the rule will keep you", we were taught. Now priority was clearly given by the Church to the Living Spirit - and the law follows life, protects it and promotes it.

I think the great majority of us found the principles of renewal a real breath of fresh air - the aim being to renew our personal lives, our communities, our apostolates so that we would really live according to the Gospels. Life, according to the Spirit, is dynamic. Our charism, that grace of the Spirit has been evolving, developing as it has been expressed for nearly two centuries in the hearts of our brothers. How would our Founders respond in today's world? We need to constantly sharpen our perception of what is taking place in the world around us. The spirit of the community must for ever be incarnated afresh in accordance with the times - otherwise the original spirit would become a dead letter.

Constitutions should articulate something of the (re-) founding dream and story which continues to unfold primarily in the members of the Congregation who are narrating the story. They have been written from our understanding of our life as ss.cc. religious today, living in the heart of the Church. The renewal called for constitutes an enormous challenge. Old wineskins don't hold new wine. The world has changed, the Church has changed, theology has changed. It became obvious that a revision of our 1966 Constitutions was not sufficient. There was a strong feeling that we needed to bring our legislation up to date, so that it would not only reflect our life as lived but would challenge our lives today. The change that has

taken place in the last 25 years has been so great that a radical re-statement of our vocation was necessary. We have had the blessing of these years of reflection throughout the Congregation. We believe the Spirit was active in our members who have received that special grace we call the charism. If we believe that God is among us, as we work sincerely - we can say that although we are all imperfect instruments, the Constitutions are the fruit of a work guided by the Spirit.

The reflection itself was very healthy - it enabled us to question our values - "not in a spirit of timidity but of courage". We needed to ask ourselves again who we are, what we believe, how do we live, and what is our mission. We needed to confirm for ourselves again the beauty of a life of faith, of hope, of love - and that a life of chastity, poverty and obedience is really worthwhile.

The process was enriching. We can say from the testimony of many that where people really engaged in the process, sharing what it means to be an ss.cc. religious, they found renewed strength in their vocation. The fact that it took us so long to arrive at new Constitutions was a blessing. It enabled us to experience the freshness and vitality of new beginnings, and, in a certain sense, the youthful spirit still present in the Community. We needed time to dream, to imagine, to project, to pray, to get in touch with our origins before we would arrive at a new expression of our vocation and mission, and of the structures to help us live it. Not that we wish to institutionalize our religious life definitively, once and for all with these Constitutions. Our life owes its origin to the free call of the Holy Spirit - we must not tie our charism to any

particular temporal and historical form or culture. Our Constitutions will continue at all times to be subject to the criticism of the Word. However, they do provide a framework within which the Community and each individual will be able to live and grow. In fact, we have a very open text.

Good law promotes life - gives a certain stability which an international community especially needs, but it should not stifle personal initiative. I hope you can see in our Constitutions not just a set of laws, but an invitation to go beyond mere prescriptions, as well as an indication of the meaning that we want to give to our life as a community. Although they contain some necessary juridical elements (for a stable foundation), the intention of the Constitutions is very much the renewal of our lives. I would like to regard them as a book of life - a gift to renew our hearts and the hearts of those we touch, helping us to lighten their burdens, increase their hope and nourish their faith.

For ourselves, as brothers, the new Constitutions can be a source of communion and vision, since they touch what is fundamental and essential. We can base our lives on their content. What a great thing it would be if we could meet in groups and use them to deepen our understanding and living out of the orientations which they express.

The question is how to profit now by this new opportunity to assimilate and make our own our rich ss.cc. spirituality. I am not referring to mere doctrinal knowledge, nor am I referring to putting the Constitutions into practice in our rituals, devotional practices and/or community events. Rather, I speak

of assimilating them on a much more profound level. I am referring to making the spirit and spirituality of our Constitutions part of our mind set, our mental structure, our way of thinking and of being in the world - so that our communion and our whole approach to our mission of evangelization, would be almost second nature to us, as we respond from the base and foundation that comes from a true 'owning' of this gift of the Spirit. I believe this is our challenge and our call right now.

Basic Content

These Constitutions express a sense of our identity and will give us purpose. A common vision brings clarity and a sustained sense of direction. What is really wonderful is that the vision has come from the discernment of the brothers. A unity that comes from within the hearts of the brothers, gives real hope that we can reach a true communion in mission. It is not just a paper vision, it has a real foundation in the lives and convictions of our members. It is a re-appropriation of our charism in order that we might address the urgent needs of today's world and not those of the past. Indeed these new Constitutions contain the seed of radical reform.

The Constitutions present a way of living a truly evangelical life, in accord with our charism. In the text we find distilled not only our Founders' experience of the Holy Spirit, but also that of succeeding generations of brothers right down to our times. They contain their accumulated wisdom, and we will be able to see in them much of our own experience and

aspirations. They contain the spirituality of our members in harmony with the traditions of the Congregation. They express that spirituality in more contemporary language and based on solid, renewed, updated theological foundations. We can say that they are the best expression we have of our charism today.

All this is very important as we seek sincerely to live authentic religious lives. The charism of the Founders is an experience of the Holy Spirit, and the source of their spirituality and their zeal. It gives a distinctive character to our religious community. This distinctive character also involves a particular style of sanctification and of apostolate. We really needed to have a vision of how that charism might be expressed today. It is fundamental for formation, and indeed for vocations - those committing themselves to our life have a right to know how the community perceives itself. In fact, I would say our charism carries within it the power of attracting others to carry on our mission. On these pages we express the fundamental values for which we stand, values and orientations which are extremely relevant in the modern world and which are very open to the future. Now I think we have an excellent text, rich in content, a text that can be a real source of animation in the Congregation.

The new Constitutions present a Congregation in mission, with each one of us called to be co-responsible for that mission. The idea of mission has changed considerably and will very much condition our community life and life-style. Today our mission is inspired by the three orientations and this is clearly expressed in the Constitutions. The last Chapters opened up new horizons, and an updated theology gave us a new understanding of our spirituality. The original charism must

come alive once more, but also there is an evolution. Our understanding of what it is to be an apostolic religious - our religious consecration, our prophetic role in the world, the meaning of the vows, the place of authority, dialogue etc. have certainly changed. Our interpretation of our spirituality is very different to that of the 19th century, e.g. we have an updated theology on the Sacred Heart, on Adoration, on Reparation, with perhaps the strongest text in the history of the Congregation on the unity of the two branches. Values such as equality, participation, complementarity, collaboration, internationality, which run through the whole text respond to a different model of Church, namely the Church as communion, so strongly emphasized by the Extraordinary Synod of 1985. Witnessing to these values is extremely important if we are to minister to a new, a changing, a secularized society. We needed "new wineskins for the new wine". I believe that we can accept the gift of this new expression of our charism as providential.

A Call to Conversion

Now that they are in our hands, we need to accept these new Constitutions as addressed to each of us personally. Whether young or old, we are called to a new beginning, that is in continuity with the past. Is it not perhaps the Holy Spirit inviting us to enter more profoundly into our vocation, renewing our lives from the inner core?

The purpose of the Constitutions is not to replace faith and grace in our lives. The primary thing in religious life is faith in the love which God shows to those whom He has called.

"Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain" (Ps 126,1). The Constitutions will not automatically re-awaken in us our original charism - our conversion is always God's work. But our new legislation can be the occasion of a real conversion committing us, both as persons and as a community, to a radical following of Christ in our mission together.

Perhaps some of our brothers have gone through years of personal confusion, darkness, doubt, tiredness and are tempted to opt out, remaining members in name only. As they interiorize and make their own these Constitutions, I hope they will hear the call of the Holy Spirit once again. We can apply the words of Habakkuk to our situation: "Write down the vision clearly ... so that we can read it readily" (Hab 2:2). This we have done - but even more important: "The vision still has its time ... the just man lives by faith". (Hab 2:3-4b).

The good news is that our call as ss.cc. religious in the Church today is a call directed to each one of us, a call to newness of life, a call to fidelity in the service of the Kingdom.

In the following pages I would like to comment on some of the values enshrined in the new Constitutions, by delving into the treasury of riches contained there - hopefully drawing out "new things and old", that may help us live joyfully our vocation and our mission.

III. OUR CONSECRATION AND VOCATION

"The Holy Spirit led each of us along diverse paths to enter the Congregation in order to follow Jesus there..." (Art. 11).

In a dualistic theology, consecration can emphasize a sense of separation, and we all know that that meaning was incorporated into the theology of religious life in the past. Today we are sensitive about the word consecration as we do not want to be considered as 'set apart'. But the word did help us to know that our life was centered on God. In any case, we need not be uncomfortable with the notion of consecration, if we understand it in the context of the biblical, incarnational theology of St. John. The whole people of God is consecrated for mission through baptism - our profession of vows is a particular expression of baptismal consecration.

When we speak of religious consecration we are speaking about something that has its origin in a call from God. This call is completely gratuitous, addressed to each one of us in our personal uniqueness - "the God who has specially chosen me while I was still in my mother's womb, called me through His grace" (Gal 1:15). Of each of us it can be said: "Looking at him, He loved him" (Mk 10:21). The call, a gift of the Spirit, embraces our whole being, the irrepeatable self, to the extent that you no longer belong to yourself but to Christ (cf. I Cor 6:19) - "you are not your own property anymore". It has a nuptial character, the character of an alliance, calling for a response on our part, engaging all our affectivity, a willingness "to lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel".

Our response (of love) through profession incorporates us into our religious family, which accepts our vows in the name of the Church (cf. Art. 12). Our religious consecration gives fuller expression to our baptismal consecration, drawing us ever more deeply into the heart of the people of God. "Religious profession places in the heart of each one of us...the love of the Father; that love that is in the Heart of Jesus Christ" ⁶
- I must say that I find this beautiful and very encouraging. We carry the bond with God to the level of a visible life-style. Our religious consecration signifies that we want our lives to be "*a symbol of the Gospel values already present in the world*" and a witness of "*the new and eternal life won by Christ's redemption*" (Art. 14).

"Consecrate them in the truth - Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world: I consecrate myself now, that they may be consecrated in truth" (Jn 17:17-19). As Raymond Brown says in his commentary on this text: "The consecration in truth is not simply a purification from sin, but is a consecration to a mission; they are being consecrated inasmuch as they are being sent".

Jesus Himself was called by the Father: "You are my beloved son whom I have chosen" (Lk 3:22). He was consecrated: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me" (Lk 4:18a). And he was sent in mission: "He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives" (Lk 4:18b). So too, because we are called, we are consecrated and we are sent in mission - to contemplate, live and announce to the world the love of God incarnate in Jesus.

Each one of us can ask himself/herself - how am I responding to the call today? It is an occasion to look at my religious consecration and my vocation - do I see the action of God's Providence in my life, as I look back? Can I see a pattern of His presence? Is my experience that the charism I have received, has given me the strength that comes from entering into Christ's sufferings? Like St. Paul, am I sure of my vocation and my mission? He persisted even in painful circumstances. For Paul, the Paschal mystery was not an abstraction: "We despaired of coming through alive ... it has taught us not to rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead to life ... that is our firm hope in Him ... that in the future He will save us again" (II Cor 1:8-9). Do I have this confidence in the charism and in the call I have received?

All this has relevance also if we are to present our vocation to young people today. We need to be very honest. Our life is a difficult life - it demands sacrifice, as every call to love does. It is a minority vocation, requiring great faith. The normal vocation is to married life - we have to learn to love without the help of a life-long marriage partner. We have to cope with loneliness and the deprivation of a certain type of affective love. We will never have that intimate circle of love to identify with, that characterises married life. Community life is not always easy. It can cause strain and often disappoints. Living a Gospel poverty in a consumer society is a great challenge.

With all these obstacles can I still thank God from the depths of my heart for the call received? Damien was able to

testify that "he was the happiest missionary in the world". Can I say - yes, my religious consecration has been for me an extraordinary grace? Would I encourage a nephew/niece who might discern that God is calling him/her along the same road? Perhaps that is the acid test! "The fruits of the Spirit are charity, peace, joy ..." If I do not experience these fruits, I really need to reflect very seriously on how I am living my religious consecration.

IV. "THE CONSECRATION TO THE SACRED HEARTS IS THE FOUNDATION OF OUR INSTITUTE" (Art. 2)

It is not surprising that our Constitutions quote this statement of the Good Father - it expresses the whole basis of our ss.cc. religious calling. Our consecration has its own particular nuance - we are consecrated to the Sacred Hearts. The center, the root of our charism is the heart of Jesus and the heart of Mary. We need to understand what this means, if we are to understand our spirituality today - if we are to live it, if we are to be true to our founding charism.

The Heart of Jesus

"The essential elements of devotion to the Sacred Heart belong in a permanent fashion to the spirituality of the Church ...". The Pope insists on the need "to find the most appropriate means to present this devotion and to put it into practice, so that the people of today with their own mentality and sensibility may find in it the true response to their questions and to their expectations".⁷

Fr. Arrupe, speaking to the Jesuits, in his last advice to the Society (6/2/81) said he was convinced that "there are few signs of the spiritual renewal of the Society which are as clear as a strong and widespread devotion to the Heart of Jesus. Our ministry would receive a new breath of life, and soon we would see results in our personal life as well as in our apostolic activities. If you seek advice from me who lived fifty three years

in the Society and almost sixteen as General, I would say that in this devotion to the Heart of Jesus an immense force is hidden. Everyone has to discover it - if you didn't discover it already -to deepen it and to apply it to his personal life in the way the Lord shows it and grants it. It is a matter of an extraordinary grace offered us by God".

When we speak of consecration and devotion to the Sacred Heart, it is clear that we are not referring to pious practices, as might have been understood fifty years ago. Historically this devotion has taken many forms. Certain of its essential elements are part of the Church's permanent spirituality, but forms and external practices have changed and will continue to change. Every authentic form, though, involves a relationship to the person Jesus Christ, who loves us with a divine and human love and asks us love in return.

We have a far richer and deeper understanding of what we mean by the Sacred Heart now. Theology has evolved, translating the devotional categories of another age into more holistic spiritual orientations for our time - we see in the Heart of Jesus the symbol of divine love made flesh - we are talking of God's love present almost palpably among us, challenging us to bring that same unconditional love and goodness to humankind.

The incarnation is, as it were, a "humanization" of the love of God. The love of God has taken on the form of human love in the person of Jesus. For Jesus, this love of God is the "heart of Jesus", the center of all His actions and His attitudes which he expresses in the Gospel - attitudes of compassion, of

pardon, of welcome, of preoccupation for the poor, for the sinner, His desire to exclude no one -all have one source, that is the love of God which is made present in the world in the human love of Jesus. Nobody would hold that God has a heart in the sense of the physical organ. However, we say (eloquently) that "the poor are very close to the heart of God". The spirituality of the heart of Jesus is an evolution of devotion to the Sacred Heart.

We are nowadays more conscious that God's love is completely gratuitous. It is not that we have a merciful God, thanks to Jesus. It is not that the man Christ Jesus, the Mediator, changed an irate God into a merciful God. Rather, it is the contrary - it is the love of God that is the source of the incarnation and of Christ's salvific work (not vice versa). "God so loved the world, that He sent His Son...". God first loved us. The love of Christ and His redemptive action is a fruit of God's love for us.

Our consecration means a call from God, yes - but with this nuance that comes from our Sacred Heart spirituality - we are called to live in continual gratitude and hope, that comes from being constantly aware of God's absolute unconditional love. I believe our charism can be beautifully described in one line of the Scriptures, namely: "We ourselves have put our faith in God's love for us" (I Jn 4:16). It is one thing to accept these words theoretically, it is another to make them so much a part of ourselves that we make them the basis of our whole life. Indeed, we need to constantly deepen our conviction of this love "which is beyond all knowledge" (Eph 3:19), for this is the love we are called "*to contemplate, live and announce to the world*",

(Art. 2) - this is the love that has redeemed us, won us over, made us "new creatures", a love that will give us a whole new outlook on life.

"Since the beginning the Church has looked to the Heart of Christ, pierced on the Cross... as a particularly expressive symbol of the love of our Redeemer".⁸ When we speak about the pierced Heart, we are speaking about the person of Christ, and the deep love which springs from His Heart, even to the point of the total gift of Himself. The Fathers of the Church and the mystics of the Middle Ages saw in His transpierced side not just a wound but a door opening to our redemption, leading us to discover the mysterious love of God, as we drink from the source, as it were, entering into the very Heart of Christ, who sacrificed Himself completely for us - unto death - to the point where He had nothing more to give, and He bowed His head and died.

We really need to contemplate this wonderful mystery, and to come to the reality symbolized by the transpierced Heart of Jesus - "They will look on the one whom they have pierced" (Jn 19:37). Did you ever read the heart of another and experience the joy of their love for you and the bond of trust between you? Contemplating this love for us and grasping "the length and the depth and the height" can be a real source of joy, and of energy and of fruitfulness in our calling.

John Paul II points out that the Old Testament uses two expressions in particular to describe God's merciful love - the term 'hesed' which means a profound "goodness", a faithfulness to Himself and to His covenant of love - even if His love is not

returned - a love that gives - a grace stronger than sin, far beyond what justice requires - that's the way God is. The second term in the Old Testament defining God's merciful love is _rahamin_ which denotes the love of a mother, completely gratuitous, not merited - an interior necessity. The Holy Father tells us that in the Old Testament these and other terms converge on one basic content to express the surpassing richness of God's mercy and love and to bring it close to us. There are simply no limits to His love! The Holy Father tells us that "mercy is the content of intimacy with the Lord, the content of dialogue with Him", that is an awareness of God's tremendous love for us, not only in spite of, but because of our weakness - an awareness that really leads us to conversion. ⁹

If this is the message of the Old Testament, it is drawing close to Christ in the mystery of His Heart that we will discover, absorb and make part of ourselves the enormous compassion of God, as lived and revealed by Jesus in the New Testament. We will begin to realize the intensity of love that broke His Heart, culminating in the Cross of Calvary, where he gave Himself, that we might have life. "The suffering Christ speaks in a special way to man, and not only to the believer. The non-believer also will be able to discover in Him the eloquence of solidarity with the human lot ... And yet the divine dimension of the paschal mystery goes still deeper. The Cross of Calvary upon which Christ conducts His final dialogue with the Father, emerges from the very heart of the love that man has been given as a gift ... Believing in the crucified Son (and we can say, believing in the Sacred Heart) means believing that love is present in the world, and that this love is more powerful than any kind of evil in which individuals, humanity or the world are involved". ¹⁰

This is so relevant to the modern world. The whole world cries out for assurance. The whole of human history is the history of the need to love and be loved - a search for the meaning and destiny of human beings. We have good tidings of great joy to bring to a world that really needs to see belief in practice.

A love that is personal

"Only God can love a multitude infinitely, passionately and personally. Only a man can do this by means of suffering and death".¹¹ We are speaking of that very personal love revealed in Jesus - the love that God has for each of us as individuals, and for all of us as His people, a love that we can rely on completely. We speak of a religion of the heart, the importance of each face and name, the destiny of each individual before a God who loves each one of us, and permits each one of us to feel precious in the eyes of our God.

"I have called you by name and you are mine ... you are precious in my eyes and I love you" (Is 43:1,4). "I have carved you on the palm of my hand" (Is 49:16). It is a question of a personalization of the God-I relationship. Not intimism. If we speak of love, it has to be personal. We are inclined to be ideologists, tending to make an ideology of our faith. (Those who speak too readily of intimism often overvalue the system. Sometimes theology can be over-objectified).

Our vocation calls to enter into a heart to heart/person

to person relationship with a very specific person, Jesus, who is now the Christ. "In His Heart we learn to know the genuine and unique meaning of our lives and destiny".¹² He will certainly speak to us in the silence of our hearts, and we will become more and more convinced of His love. "His pierced Heart is the endless source of the divine charity which pardons, regenerates and restores life".¹³

As we enter into the personal mystery of Jesus, into His inner life, in a continual dialogue of friendship, more and more we will begin to discover a God who is "rich in mercy" -whom Jesus reveals to us as Father, for it is His very Son who manifests Him and makes Him known to us. That is why our consecration to the Sacred Heart can be such a liberating experience.

A love that is unconditional

Our vocation is to contemplate, live and announce this Love to the world, (cf. Art. 2). We don't really understand infinite, unconditional love. It is hard for us to imagine, as we think in very human categories. There are hundreds of texts in the Scriptures affirming it, yet it is hard to assimilate and comprehend it. There is a danger we can get lost in words and the texts remain simply texts. Only in the light of the Spirit, as we contemplate Jesus who is love in the flesh can we begin to make God's unconditional love the basis of our lives. We need to get down to a profound level, where we listen to His Heart speaking to us, if we are "to take a firm grip on the hope that is held out to us" (Heb 6:18) - so that we develop a habitual trust

in God's goodness and love, that enables us to live with great freedom. We are called not only to contemplate, but to live lives based on the absolute fidelity of God. "We may be unfaithful, but He is always faithful, for He cannot disown His own self" (II Tim 2:13).

I have often marvelled when I have seen a mother who continues to believe in, accept, forgive and welcome a wayward son, who perhaps insults, attacks, rejects her - indeed such a prodigal son gets even more attention and affection than the other members of her family! Sometimes even the wayward son can intuit her great love, and this is the beginning of his conversion. This is but an intimation of the gratuitousness, compassion, tenderness in the Heart of Christ for us. "Even if a mother were to forget her child at the breast, I will not forget thee" (Is 49:15). If God is the passionate, all-patient, all-forgiving lover that Christ reveals, surely His perfect love will bring even the most hardened sinner among us to accept it. If human love, weak and imperfect as it is, can melt hard hearts, we can believe that His perfect Love will penetrate every kind of resistance. (The great theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar states that he is prepared to cite text after text of the great mystics to support the right of hoping that God most assuredly saves all men from the very danger of hell - even Judas, Hitler, Stalin!). The Hound of Heaven will continue to pursue us, so that in the end, "all will be well and all manner of things will be well". (Bl. Julian of Norwich).

We need to make our own the fact that God sees all that is in us, yet He loves us infinitely more than we love ourselves,

with compassion, tenderness and a love that wins us over (redemptive) - no matter how often we offend or neglect Him, His Heart is open to us, we are already _pardoned sinners_. "Where sin abounds, grace does more abound" (Rom 5:20). We grew up believing that love is something to be earned - this militates against the whole biblical tradition of God's gratuitous love for us. We need to be convinced that He loves us. We need not convince him to love us! We do not have to induce His love nor can we deserve it - there is nothing we could do that would make Him love us more than He already does! There are no strings attached!

"This", then, "is the love I mean, not our love for God but God's love for us", (I Jn 4:10). We base our lives on His alliance of love for His people. This is what it means to be consecrated to the Sacred Heart - it means to have faith in the love of our Father revealed in Jesus - it involves total trust. We can trust in that "faithfulness at the heart of things" (G.M. Hopkins). We are "His beloved sons (and daughters) in whom He is well pleased". Do we really believe that? We must accept God's acceptance of us, as we are - this is the basic gesture of faith, our trust in the Giver from whom we receive all, even ourselves - let us trust who we are then, His children. The great lie would be to believe we come to God through our own perfection - no, the opposite is true - we come to Him through our weakness - there is nothing to be afraid of - that is the mystery of the Good News. He came for the poor, the weak, the sinner - that is the mystery of the Sacred Heart.

I think most of us can truthfully say that we've experienced His goodness in our lives. We can sing His praises for so

many blessings. Most of us can marvel at the way, despite our struggles, we have experienced His presence in our lives over the years. How many letters have I received in these past years from jubilarians, wonderful testimonies of God's love in action, full of gratitude and wonder at the goodness of God during their religious lives, at the same time expressing their unworthiness! "God will be faithful even if we are unfaithful". Yes, we can have faith that life will keep its promises. We can trust our experience of God. We can rely on His plans for us. We can believe in His Providence. We can abandon ourselves totally to His love.

This is what it means to be consecrated to the Sacred Heart - it is a whole way of living and being in the world. Once this Love really takes root in us, we see the world through different eyes. Only if we are soaked in the Scriptures, only if we come back again and again to the Word of God will an attitude of total trust grow in us. No wonder the monks of old made the *lectio divina* so central in their lives.

The Heart of Mary

"Mary has been associated in a singular way with the mystery of God made man and with His saving work; this is what is expressed in the union of the Heart of Jesus and the Heart of Mary" (Art. 2).

We are consecrated not only to the Heart of Jesus. We recognize the indissoluble union existing between the Heart of the Son and that of His Mother, bound as they are together in

the saving plan of God; "Mary belongs indissolubly to the mystery of Christ".¹⁴ Without her the Incarnation could not have happened - that is why our very first Constitutions insisted that we are called "to spread devotion to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary".¹⁵ Already in the "Prayer to the Heart of Mary" composed by Father Coudrin about the year 1800 we read: "It is through you, kind and sweet Mary, it is through your Sacred Heart, that we shall surely reach the Adorable Heart of your Divine Son".¹⁶ In his Circular of 14/4/1817 the Good Father wrote: "Remember dear Brothers and Sisters, that after the adorable Heart of Jesus, we should honor the Heart of Mary in a special manner ... Let us be consoled in our griefs that Mary is and will always be our protector and our help and that we shall always have a share in the affections of her Heart".¹⁷

I could continue to multiply texts, also of the Good Mother - suffice to consult Cahiers de Spiritualité No. 10 (375-428) for a representative selection - there is simply no doubt that "*we have a filial devotion to Mary as our inheritance*" (Art. 59) - indeed, faith in her love has always been a special dimension of our charism. She helps us to understand the depths of the love of Christ and to enter into His inner life. Mary, for many years lived in intimacy with the mystery of her Son.¹⁸ Mary's own Heart reached the depths of Jesus' Heart. She knew her Son intimately. Who knows and loves a son better than his mother? She formed not only His body but His mind and His heart. We think of her influence on Him, and the kind of caring role she played in His life. What a deep understanding existed between Jesus and His mother. She loved Him so totally that they were but one, the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, "so that there was but

one heart and one soul". She was truly "a unique witness to the mystery of Jesus".¹⁹

"Mary His mother, model of faith in that Love precedes and accompanies us so that we can enter fully into the mission of her Son" (Art. 3). "She was the first to believe... she followed Jesus step by step in her maternal pilgrimage of faith".²⁰ In the words of John Paul II, "Mary is the most lively image and the most perfect example of discipleship and consecration to the Lord: the Virgin poor and obedient, chosen by God, dedicated entirely to the mission of her Son". We can watch her in the Gospels and learn from her to trust, to be docile, to probe the Word of God. Mary's response to mystery was to "treasure all these things and reflect on them in her heart" (Lk 2:19,51). - She listened, received the Word in her heart - this is the contemplative dimension of her life.

Mary responds to that Word, with her life, with her fiat, "behold the servant of the Lord" - this is her fundamental option. She is alert to God's action, she reflects on her experience, and surrenders herself, completely, open to what God would ask of her. The implications of her vocation gradually unfolded in her life. She came to know God's will by searching in the Scriptures, reading the signs of the times. Only time revealed to her what God would ask of her. - "A sword of sorrow would pierce her heart" - a prediction realized as she stood at the foot of the Cross on Calvary united in the sacrifice of her Son. She is always a woman of strong trust, living in a condition of total surrender - "Do whatever He tells you ... Be it done into me according to your word", always thanking and praising God with her Magnificat.

"We are called to enter with Jesus, as Mary did, into the plan of the Father, for the salvation of the world through love" (Art. 13). She has shown us that we can enter actively into the mystery of salvation, without great external works, identifying our hearts with the mission of Jesus. In the Heart of Mary we can discover "the way par excellence" to follow Jesus with the attitude of a servant, the way of deep and faithful love.

The Heart of Mary was able to receive the *_gift of God_* and she gave herself to collaborate with God's loving action in the world. In the company of Mary we are called to enter into a very profound relationship with Jesus, entering into the mystery of His love, penetrating it, living by it. ²¹ Like Mary, we are called to look "on him whom they have pierced" (Jn 19:37). Her heart is in total accord with Christ's: that is why we view their hearts together, uniting them in the same love and making one consecration of ourselves to both of them.

Mary, the Queen of Peace, is a very modern figure, a woman for our times. By every criterion that we could imagine she was among the poor and the powerless and the unimportant. She was a poor woman from an insignificant town. The powerful people of her time would not have given her a second glance. But she had a real freedom within her. She believed completely in the God of peace. She knew that His power and His love are without limit. That was what gave her the freedom and the strength to accept her role as Mother of God. She shows us the profound freedom that every human being has - the freedom to do the will of the Father. In the end that is the freedom that matters. She teaches us that, however dark our

situation may be, in a very uncertain world, the God of peace is within it. Peace comes from being in harmony with the plan of God. That is why Mary is the model of freedom and the Queen of Peace.

Most of history is interpreted in patriarchal, masculine terms. We were "created male and female". God is just as much feminine as masculine - the Gospel needs the image of Mary for wholeness. We need Mary's presence to feminize the Church, to show us how to love. Mary presents to us the "sacramental presence of the maternal features of God".²²

Feminists, having previously dismissed Mary as a model for today, are now prepared to see her as a woman making her way against the odds in a patriarchal society. They are also aware that in Latin America especially, Mary has come to the fore as the bearer of liberation. The Magnificat is a central text of liberation theology.

Paul VI gave excellent expression to this whole liberating dimension of Mary in *Marialis Cultus* No. 37: "Mary of Nazareth, despite her total submission to the will of God, was far from being a passively submissive woman or one given to an alienating religiosity; she was a woman who had no hesitation in affirming that God is the avenger of the humble and oppressed, who pulls down the mighty of this world from their thrones. We can recognize in Mary, who stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, a strong woman, who knew poverty, suffering, flight, and exile (Mt 2:13-23) - situations that cannot escape the attention of those who with an evangelical spirit seek to channel the liberating energies of man and

society".

Mary, as our mother, keeps each of us in her heart. "Mary's motherhood is a gift which Christ Himself makes personally to each individual ... Motherhood always establishes a unique and unrepeatable relationship between mother and child and between child and mother".²³ "The Blessed Virgin's role as mother leads us to turn with filial confidence to her who is ever ready to listen with a mother's affection and efficacious assistance".²⁴ Our new Constitutions express anew our consecration to Mary, presenting her to us both as our Mother and our model of faithful living. She precedes us and

accompanies us in the radical following of her Son so that we can enter fully into His mission.

Although there is nothing new in the above reflections, I have given them a lot of space, for I think they are very central to our vocation. I have tried to capture in plain words the motivation, the values, the spirit by which we ss.cc.'s might aspire to live our vocation today. We are consecrated to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. It is a spirituality of hope and gratitude much appreciated by God's people, who somehow seem to recognize in our charism a cordiality (truly springing from the heart) and a humanity with which they can identify. It seems to convey a message - especially to those who are struggling with their failures, with their weakness, with their sinfulness, and to those who are suffering through poverty,

through marginalization of whatever kind or even through persecution - despite everything, to continue to believe, to hope against hope, for God is love, and His love will triumph in the end.

"From this consecration to the Sacred Hearts our mission has its origin: to contemplate, live and announce to the world God's love which was made flesh in Jesus" (Art. 2). Contemplation means that we live from within our own center. Contemplation means that we go to that place within us, beyond our thoughts, our feelings, our self-image to where God, who is Love dwells, to that place where we discover ourselves "hidden with Christ in God". There we will be aware of who we are in God. There we will discover that we are deeply loved even before we can give or receive any love. When we come in touch with that First Love - when we return to the source within us, we will be set free. Only then will we be able to live the dynamism of saving love, only then will we be able to live our reparative vocation and mission in all its dimensions - this is our loving response to His love.

V. THE DYNAMISM OF SAVING LOVE

"Our consecration calls us to live the dynamism of saving Love and fills us with zeal for our mission" (Art. 2).

In the Heart of Jesus we contemplate the saving Love of God in the flesh. Our consecration calls us not only to contemplate but "to live the dynamism of saving Love", that is, to love with His love. Remember our charism is a gift from God - it is "that energy of His, which is at work in me with power" (Col 1:29). By our consecration we give ourselves totally to the transforming power of "Christ within us", so that our whole lives get caught up in God's movement of redeeming love. The Father put all His saving power in Jesus in order to transform (raise up) the world. For us to say "we believe in love" is to say that we believe that this Love is capable of transforming us, and of transforming and changing the world. This would explain how the Good Father experienced his charism, as power, energy, as a burning zeal.

This "dynamism (power) of saving Love" within us, is God's gift enabling us to love with His heart. "The deeper we go within ourselves, the more we will find the Other. Any authentic encounter with this loving saving Other produces in us a new graced ability to come out of ourselves to truly encounter and be in communion with others. The Love who is God creates within us the power for depth, mercy and commitment in our relationship with others ... This is the dynamism of redeeming and freeing love".²⁵

"Our mission urges us to evangelizing action by which we enter into the interior dynamism of Christ's Love for His Father and for the world, especially for the poor, the afflicted, the marginalized and those who have not heard the Good news" (Art. 6).

As we discover the mysteries of His Heart and experience His love, we are filled with a desire to share it and to proclaim it to the world. To reveal that Love incarnated in the Heart of Jesus has always been the central mission of our Congregation. Our Community has always felt itself called to underline the dimensions of pardon and tenderness of that saving Love. We want to enter actively into the process of salvation centered in Christ Jesus, adopting the attitudes which made Him the Servant of God and of all people.

In all of this our great model is Fr. Coudrin. He was a pastor who never portioned out his zeal. He had the daring courage of the humble. Faced with what we today call the "dechristianization" of society he summoned us to the most profound of vocations: "to call people back to the confidence and the love of Jesus Christ".²⁶ And at the same time he made clear to us the extent of this call: "Their vocation, in the last analysis is one of total zeal and of a zeal on fire" ... - If a person is penetrated with the tenderness of the Heart of Jesus for the salvation of souls, can he help being set on fire with zeal to respond to the love of so good a Master? If a person thinks of the motherly tenderness of the Heart of Mary towards us who have been made her children in the person of St. John, can he still not feel his soul warmed with a holy zeal to honor the Virgin of Virgins? Now that is precisely what we are saying when we use the name Zealots".²⁷

The accent is on proclaiming the good news of His love. We are speaking of a zeal and a confidence so great that, after the example of Christ, it expresses itself in a preferential option for the weak and the poor. Fr. Coudrin did not doubt the power of that love, as he proclaimed the Good News. Our charism brings with it the expectation that God will be working with us in our mission - and so we can be daring, as Fr. Coudrin was - ready to risk many initiatives - not with a "prudent" calculating attitude, but rather with an attitude of generosity and readiness to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of the people - "the love of Christ urges us on" - it is a zeal that comes from that dynamism, energy (love) within us, enabling us to respond to the needs of the Church and of the world. As in the case of the Founders themselves, these needs will demand on our part availability, mobility, flexibility - a real missionary spirit.

"Availability to the needs and demands of the Church, discerned in the light of the Spirit, and the capacity to adapt to circumstances and events are characteristics inherited from our Founders. The missionary spirit frees us and makes us available to exercise our apostolic service where we are sent to bring and receive the Good News" (Art. 6).

Our ss.cc. vocation calls us to reach out not only to the 'good people' but to all, and especially those who have been alienated or abandoned - this is badly needed today especially in a secularized society, where people still respond to that humanity, to that closeness and cordiality that comes from the heart. Indeed, our charism, which emphasizes not the 'goodness' or 'badness' of people, but rather God's heart for all

people, has a particular appeal. Time and again, visiting our brothers and sisters, the comments of the people they serve give testimony to how very much the ss.cc. spirit is appreciated.

Today it is difficult to talk about God - perhaps, many people who seem to be indifferent to the faith today, have really rejected a caricature of God. Sometimes, we have made of Him, a God who puts people on the border - outside the fold, beyond His touch, beyond His love and acceptance. Sometimes we have done it by perhaps identifying the 'real faithful' as those who obey all the Church rules - those who go to Mass, those who don't practice birth control etc. etc., and so people feel - well, I don't really believe any more, because I cannot keep these rules - that is, they don't really know a loving God - they feel that they are alienated, not really belonging to God's people - they feel excluded. Perhaps we all feel marginalized at times, even though we are loved and accepted. How much deeper must the alienation be for those who believe they have failed in life, who feel rejected, unwanted and powerless and who have never really 'owned' the liberating message of the Gospel.

We are called "*to make our own the attitudes, options and tasks that led Jesus to the point of having His Heart transpierced on the Cross*" (Art. 3). This implies the task of incarnating in ourselves God's love as it was incarnated in Jesus during His whole life: "He had compassion on the multitude" (Mk 8:2). He proclaimed the Good News of God's reign in their midst. He fed them with God's Word and with the Bread of Life. With that same compassion in our hearts, that comes from His Heart, we will be sensitive to all, sharing the Word of Life, and making His love present in people's lives, and giving them new hope.

In the pierced Heart of Jesus we will discover the tremendous injustice in the world, and how it affects the Lord Himself, for Jesus has declared not only His solidarity but His identification with those who suffer. Loving with His Heart, following Him in His work of bringing about God's reign on earth signifies that we take a strong stand against the evil existing in the world. Like Jesus, we can expect that our hearts will also be transpierced as we follow the Suffering Servant - but we can have confidence, for we have received this charism which fills us with zeal to incarnate His love.

VI. REPARATION

"We identify with the attitude of Jesus and with His reparative work" (Art. 4).

Earlier, when we spoke about the Sacred Heart, we spoke about the attitude of 'abandonment', the total trust which Jesus had in His Father, an attitude we wish to share. Now I wish to speak of His reparative spirit, the other essential characteristic of His Heart, and the source of His reparative work. While the spirit of abandonment entrusts us to the Lord's saving mercy in our powerlessness - the spirit of reparation enables us to participate in the Christ's saving mission, a fruit of what He did to destroy the reign of sin and to restore the reign of God.

From the very beginning of our Congregation a spirit of reparation characterized our community, a spirit which expresses itself in reparative eucharistic adoration and in evangelical service. The Good Father in his *Mémoire* of 29/9/1824 describes us as "Perpetual Adorers of the Most Holy Sacrament and Repairers of the injuries caused to the divine majesty".

In an interesting unpublished article entitled: *_How the Good Father saw reparation_*, Fr. Yves Kerrien writes that nothing is more sure than the intention of the Founders to found a family with a reparative vocation. Fr. Coudrin made his own the devotion to the Sacred Heart, as it came from St.

Margaret Mary - which could be expressed thus: Reparation can only be a union with the Heart of Jesus "loving God through the Sacred Heart." ²⁸ Fr. Kerrien continues: The Good Father calls us the family of the Sacred Hearts, of the suffering Heart of our Good Master... and he quotes Fr. Euthyme Rouchouze (often called the second founder) who says: "Yes, we are the family of the Sacred Hearts... They communicated to us something of their life. So, we have to reproduce the characteristics of the Sacred Hearts... Consequently, we have to enter into Their love which went as far as being a total gift for the salvation of the world. Thus, we will repair, from our part, the injuries caused to the divine majesty by the enormous crimes of the sinners. That is the first idea that was present at the birth of our Institute. It is the Good Father's idea and in his letters he repeats it so often that it must have been for him the leading-idea which gave birth to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts". ²⁹

This approach to Reparation is very much in line with modern theology which sees Reparation not so much as directed to Jesus Himself (e.g. consoling Him for the ingratitude of those who do not accept His redemptive work), but rather as uniting ourselves with Jesus in making reparation to the Father, that is, assuming the cause of the love of God and fighting actively against the sin of the world which does not recognize God's gratuitous love.

We wish to identify with the sentiments of the Heart of Christ and participate in His mission. Perhaps this is our way of expressing what our first Constitutions called our vocation "to retrace the four ages of our Lord Jesus Christ". The whole thrust of the first chapter of our Constitutions, as we have already

seen, is to identify with Christ, entering into the mystery of His Heart so that our whole lives will be lived through Him, with Him and in Him ...

As with Jesus, our lives will be a response of love towards the Father, "who has first loved us". Jesus revealed to us the meaning of reparative love, that total gift of self. The Father is not some distant personage awaiting satisfaction by a sacrificial gift. "The return of love is the unique and true reparation which the Son can give. For love, love is enough". The theology of reparation is based not on compensation, repayment to the Father for offenses, but rather on a recreation of the human spirit in love.

This is the new covenant of reconciliation, of reparation. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (II Cor 5:17). This new covenant, a new creation, is a new beginning, starting from Christ's resurrection and our incorporation in His death and resurrection. So, its central figure is the crucified Christ showing God's love giving Himself up to the last, and restoring a new humanity in His resurrection. Thus, our Constitutions say: "*Our reparation makes us participate in the mission of the risen Christ who sends us to announce the Good News of salvation*" (Art. 4).

Communion with Jesus means entering into His passion. Christ's passion had its value not from the magnitude of His sufferings, but from His fidelity to the mission He had received. He freely accepted the consequences of His loving commitment. The cross we must carry is likewise a consequence of following Christ.

We are ready to sacrifice all for the sake of the kingdom. The sacrifice of Christ was that he offered Himself to the Father for the salvation of all. "... Look at the Heart of Jesus, who substituted Himself for all the holocausts of the Old Law... a living holocaust..."³⁰ Fr. Coudrin advises Sister Gabriel de la Barre to accept her trials with courage, "uniting them to the different sacrifices that the Heart of the Good Master was obliged to make in order to beget us for His Father".³¹ Later on, our Superior Generals, Rouchouze, Bousquet, Prat, d'Elbée will say again that our whole religious life supplies inexhaustible material for reparative love. On what is our faith in the efficacy of this reparation based? On our union, through love, with the redemptive Christ. "Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty" (Jn 15:5).

We are ready then, to deny ourselves, making of our lives a means for the cause of the reign of God and for the good of others - making ourselves effectively to be in solidarity with those who suffer the consequences of sin. However, it is not the pain or renunciation, as such, which make these options reparatory. Rather it is the fact that we enter into the mission and the attitudes of Christ with regard to reality of sin "making up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (Col 1:24). Suffering when it comes from love can be used to destroy sin. "We must believe that a heart that loves, a life given over, can destroy the power of sin. This is why we wish to live celibate, poor and obedient as Jesus did" (Pablo Fontaine ss.cc.).

Our vows through their evangelical context, prophetically denounce the reign of sin, and so they form a vital part of

our reparative mission (Cf. Arts. 13-16). In effect, it is a question of offering one's life, "handing it over", being assimilated to Christ and sharing His lot as 'servant of Yahweh' with His attitude: "Behold I come to do Your will" (Heb 10:9). This attitude is central to our whole reparative vocation: "*Our reparation is communion with Him whose good is to do the Father's will and whose work is to reunite by His blood the dispersed children of God*" (Art. 4).

Reparative Adoration

As we have seen, the spirituality of the Sacred Heart is a way of love which leads to a life of communion with Jesus. It is based on sustained contemplation, particularly, in Eucharistic adoration. In a document of unknown date entitled "Advice of the Good Father on Adoration", kept by Sister Justine Charret, the Father Founder said: "... The adorer should adore with Jesus Christ, to repair just for herself and for the sins committed throughout the world".³² In Art. 53 of our new Constitutions we read: "*Eucharistic adoration is an essential part of our Congregational heritage and of its reparative mission in the Church. In our religious apostolic life, adoration is rooted in the celebration of the Eucharist. It is a time for contemplation with the Risen Jesus, the beloved Son of the Father who came to serve and give His life*". Although the task of repairing the action of sin in the world is placed first in our Constitutions, without the contemplative dimension we could lose our way. The eucharistic celebration makes us participate in the attitudes of Christ before the Father and the world so that we can be united in His mission and in His reparative work.

We do not doubt that sin affects God in some way, for it "*opposes the Father's Love and disfigures His design for the world*" (Art. 4). It is a rejection of His love. On this earth, we know how Jesus Himself wept over Jerusalem. It cannot be wrong for us "to look on Him whom they have pierced" and to share His sentiments, to be in 'sympathy' with Him. No doubt the evil of sin touches the Heart of Christ, that is, in the most profound depth of His person. The Indians have a beautiful way of identifying with those whom they love. They say: "I place my heart next to your heart. This is so that the two hearts will beat as one".

We see our adoration as a prolongation of the Eucharist and of the sacrifice of Christ which atoned for the sin of the world, thus reconciling us with God and with each other. His open Heart will be for us "an inexhaustible source of life" from which a new world can be born (cf. Art. 5). If we make the sentiments of the Heart of Jesus our own, we will be filled with His compassion, and with that apostolic zeal which Fr. Coudrin regarded as distinctive of the Congregation.

Apostolic Action

Our reparatory attitude will extend to that other dimension of sin: its destructive impact on the work of God in history and in the world. We are called to fight actively against sin and its effects. We are called to heal the wounds of the Crucified who continues His passion today, for He has identified Himself with all those who suffer injustice and every

kind of rejection and oppression. In their sad faces we recognize "the pained features of Christ the Lord".³³ "The spirit of reparation we have inherited puts us on the side of the suffering and the powerless, in solidarity, to supply what is wanting in the suffering of Christ. In this way our reparative adoration will lead us to continue the ministry of Christ Himself".³⁴

We are called not only to reparative adoration, returning love for love to the Father, as Christ did, but also we are called to participate in Christ's whole life, by our apostolic action. Justice, peace and reconciliation are values rooted "in the love which is in the Heart of Jesus, a love which embraces all men and women in their unique human reality".³⁵ As we seek to bring about Christ's reign in the world, human hearts need to be converted, and we need to develop everywhere community relationships as brothers and sisters. *"To make the Kingdom of God present, we seek the transformation of the human heart and we endeavour to be agents of communion in the world. In solidarity with the poor, we work for a just and reconciled society"* (Art. 6).

Reparation for sin is, above all, oriented to people - aimed at bringing about a conversion of their hearts, in such a way that they become open to God's gratuitous love. We ourselves are the very first to need conversion, for *"We recognize our own sinfulness"* (Art. 4), and we have no reason to be self-righteous, and we feel ourselves to be in solidarity with all victims of the sin of the world, of injustice and of hate. Nor do we pretend to be the only ones who make reparation - we collaborate with all who wish to build a new world.

Our spirit of reparation also includes the ecumenical

dimension, for "*we recognize the spiritual worth of all peoples and of every person. We wish to work for the unity desired by Christ as a sign of communion and love among all*" (Art. 42,3). As Jesus gave Himself over completely to a ministry of healing and pardon "*reuniting by His blood the dispersed children of God*" (cf. Art. 4), we, weak as we are, wish to share in His reparative mission.

Finally, to make reparation for sin signifies to transform not only hearts but also structures. We recognize that sin is a reality in the personal sense, but reparation has also to do with so called 'social' sin. Healing wounds implies not only helping 'broken' individuals but may demand the calling into question of the structures and systems that perpetuate injustice and misery. I speak of the way society is organized, and of those structures, be they economic, political, social or cultural, which marginalize and oppress many peoples. Such structures are real obstacles to a world of justice and peace, and they are certainly contrary to God's loving plan for His people. This is why "*our reparative vocation encourages us to collaborate with all those who, led by the Spirit, work to build a world of justice and love, sign of the Kingdom*" (Art. 4).

VII. FOLLOWING JESUS

"In Jesus we find everything: His birth, His life and His death. This is our Rule" (Art. 3).

The words of the Good Father help us to keep ourselves really focused on the Lord. They remind me of a television interview with Fr. Pedro Arrupe S.J. some years ago. At the end of a long interview on many things, he was asked a surprising question "And what do you think of Jesus Christ?" He replied without hesitation: "For me Jesus Christ is every-thing!"

"When God gave us His Son, who is His one Word, He spoke everything to us, once and for all, in that one Word. There is nothing further for Him to say. _This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him_. I have already told you all things in my Word. Fix your eyes on Him alone, because in Him I have spoken and revealed all ... Moreover, in Him you will find more than you ask or desire".³⁶

"He is the center of history and of the world; He is the one who knows and who loves us; He is the companion and friend of our life. He is the man of sorrows and of hopes ... I could never finish speaking about Him: He is the light and the truth; indeed He is the way, the truth and the life. He is the bread and the spring of living water to satisfy our hunger and thirst. He is our shepherd, our guide, our model, our comfort, our brother ... He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega ... He is the secret of history; He is the key to our destiny."³⁷

"In Jesus of Nazareth, in His Heart, in His words, in His actions the mystery of God's love ... is supremely revealed. Lift up your eyes to Jesus Christ. Contemplate the God-Man, the man with the transpierced Heart. Do not be afraid ... He will purify your heart, strengthen it, direct it to those in need".³⁸ Little wonder that the Second Vatican Council emphasized the christological dimension of religious life, and so do our new Constitutions.

Traditionally, right from the beginning, our Constitutions called on us to retrace in our lives the four ages of Our Saviour, His childhood, His hidden life, His evangelical and His crucified life.³⁹ Thus the life of Christ has always been the source and inspiration for our lives and for determining the mission and ministries of the Congregation. The awareness that no one can exhaust the richness and fulness of Christ allows for a real diversity in unity, centered in the Person of our Lord.

If we speak of the imitation of Christ, we need to understand this in a dynamic sense - it is not simply taking Jesus as an example of someone we should imitate, nor is it a question of external practices - it is much more radical. By the following of Christ we mean entering into the very mystery of Christ and living by His Spirit. For us it means that we adopt His way of life, celibate, poor and obedient, and we manifest the Saviour's self-giving by embracing these vows, giving ourselves totally, making His mission our own. It means that we "live by His word, walk in His company, enjoy His inner presence, share His very life, participate in His saving mission. His person and His mystery are the proclamation and the essential witness of

our apostolate".⁴⁰ Our Constitutions in Art. 11 expresses it thus: "*We commit ourselves to this following of Jesus, as out of love for Him, we embrace His own way of life by means of our religious profession. Thus, we are free _to be with Jesus_ and we are available _to be sent by Him_ in mission for the building of God's Kingdom*".

This consecration of our lives to the Lord involves "*a total donation of our entire being*" (Art. 12,1). We give our whole lives over to Him and to His service. We need to make this surrender of self at a very deep level of our persons, if we are going to live with a real sense of our identity. We will never be happy with a reserved commitment. When we identify completely with our religious family, we will discover that we have our own special role and service to offer in the Church as together, we live our ss.cc. consecration (cf. Art. 12, 13).

In a society becoming more and more materialistic, individualistic and consumer oriented, where long range commitments seem less and less viable, the need for a more explicit presence of communities that follow Jesus is greater than ever - communities that can transcend the prevailing culture, transform it, and if necessary work against its values as a counter-cultural force. People need the inspiration and encouragement that comes from the Gospel of Jesus really lived. When lived radically, our vows have a powerful content, and they really challenge the prevailing culture. In the words of Art. 15: "*The vows, through their evangelical content, prophetically denounce the most characteristic manifestation of _the sin of the world_: those which strike at the fundamental values of human life. Taken in this spirit, our vows contribute to the redemption and promotion of these values and they form a vital part of our reparative*

mission".

In the past, our religious communities tended to live more isolated from the world. We experienced more personal and corporate security - including financial security, a good institutional image etc. - even though on a personal level many lived very ascetical and very dedicated lives. We recognize also that, especially in Western countries, many of us have been affected by the individualistic, liberal spirit of our day, and we have tended to domesticate the Gospel, perhaps settling for the *_comfortable_ life, adopting _middle class_ values.*

More and more our brothers and sisters are experiencing the Church's call to a personal and community renewal. They desire to live their faith and their vows more radically and more focused on the Gospels and on the person of Christ. They believe that because of Jesus - because of His life, His death and resurrection, something other is possible. They want to walk in His footsteps. They are ready to renew again the radical surrender they made at their profession, embracing our vocation with faith, as "*a way of life and freedom*". (Art. 16).

VIII. A WAY OF LIFE AND FREEDOM: CHASTITY

"Jesus lived His love for the Father and for humanity through His celibacy" (Art. 18), and He calls us to follow His example. His heart was "undivided", as was the heart of Mary, who is a model of faith and love in her chaste love for her Son and for His kingdom. (cf. Art. 19).

Our Constitutions stress that to be called to such a life is a gift of grace that can only be accepted in faith. Celibacy reaches deep into the development of our physical sexual nature. It affects very profound areas of our human existence. Such unconditional love means learning how to die. In a sense, it is a bearing witness in our bodies to the death of the Lord. Yet the gift guarantees God's help to live our vow. If we are called to this life by God, we can be sure He will give us all the help we will need. His words, "My grace is sufficient for you" (II Cor 12:9) will also be true for us.

"We realize that the richness of the affective life is discovered only progressively. We embrace our way of life with its perspectives of growth and maturation, confiding in the fidelity of Him who has called us. We find the necessary help in prayer, asceticism and in a sense of discretion" (Art. 20).

Celibacy involves a rupture outside the normal run of things. It is a sacrifice that touches intimately the deeper inclinations of our human nature. That is why we will need a sustained relationship with God, through humble and persevering prayer and it is really wise to have a good spiritual director

with whom we can be completely open. We are not judges in our own case, and a good director can be a great support. We do not always succeed in putting our affective life and our sexuality at the service of genuine love - "We carry our treasure in vessels of clay" (II Cor 4:7). A life of celibacy requires an adequate psychological maturity which makes us capable of cultivating deep friendships, of enduring solitude and of finding our joy in working among the people for the coming of God's kingdom - all this is easy to say - not always easy to do. That is why both discernment of vocations and accompaniment in living our vocation are so important.

There is great power in the witness of celibate love. There is no human explanation for such a vocation except our faith and hope in Jesus Christ. Today chastity is seen as impractical. It seems incredible that someone would find human intimacy without genital sexuality and gratification. A celibate who lives a warm and affective life of intimacy, which is not reduced to genitality, says by his/her life choice that human happiness, tenderness, compassion and passion are possible in a caring life of faith and hope.

We all know unhappy religious (of course there are unhappy married people too!). There is always the danger of displacing our affective lives rather than transforming them. A loss of tenderness and of affection can accompany the celibate life. There is the danger that love and passion would be directed to possessions, success, prestige, power... Moralistic preoccupations may also be a by-product of celibacy not grounded in the love of Christ and of other people. Only happy religious can give witness to the Gospel. By our lives more than

by our words, we reveal the possibility of a true dedication to and openness toward others, in sharing in their joys, in being faithful and constant in love, without a desire for domination or exclusiveness. Chastity should free our human hearts in a remarkable way so that they burn with a love for God and for all people. This is the way that Jesus Himself lived.

"We live our vow of chastity in a community of Brothers. This means that we can count on their fraternal help in order to be faithful to our commitment. It also means that we agree to contribute in creating in community life the climate necessary for each person to develop a well-balanced affective life and to learn self-giving love" (Art. 21). As Jesus Himself established a community of brothers among whom he lived, we too seek to live in deep brotherly relationships. We are not alone. In fact we are called to mutually support each other in our common vocation. We are all responsible for the quality of our community life. We have come together for the sake of the Gospel.

Despite the fact that our Founders were persons of their times, a time when there was far more reticence as regards sexuality ("My good friends, a grand reserve in sexual matters": Fr. Coudrin to Frs. Simeon and Martin 10/3/1827), nevertheless, we can say our Founders were really warm cordial persons who spoke from the heart with genuine affection for their brothers and sisters.⁴¹ Indeed Fr. Coudrin and Mother Henriette themselves gave us an example in their mutual love and support for each other in their common vocation.

On every level of our community, we need to belong to Christ, but we also need to belong to each other. We need to feel

that in a real sense we are not alone, but we can rely on each other for genuine human affection and support. "Chastity is best safeguarded where true brotherly love flourishes in the common life of the community".⁴² We can read in Cahiers de Spiritualité No. 10 (553-568) how strong that family spirit was in the primitive community of the Congregation. This mutual esteem, appreciation, welcome for each other creates the climate for a well-balanced affective life, and for that self-giving love which enables us to be open to the wider community.

The need for intimacy is real for everybody, for celibate people as well as for all other human beings. It is the deepest personal need we have, and it is a spiritual need. Indeed the assumption about mature adults is that they are sustained by close relationships. We need to develop more our own sense of belonging uniquely to God, because we too have a need to belong to somebody.

We recognize that human sexuality has an irrational and an impulsive side that cannot be easily explained, but this must not make us fearful. We need to take the risk of loving, but we need not fear if we are loving with the heart and spirit of Jesus. In fact, when our need for intimacy, deeply rooted in the Lord, is not met, we will be more inclined to act out in genital and romantic ways - and ultimately this will be the source of a lot of pain and frustration.

A life commitment usually signals the establishment of an identity. Only when we are confident of our identity can we establish and maintain a life of closeness to others, both inside and outside our religious community. Of course the experience

of loneliness remains too. And it too can be entered into at a new depth. To be human is to be lonely sometimes. The only cure for loneliness is solitude where we meet our God.

Solitude and contemplation are values that are really complementary to intimacy and to relationships - for if we do not live from within our own center, where God dwells, we will not be capable of any healthy relationships.

We are called "*to deepen in a more personal way our loving communion with Christ*" (Art. 22.1). We ground our lives in God and enter into a personal covenant with Him. It is a radical choice. We need to live our celibacy in a positive way, in a more immediate personal relationship with the Lord, trusting in His promise to be with us always. It is a mystery that is sometimes painful - but we will discover that this tremendous lover touches us in the depths of our loneliness, as no human lover can touch us, and calls us to a peace that surpasses understanding.

A committed celibate life cannot be sustained by anyone who does not regularly take the time to make himself or herself available to the Lord in order to be touched and moved by God's Spirit. Prayer is essential to the living of our life. We will emerge from the depth of our relationship with God with a new strength and a new solidarity with fragile brothers and sisters everywhere. We need also of course to choose to act in a way that will help us appreciate the life to which we are called, remaining open to all warm relationships including those that can ripen into deep personal sharing.

By our vow of chastity we witness to the absolute value of God's friendship, not only for ourselves but for all human beings. In some way we witness to the mystery of God's presence in the world, and to the possibility of "*a communion that is not of flesh and blood*" (Art. 22.4)

"Lived in common and with joy, it is a sign of the future world and an anticipation of the Kingdom" (Art. 22.4). The Church and the world is in constant need of being reminded, that however wonderful this earth may be, the age to come transcends the present age. This world is not the end. There is hope of fulfilment for all in the kingdom of God - if we are happy in our vocation it will certainly strengthen peoples' faith.

Although our celibate vocation cannot be understood primarily in terms of the objective services it renders to the Church, it does "*liberate us so that we can be more human, more open, more creative, and so that we can be more capable of risk in our apostolic work*" (Art. 22.2). It does free us for a more universal availability. "The love of Christ urges us" in such a way that we are "unable to do otherwise" (Schillebeeckx) in order to continue His mission. We are free to enter into a variety of non-possessive, other-centered relationships, incarnating the love of Christ in the world around us.

In particular, our vow of chastity, "*brings us into a special solidarity with those for whom celibacy means loneliness and a state of life imposed by circumstances*" (Art. 22.5). Our life brings with it, by its very nature, a certain marginalization. We do not marry. We do not take part in the pro-creation of the next generation. Even if we have married brothers and sisters, they have their

own families, they have their children, and quite rightly, they have their own concerns and responsibilities. Of course we love them and accept them, and we are loved and accepted by them - nevertheless we feel in some sense at the edge of their lives. And so, we can truly be in solidarity with others who may feel the pain of loneliness imposed by circumstances - the divorced, the deserted, those abandoned, victims of infidelity or broken relationships. We accept the pain of celibacy in solidarity with those who cry out from their broken lives for intimacy with another. We can walk with them and love them, sharing their pain, but also the hope of the eternal wedding feast. We can be a real support to many who live an enforced celibacy. Of course we need to be happy people to do this. We need to be experiencing the great joy of our vocation, with a real sense of identity and of belonging to the Lord.

Many find it difficult to realize that love can be lived in a total dedication of oneself without necessarily requiring a sexual manifestation of it. Our lives can truly be "*prophetic denouncements of that selfishness which vitiates sexuality; they can also announce a new kind of relationship between persons*" (Cf. Art. 22.3). In our culture today there is much sexual manipulation and exploitation (not really sexual liberation), and chastity is considered by many to be impractical and out of date. Yet the truth is that our deepest longings and desires are for relationships that go beyond physical sex. Sexuality is more than genital sex. It is a dimension of our self awareness. Genital sex is merely one specific expression of a much larger reality which we call sexuality, which includes the drive for community, family, friendship, love, creativity. Our lives become warmer, more meaningful and more whole when these are present.

When sexuality is synonymous with genital sex, even married people, except for brief moments, live in much frustration and restless dissatisfaction.

In a world "permeated by unredeemed sex" (B. Häring) celibacy provides a counter culture witness, a reminder that life and freedom are to be found not in erotic licence or sexual indulgence but in interpersonal relationships marked by devotion and integrity. If "rooted and grounded in love", we can give ourselves without reservations. Haven't we ourselves found this to be so? Celibacy will provide a strong testimony that unselfish love is possible. We have the opportunity to bear witness to that love that flows from the heart of Christ who came "that we might have life and have it more abundantly".

IX. A WAY OF LIFE AND FREEDOM: POVERTY

"_Jesus, being rich made Himself poor_, and during His ministry He lived with His disciples, sharing everything in common with them" (Art. 23.1).

Jesus came into the world poor and He left it poor - He was the freest of men. "He took on the form of a servant" - He did not have "whereon to lay His head". He lived a life that was poor in fact and in spirit, a simple life subject to the common law of work. Mary, too, is presented in our Constitutions as being among the "poor of Yahweh", singing the Magnificat to the Lord, who exalts the humble and sends the rich away empty (cf. Art. 24). We are called to welcome in a radical way the invitation in the words and example of Jesus *"to leave all and embrace the life of poverty He shared with His disciples"* (cf. Art. 23).

Following the example of Jesus and the ideal of the first Christians we are invited to share all things in common (cf. Art. 25). Certainly that was the spirit from the beginning in our own Congregation. "The Community founded by the Good Father was a poor Community, in imitation of Christ. This poverty was real, not only in consequence of difficult circumstances but also because of a desire to serve the poor and to carry on an apostolate without losing its freedom.⁴³ That early community was really alive and full of zeal. If we follow their example, we too, will find that *"a simple life style, in solidarity with the poor is a decisive factor for the vitality of our entire religious life"* (Art. 30.1)

A simple life style shared in common? Are we really

credible today, or do we sometimes witness more to affluence, luxury, comfort and financial security? How detached are we really? Our Constitutions insist that we place our confidence in God's Providence, being careful "*not to allow ourselves to be seduced by riches and the power that comes with them ...*" (cf. Art. 25.2). Are we willing to let go of everything? The spirit of our Founder was that "we have nothing that belongs to us once we have made our vows ...".⁴⁴ "The spirit of poverty means that we don't have all we want - there is always something lacking".⁴⁵ Poverty means deprivation but it enables us to live with free hearts, unattached to material goods - relativizing their importance. We must have the attitude that everything we have belongs to the Community - salaries, pensions, gifts, whatever - that is the spirit of Art. 26 of the Constitutions - we are ready to share all, to put all that we are and all that we might have at the service of the community and at the service of its mission. (cf. also Art. 142).

Already in 1977 in an inspiring address to the Interamerican Congress of Religious in Canada, Fr. Arrupe S.J. told the religious that the "newness of the Gospel" demands of us a "conversion to frugality", from which no religious can consider himself or herself dispensed. "Homo sapiens" has become "homo consumens" - our first obligation as religious will be to become "homines servientes" who live with what is sufficient, and who seek to develop a capacity for service to others in solidarity. Now we are more conscious than ever of the wisdom of that advice.

Our Constitutions encourage us to live a simple life not only as individuals but as communities. We need to have a

vision of community life that is really apostolic in that it gives witness "to the values of the kingdom" - it should be "a sign for the world that denounces the idolatry of profit and consumerism as well as its devastating effects on rich and poor alike". (cf. Art. 30, 2,3). Many of us are part of the consumer culture, and it is very easy for us to get caught up in it. That society, we know well now, is grossly unjust. That is why we are urged by the Church to constantly review our life options, our use of goods, "because one who dares to speak to others about justice must above all be just in the eyes of others".⁴⁶

It is difficult to be very prophetic while we maintain the comfort of a middle-class life style. Indeed, sometimes in the eyes of others we are among the privileged classes.

In fact, "the mission of the congregation leads us to share the life of the poor and to take up their cause, knowing that solidarity with them can bring us face to face with a world marked by injustice" (Art. 25.1).

This linking of the poverty of religious life with the poverty of the real poor is perhaps a new insight that did not appear in earlier Constitutions, but it is of tremendous importance. It means that, in some way or another, all of us are called to share the life of the poor, and to take up their cause. In an earlier letter, I wrote that "the cry of the poor" of which Pope Paul VI spoke in *Evangelica Testificatio* challenges "all of us to live for the poor". There I mentioned that "some of our members are already working directly with the poor, and a much smaller number are living among and as the poor". Happily, that number is gradually increasing. We welcome this as a sign that

the first orientation of our recent General Chapters is being deepened and being concretized. Now our Constitutions say it again: we are called "*to share the lives of the poor and take up their cause*". It is the mission of Jesus Himself: "to bring Good News to the poor". (Lk 4,18).

This mission has consequences which should become visible in our daily lives. If we are to see the world with new eyes, we will need some real contact with poor people. A real problem facing some of our religious is that their apostolates no longer reach the poor and the marginalized. This may call for concrete decisions to review our apostolic priorities.

We must remember also that where we live determines what we see; whom we listen to determines what we hear. Thus, for example, we can be encouraged by those among us who have already made the move into the world of the poor. It is reassuring for all of us that this painful transition can be made at least to some degree. It would seem that small communities inserted among the people have a greater possibility of sharing life with poor people - our larger institutions can sometimes be almost closed fortresses and perhaps somewhat intimidating for ordinary people. There is a danger that we might live at a distance from the critical issues, rather isolated and out of contact. When we are in contact with littleness, with poverty, with brokenness, with the poor - we will be converted to compassion, we will begin to know what God is really like. We have to move to the margins of society if we are to understand the Gospel - that is where Jesus said he could be found "in the least of the brethren" (Mt 25:40).

Jesus identified with the poor, the stranger, the hungry, the thirsty, those in prison, those stripped of everything. *"Our faith moves us to welcome and serve Jesus Himself who suffers in the victims of human greed and injustice to the end of time"* (Art. 30.4).

If we identify with poor people *"we will discover precisely in the dispossessed and marginalized wherein lies the true dignity of all human persons, and where the authentic quality of life is to be found.* (Art. 30.2). We will discover that the really little people have a clarity of vision and a spiritual freedom - and a sense of humour that the rich don't always have. They are in touch with life, and we can learn much from them. Sometimes we are possessed by our possessions, and we are not free. The more we have the more we want, and what we have, we enjoy less! (Think of many children in the First World - thirty gifts under the Christmas tree - and they hardly enjoy them!). It is wonderful to experience the humanity of the poor, and how much more free and open they can be in their human relations. As the song says: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose". It is almost as if the rich have too much to protect, and their possessions can make them hard of heart.

Of course, the poor have their faults too. They are as imperfect as the rest of us, but they are the victims of real injustice, and perhaps their state gives them a humility, that leaves them more open to real values. Incidentally, we must not be so arrogant as to distinguish the worthy and the unworthy poor. We will recognize the beauty of Christ suffering in all His people, and we begin also to discover the solidarity that links us all.

Jesus "*denounced as evil the poverty which the poor of this world suffer and announced to them the Good News that God would reign in their favour*" (Art. 23.2).

We must not underestimate the absolute misery that so many people experience. Those of us who have not direct contact with the poor are in danger of having a very abstract notion of their intolerable suffering - material suffering, first of all - whether it be through hunger, homelessness, discrimination, injustice of every kind and all the humiliation that goes with it. The reality is that more than half of the human race cannot live lives worthy of a human being - and their plight is getting worse. Their lives are hell on earth. We must assume their cause, protesting at their "situation which cries out to heaven",⁴⁷ not merely in words but by the witness of our lives. We must bring them Good News - announcing "a life that conquers death".

Solidarity with the poor is a real dimension of our reparative vocation - restoring dignity to persons and working for justice. As we move towards the margin and take our place with the powerless, trusting in God's goodness and in His love - we will feel the need, the hunger and thirst for a different kind of future. We will really want to see the Reign of God come. By living radically "the values of the kingdom", we will take our stand at the side of the oppressed rather than the oppressors. Our witness and our service will indicate "*the way to liberation and to human fulfilment*" (cf. Art. 30.3), and we will be convincing signs of the good news that God will reign in their favour. We ourselves will meet God bleeding in suffering humanity - and we will be changed - we will be converted.

We are discovering the heart of the Gospel today in the Church of the poor. "It was those who were poor according to the world that God chose to be rich in faith and to be the heirs of the kingdom" (Jas 2:5). The fact that we are called to share the lives of the poor has profound repercussions for the mission and lifestyle of each religious and indeed for the whole community. Religious are encouraged to engage actively with all those who are struggling to overcome everything that condemns them to remain on the margin of life.⁴⁸ As we will see even clearer later in this letter, this is what our consecration to the Sacred Hearts demands of us today.

X. A WAY OF LIFE AND FREEDOM: OBEDIENCE

As with the other vows, our Constitutions, when speaking of obedience, begin with the life and example of Jesus. "His food was to do the will of His Father". In order to fulfil His mission of making God's kingdom present, "*He was always attentive to recognize the will of His Father and to fulfil it*" (Art. 31,1).

His heart was the heart of a servant, and He made doing His Father's will the center and motivation of all His actions without ever seeking anything for Himself. Indeed that obedience to His Father's will led Him to become the servant of all - "He came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). In this way He taught us too how to live our human existence to the full. He teaches us to seek at all times to do the will of our Father in heaven, always with the heart of someone ready to live life with an attitude of service. Our Constitutions present for us the model of Mary, whose life was so fruitful precisely because she too was so completely open to God's will ... "Be it done unto me, according to Your word" (Lk 1:38).

We are called to share in the life and mission of Jesus. In the words of the Good Father, "Be united in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, dear friends; but remember that we must not expect to be happy without wanting what God wants".⁴⁹ As with Jesus, Himself, our obedience is inspired by love - for we have confidence in our Father and in His Providence. The Spirit we have received is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out:

"Abba Father". (Rom 8:14-16). We believe, as His children, that "all things work unto the good of those who seek to do God's will". (Rom 8:28).

That same Spirit of Jesus enables us to look on all human beings as our brothers and sisters. We too are inspired by love to really serve them - What can I do for them? We are consecrated as Jesus was to the mission of making present God's kingdom among them - His kingdom of love, of justice and of peace.

We are "*called to make our own the obedient attitude of Jesus. For us, His call is concretized in the apostolic religious life that our Congregation proposes to us. Identifying with its mission and its orientations we find our way of following Jesus*" (Art. 33).

Because in His Providence, God has called us to live our lives as Brothers/Sisters in this Congregation, He also gives us the charism to live out our ss.cc. vocation. We can be confident that the charism, that special gift of the Spirit that lives in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, enables us to discern our mission together.

On the level of the Congregation, the writing of new Constitutions was an excellent exercise in discernment. As we have seen already, the Constitutions articulate for us the fundamental mission and orientations of our Congregation today, and this discernment has been authenticated by the Church. Their concrete application in our communities and in our daily lives obviously requires an ongoing discernment. God continues to manifest His will "in the midst of the brethren"⁵⁰ if

we are open to His Spirit.

Our Constitutions remind us that each of us is called upon to participate actively and responsibly in the life of our Community, if we are to fulfil the mission of the Congregation. *"This participation is especially indispensable in the task incumbent on the whole Congregation and on each of its communities: to discern the will of God in order to fulfil it in a concrete manner"* (Art. 35,1).

The word "obedience" is derived from the Latin 'ob-audire', meaning 'to listen attentively'... it is a life lived in obedience to the Spirit. We are called then to listen respectfully, attentively, and with faith: to listen to God, to our community, to the signs of our times, to life's circumstances and to the many 'calls' of daily living. We gather together in His name to discern together what God asks of us. We really want to be given over totally to what He wants. We are convinced that that is the only way to true life and freedom. His will is our life. And so, we share, not only our material goods but the unique gifts of every member of the community, their talents, their experience, their wisdom.

None of us have all the answers! We search together in a spirit of openness and of communal listening - listening with the idea of learning, expecting to be enriched by the same Spirit working in each of the brothers. Our obedience is a commitment to dialogue by adults who are responsible and free, open to newness and diversity. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them" - we need to recognize the wealth of this quote - if we come to dialogue thinking that we already know the will of God, then the

discernment has little chance of success. We need to be mature enough, not to have closed minds or fixed ideas, but rather to create a climate of free expression in our search for how we can best serve God's people. We are a pilgrim people - uncertain of the future, but always seeking the way ahead - with an attitude of trusting the community, with a deep respect for the others, for their dignity and for their freedom.

While the community must recognize each person, each one of us must also recognize the community. Our vow of obedience is really a consequence of our willingness to create community life. We can show that it is possible to be community persons today, when so many live alienated, individualistic lives. We all realize that the desire for our own fulfilment can be excessive - it should not be at the expense of the community and its mission. Searching for a common vision based on the community charism can help us test the spirits - all that should really count is what the Lord wants of us. This is confirmed in Art. 33 of our Constitutions where we are told that "*our obedience as religious derives from our belonging to the Congregation and in that it finds its meaning*". We expect and trust that the Lord will bless us with the fulfilment that comes from self-giving.

"Obedience contributes efficaciously to the death within us of what is most characteristic of "the old man", the will to autonomy and domination" (Art. 37.1). We know where obedience to His Father's will led Jesus - as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, "He learned to obey through suffering" (Heb 5:8). It will not be any easier for us. He did not seek His own will, even when His suffering was at its most intense - "Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me... yet not my will but Thy will be

done. He was obedient unto death" - trusting His Father to the end - abandoning Himself into His hands. We submit ourselves too into the hands of the Father, believing that "if we die with Christ, we will live with Him". That obedience is mediated to us through the brethren. In a world and culture that emphasizes domination, control, competition, individualism, and self-autonomy - it is not easy to live in a spirit of obedience, which emphasizes collaboration, freedom, community, cooperation and interdependence. Seeking to be united with the others in a common mission always involves pain and sacrifice - this is inevitable (give and take is necessary in any united family!). But we are sure this is God's will for us, - we are ready to become, like Him, "suffering servants". We want to put on the "new man", and to put to death within us that which is most

characteristic of the "old man" - the will to autonomy and domination.

Our obedience *"will open to us new possibilities for freedom, stripping us of the servitude and limitations stemming from our selfishness and the conditioning and prejudices of our environment"* (Art. 37.2). - We will not be locked in our own narrow point of view; we will not be alone in our mission. Through our openness, we will create a unity that will strengthen the efforts and the effectiveness of all who are co-responsible for our mission - thus *"allowing us to contribute to the liberation of those who feel alienated as a result of their own sin or because of 'the sin of the world'. Our obedience will help us to be a prophetic sign of the freedom of the children of God, in a world where human beings are oppressed"* (Art. 37.3.). It is paradoxical that it is in the service of others that we will discover the joy and the liberty of the

children of God.

The model of authority to be found in our Constitutions depicts authority as service, service to the brothers and to the mission. This, of course, is just as Jesus presents it in the Gospel (Art. 91). His example of washing the feet of the disciples is a beautiful reminder to us of caring love. "The leaders are there to serve the others, to wash their feet". Those who exercise authority must never forget the fundamental equality of all in the religious vocation (whether cleric or non cleric) - the basic law is brotherliness - only within this relationship does obedience in imitation of Christ have its place. This was an explicit desire of our General Chapter in the context of these new Constitutions. Each one has his gifts and his own unique contribution to make to the community (cf. Arts. 92.1 and 95). Those in authority must be very sensitive to all of this - really treating each one as a brother, fostering a family spirit, where all can be themselves and where the unique personality, the talents and well-being of each brother can be developed (cf. Art. 92, 1-2).

They must try to cultivate in the community an atmosphere of trust and acceptance of each one in all his/her weakness. The words of Fr. Coudrin writing to some of those he placed in authority can help us too:

"Be more open to one another, my good friend; it is the only way on which we can rely for our consolations or sorrows".⁵¹ ... "You should not be so sensitive to trifles... do good with courage, and as much as you can, uphold the dear confrere of whom you speak to me".⁵² ... "A bit

of tolerance goes a long way when one has authority".⁵³

The brothers who exercise authority "*seek to animate the community in the task of discerning the will of God, and taking care that it is put into practice*" (Art. 92.2). They do not create God's will - rather they promote its discernment! For this they do all they can to encourage the active participation and sense of co-responsibility of which we spoke earlier. They see prayerful dialogue as the principal means to strengthen communion among the brothers, centered around the mission and the spirit of the Congregation. This is seen as much more important in our Constitutions than the mere observance of rules (cf. Art. 92.3).

The superiors should animate very much from within the community - not from above or outside - they are brothers like the rest, but with a special responsibility for the promotion of the "oneness in mind and heart" of the brethren. They must help the brothers to become a real community - not simply apostolic teams gathered to become teachers, social workers, preachers or whatever - only in a real community is there true communication on a deep level - if this is a reality, decision-making will not be a problem. Although the Constitutions recognize that it can be appropriate for those in authority to take decisions in an evangelical spirit on certain occasions (cf. Art. 35.2), it is always so much better when a community can reach decisions by consensus.

In any case, the Superiors must encourage co-responsibility at all times. They themselves must form a government team, creating with their Councils a true communion of spirit, and

consulting with the brothers wherever possible before making decisions that affect them (cf. Art. 94, 95). They must respect the principle of subsidiarity, and the liberty of all, leaving ample room for responsible initiatives among the brothers. Again the words and example of Fr. Coudrin are quite helpful:

"I rely on your prudence and am well convinced that whatever you do is always for the best".⁵⁴ ... "You are on the spot, so use your judgement. Do whatever you think best and do not refer to decision back to me".⁵⁵

This is typical of his trust in the brothers and sisters.

Jean Vanier writes (and this applies to all who are in ministry): "It is not easy to be a good shepherd. I know the theory well and can talk about it. But I realize that often I am more like the _hired worker_ who needs to prove and protect his authority... my action springs more from my own anguish than from a desire to help another grow. This happens most often, when I have become overactive, when I have lost the source of light within me, when I am tired, or when I am far removed from the spirit of prayer, being too immersed in the daily concerns without sufficient recollection or inner resources... The one who acts as a shepherd must be a rock of tenderness and truth upon which the other can rely ... It is very difficult to exercise authority alone; one so quickly becomes defensive or unconsciously oppressive. One tends to protect one's authority and the established order, without permitting others to question it".⁵⁶

In the portrait of the Good Father at the end of our Rule

of Life (Appendix I), we see much of what has been said above described:

"Father Coudrin never looked on himself as 'proprietor' of his community. He saw all too clearly that his work was not his own; one of the names which he used most often to identify it was 'the work of God'...

He felt it necessary to integrate himself into the community, without seeking in authority a pretext for placing himself above it ...

He exercised his authority with a real sensitivity to persons and he recognized that he had no monopoly on ideas. He recognized the prophetic charism of the Good Mother, once he had carefully put it to the test.

... He stimulated, encouraged and reproved with discernment. Understanding and very tenderhearted, he nevertheless knew how to speak the painful truth when necessary. No one could have been less domineering than he and more open to collaboration and dialogue. He often asked advice from the superiors and the brethren.

... He was just as concerned with the devotion of souls and the freedom of consciences, as with the health of bodies. He did not confine his concern to his religious but extended it to their families, especially their parents. He recalled constantly the fundamental norms and the

need of preserving the spirit of the Congregation ...

Because he knew he was God's steward, he brought to everything a peace of heart, a faith in Providence, a purity of intention and outlook, a naturalness and a simplicity of action with the vigour of a leader of men. He was a realist, with a realism born of natural dispositions and confidence in God, rooted in the charity of Christ and the conviction that he was doing the *_Work of God_*.

... During his time in office, which lasted for 37 years, everyone always felt that he was in truth, the *_Good Father_*".

Not only on the local but also on the provincial and international level of the community, our Constitutions see the role of authority as a one of strengthening the communion and the mission of the Congregation. Likewise the Constitutions foresee structures which will help promote our common mission. In speaking of structures, Art. 98.1 of the Constitutions indicates that "*The fulfilment of our mission in different countries and the diversity of our apostolic activities demand at the local level a certain pluralism in structure and organization*". Obviously structures are necessary, but they are for the persons and their mission. They must be geared so that all can make a truly Christian response in community to God's call. Our structures like the community itself are geared towards our mission, and they must be discovered by the community - not imposed from outside - and not by one person in the community. These structures need to be evaluated regularly, and changed if

necessary to see if they are serving the mission in the best possible way.

Life is changing, persons are changing, personnel are changing - there must be room for pluralism and for flexibility, if we are to facilitate our lives together. However, in our day and age, when communication must take preference over _orders from on high_ as a means to ensure our unity, we all need to respect the agreed structure in a real spirit of cooperation, if we are to promote our life and mission. Today this demands far more of us in terms of attending meetings at every level of our community - it demands also the sacrifice of time, energy and money, but we see all this as part of our obedience today - the willingness to listen to each other, and to discern God's will together.

In some ways all this seems relatively easy. After all we see our vow as _a way of life and freedom_ - but actually, the price we must pay is high - _the cost is not less than everything_- giving over our lives not to do our own will, but God's will. It involves a deep personal commitment to what God asks of us, even when it isn't convenient or comfortable for us - it demands an availability and openness to whatever He sends our way. Outside the context of a deep faith, this is impossible.

When we speak of discernment, it is not simply a question of exchanging opinions, nor of enabling our egos to coincide, so to speak - but rather the searching together for how to respond to what God asks of us, as a servant community - no matter what the price. Living in community is not that easy - as is evident from the way community has broken down in society

today - we need each other's support, and a common commitment to our mission together. However, our Constitutions, our General and Provincial Chapters give us the orientations and the priorities - the parameters within which there should be ample room for freedom and creativity, enabling us to collaborate and support each other in our common vocation. Thus our religious community can be a genuine witness to the world of the possibility of real community life based on the values of the Gospel, a witness so badly needed today at every level of society.

We can expect that if "*we make our own the attitudes, the options and the tasks of Jesus*" (Art. 3), then the pattern of His life will be the pattern of our lives too. Our hearts will also be transpierced, and we will through our vows participate radically in the Cross of Christ (cf. Art. 16). This is the challenge of our call: - to renew again that radical surrender we made at our profession embracing our vocation with faith, as "*a way of life and freedom*" (Art. 16).

XI. SUFFERING SERVANTS - OUR SS.CC HERITAGE

"The mystery of Redemptive Love which fulfilled its work in the Cross of Christ, and which through it gave meaning to our suffering and to our whole life was the Good Father's great center of interest".⁵⁷

In his sermon on suffering Fr. Coudrin insisted that we can walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ only by carrying His cross. "It is Jesus Christ who has given us the unique example of a tenderness beyond any human feeling. We do not imitate Him except through sufferings."⁵⁸ "My poor children will always be children of the Cross in order to conform perfectly to the Heart of our Good Master ...".⁵⁹ "The Good God provides us with crosses, dear friend. This is proof that he loves us...".⁶⁰ "Love the cross, my sons, and be happy to see that you are taking the same path as the saints". "The Sacred Heart of Jesus keeps always and everywhere a special part of His bitter chalice for His friends".⁶¹

Mother Henriette wrote in the same vein. Thus, for example, in 1801 she wrote that the vocation of the Congregation is "to enter into the interior sorrows of the Heart of Jesus". "Extend your arms generously on the cross, and you will find it to be less heavy. Let us walk courageously behind a Crucified God. Let us never say: less pain, less suffering, but let us ask more courage, more strength, more resignation". (Oct. 1804) "Love of the cross can and should sustain us, for we must not deceive ourselves, we will have to suffer a lot. We must take refuge in the Heart of Jesus and remain there never to leave"

(Sept. 1812) ...

The successors of Fr. Coudrin, especially Fr. Euthyme Rouchouze who wrote extensively on our spirituality (in the terminology of the time), expressed this same idea of the sacrificial nature of our vocation in terms of our call to become victims with Christ, emptying ourselves, taking on the condition of servants in union with the sacrifice of Christ Himself.

This biblical tradition of the suffering Servant of Yahweh has always been a part of our heritage, even if not always expressed in these terms.⁶² Our Rule of Life, no. 77 expresses it thus: "At the heart of your vocation is the mystery of the Suffering Servant of God, 'come to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many'". The same theme is very present in our new Constitutions, not in any morbid way, but rather as an inevitable consequence of following Christ in our prophetic vocation.

Somehow we need to reclaim a sense of religious life as a way of freely chosen sacrifice. Jesus did not treasure His life and hoard it. He gave it away, freely and fully. Sacrifice is not a popular word today - it implies the willingness to go beyond self-interest. Can we accept that "we are consigned to our death every day, for the sake of Jesus, so that in our mortal flesh the life of Jesus can be openly shown" (II Cor 4:11)? This kind of commitment will speak volumes to the poor, to the broken, to the marginalized and to the alienated of our times. Isn't this why Fr. Damien's life is so inspiring? Indeed it is in solidarity with suffering, struggling people that we will discover the future and the real relevance of our mission. It is when we take

our place as suffering servants with those who experience the dark night and the heavy weight of the cross in their lives that we will be more likely to hunger and thirst for a different kind of future, and we will want to see the reign of God come.

We need a faith that transcends the current culture - and challenges it. Many live under the false illusion that economic wellbeing and the consumer society will respond to their needs, yet the reality is that there is a lot of emptiness, loneliness and alienation in the hearts of many, especially in the first world, not to speak of the misery experienced by the marginalized all over the globe. We need to proclaim with energy and conviction the emptiness of the consumer culture, and to renew our faith that in our crucified Lord we will find true life.

There is, for all of us, the danger of watering down our faith, playing down the need for sacrifice, yet that is the very price of love. How many of us know wonderful people, perhaps even in our own families or among our friends who are real witnesses to the possibility of genuine self-sacrificing love ... a wife who never gives up on her unfaithful husband, a husband who takes care of his permanently disabled wife, a parent who is ready to sacrifice all for her children, a missionary ready to leave home, family, friends for the sake of the Gospel ... we have them in our own community ... a brother or a sister ready to risk their very lives to stay with the poor in the violent world in which we live ... a love almost without limit.

We will not be able to live religious life and mission today unless we have the faith to embrace the crosses in our own lives - and unless we recognize the extent of passion in the

world, and the reality of the cross in peoples' lives. We wish to minister in a world in which there is so much suffering and pain, and we need to be in solidarity with so many people who have to carry very heavy crosses.⁶³ This is a real challenge. We are in fact called to make the same journey that Jesus made. He had to drink the chalice of suffering and we must accept the same fate and embrace the cross. We need not be afraid of all this. We can trust Providence. If we look at our lives and consider our own human weakness and all our limitations and indeed our sinfulness, we have every reason to be humble ... and yet, how much has happened so far beyond our dreams ... much more than we could ever have hoped for ... things far beyond our powers. Can we not honestly say that Providence has indeed been at work ... and we can sing a song of thanksgiving for so much. "He that is mighty has done great things for me, and Holy is His name".

Our Founders had this kind of profound trust in God's Providence. "What a great doctrine, brothers", writes the Good Father, "how strange it must seem to men of little faith! For such men, to be afflicted, humiliated, despised, persecuted was regarded as a misfortune. The real misfortune is their impatience. Remain in your afflictions with resignation ... This is the great art of lessening burdens. Therein is the order of Providence".⁶⁴ In the words of Mother Henriette: "Have courage, let us trust in Divine Providence, who arranges everything, not always according to our own liking, but always for our good".⁶⁵ "Abandon yourself to Him, and there you will find peace - the strength to suffer and the joy that follows from it".⁶⁶

John Paul II reminds us that "it is through the passion,

the mystery of salvation that the energies of love are released. The passion invites all believers to offer themselves, as Jesus did, totally and exclusively to the Father, that He may accomplish His merciful plan for all of humanity ... From the crucifix flows the ability to give our lives for our brothers and sisters; from it flows joy and inner peace, in being poor ...".⁶⁷ Indeed since Vatican Council II we are more aware of this Paschal dimension of our spirituality, and of the newness of life to which we are invited.

Gastón Garatea makes the point that the teaching of Puebla and the lived experience of many religious in Latin-America emphasize the link between self-emptying and a joyful newness of life - self-emptying, not only in union with the sacrifice of Jesus who "took on the condition of a slave", but also self-emptying seen as being in solidarity with the poor - accompanying those who are really suffering.⁶⁸ This really enriches the meaning of being a victim, giving a very positive dimension to the spirit of victimhood spoken about in the past. It is an enrichment that gives our spirituality a new vigour and vitality, so that we can joyfully accept the fatigue, the sufferings and sacrifice that is inevitably part of our vocation. The sufferings of the poor, their misery and their great need is a real stimulus for us to serve, with the Heart of the Suffering Servant, for God Himself has seen their suffering and has really identified Himself with them.

Our spirituality is open to these impulses that come from the joyful experience of our brothers and sisters who live the spirituality of the "Heart of the Suffering Servant" today. As we assimilate their insights and experiences, the members of

our Congregation make our spiritual patrimony more actual and indeed more attractive in a continual process of renewal.⁶⁹

Our Constitutions already presuppose that ours will be a life embraced out of love, and therefore a life full of joy which is the fruit of love. "Free to be with Jesus", we will "put on His mind and His heart" and we will experience that 'caritas Christi', that love of Christ which will fill us with zeal for the kingdom.

We are all aware that to love is to suffer, and the deeper the love the more we will suffer. Yet paradoxically, it is also true that the more we love, the deeper will be the joy in our hearts and the more profound will be our experience of "that peace that surpasses all understanding".

XII. THE WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE

In a way, the world writes the agenda of our mission for us. We need to know the reality of the world, which we are called to evangelize. In recent years Pope John Paul II has described in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and in *Centesimus Annus* the reality of the world of our time, which is even more unjust than the world which Medellín and Puebla had already described. This is not the place to go into a detailed social analysis. We all know the broad lines of the enormous injustice in our world today, which the Pope describes:

- the still widening gap between the richer nations of the North and the poorer nations of the South;
- less than one third of the world's population enjoy more than two thirds of its available fruit; literally thousands of people die of hunger or malnutrition every day (who can forget the horrific pictures from Somalia those past months?);
- for hundreds of millions of people the situation has gotten worse in the last twenty years;
- we recognize the immense multitudes of the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and above all, without hope for a better future.

Pope John Paul, in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, identifies the causes of such misery, from the corruption of third world rulers to new forms of imperialism and colonialism of the super powers. He offers us a critique of liberal capitalism with its stress on unlimited free enterprise, its cult of individualism, its promotion of the desire for profit and thirst for power, and its

propensity to mould society on the principle of structured selfishness. He points out that excessive access to all kinds of things - sometimes called consumerism - enslaves people, and does not make them happy. 'Having' more things does not necessarily mean 'being' more or being better. 'Having' only helps us when it contributes to a more complete 'being'. The present picture is that there is the minority who possess much but who are stunted in 'being', because they want more and more, and there is the great majority who have little or nothing and who cannot realize their basic human vocation.

There is a growing body of data to indicate that the wealthy minority of the world's inhabitants are themselves in need of liberation from overindulgence. Increased drug abuse, obesity, marriage break up, abortion and suicide are an indication of the sickness of the society.

In Centesimus Annus (1991) the Pope insists that "the fall of Marxism has not rid the world of the situations of injustice and oppression which Marxism itself exploited and on which it fed".⁷⁰ He advocates assistance for the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe, not only as a debt in justice, but also in the interest of European unity and peace. He also points out that this assistance must not lead to a slackening of efforts to sustain and assist the countries of the Third

World which often suffer even more serious conditions of poverty and want.

Among the scandalous situations that challenge our

world the Holy Father refers in his letters to:

- the enormous stockpile of nuclear weapons and the arms trade itself which he calls moral distortions in a world crying out for justice and peace - the madness of so much money spent on weapons instead of on the development of the poorer nations leading us more quickly to death than to life;
- the crippling problem of the international debt, which puts the debtor countries in an ever-worsening economic situation;
- the immense problems resulting from social, economic and political exploitation. They add up to millions of people lacking the most basic necessities, such as clean water, enough to eat, a shelter for the night - as a result, many people have a very short life expectancy ... It really is a world of oppression for many - there are literally millions of refugees ... so many suffer discrimination because of racism, excessive nationalism etc ... Countless others, especially women, work in atrocious conditions just to survive. (The reality is that half the women in the world have little or no say in things) ... The misuse of natural resources for the sake of profit is consuming the resources of the earth and polluting our world, with consequences for health and for future generations ...

Pope John Paul II speaks in *Centesimus Annus* not only about the ecological question, but about the little effort being made "to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic _human ecology_". ⁷¹ In this context he speaks of the destruction of the lives of defenceless human beings through abortion, and the breakdown of the family which he calls "the sanctuary of life", the first and fundamental structure for "human

ecology".

In all of this, of course, the poor are the first victims - the real poor suffer every kind of marginalization more intensely - and all the resultant ills that flow from it - broken homes, overcrowding, violence, unemployment, drug addiction, alcoholism, criminality ... there are so many categories of desperate people.

The words "Third World poverty" may now seem tired and cliched - but it doesn't alter the facts - of the hell on earth that is the daily experience of so many millions of human beings. Something terrible is wrong and has to change.

Poverty is increasing not only in the less developed countries - and this seems no less scandalous - it is increasing in the more developed ones too. There is a growing number of unemployed, immigrants, the new poor (the retired, the alienated, the lonely, etc.), as well as the dependent unwaged.

Poverty is not only an economic reality. We can find in the Gospels a definition of poor which remains valid today. Jesus had a preferential concern for those who were looked down upon, treated as of little worth, denied a full place in the society of His own time. It cannot be denied that the vast majority of those in this position in the world today are in fact materially poor. In the words of the 1986 pastoral on the economy written by the American bishops, we read, "The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be actively treated or passively abandoned as if they were nonmembers of the

human race. To treat people in this way is effectively to say that they simply do not count as human beings. This can take many forms, all of which can be described as varieties of marginalization or exclusion from social life".⁷²

The evil that afflicts our world is not merely economic, it is an ethical, a moral evil that requires action on every level of society, for the task is the transformation of the world. The responsibility rests on everybody - the situation is not inevitable - it is the fruit of injustice.

Obviously, those holding economic and political power need the political will to change the way our society is organized and to take the decisions necessary for a more just distribution of its wealth, so that all people can live in dignity.

On the political and economic level, the problems of the poor and the Third World have their roots in the First. Western Europe, together with North America and Japan, determine the rules for the economic order of the whole world and they decide on the future of the so-called Second and Third Worlds. The most urgent problem is the moral problem of consumerism and its consequent structures of oppression - everything is subordinate to economics. The sense of transcendence is lost. Growing individualism and competition threaten human relations and the human community. The poor find themselves at the mercy of power groups.

Those who have no voice look to the Church to speak for them. Even though the Church has no technical solutions, John Paul II is challenging those responsible for ensuring a "more

human life". He calls for "a profound transformation in accustomed ways of thinking".⁷³ Evangelization means restoring a broken world community - it takes us beyond the Church out into the world. "To evangelize is to announce the life which has conquered death, the liberty which sets free from every slavery".⁷⁴

The Church that is, all of us who belong to the community of faith, must challenge the world with the values of the kingdom. We recognize each person's right to be seated at the table of the common banquet. The poor not only have needs, they have also rights. We must promote and defend them. The Synod of Bishops declared in 1971: "Working for justice and taking part in the transformation of the world are clearly constitutive elements of the preaching of the Gospel, that is to say of the mission of the Church for the redemption of the human race and the liberation from all forms of oppression".⁷⁵

As religious in the heart of the Church, we must be very aware of the world in which we live, if we are truly to serve it well. We will seek by our presence and by our ministries to promote the dignity of all God's children. We will fight against the 'sin of the world', injustice, seeking to make the reign of God a visible and significant presence in our world. In the following chapters we will see some of the implications of this mission.

XIII. THE LIGHT OF THE SCRIPTURES

In the Old Testament it is clear that God takes up the cause of the poor. That is the point of the Exodus story, for example - God chose a people who were enslaved, dominated by the mighty power of Pharaoh - taking them into the desert and making them into a community. They formed a covenant with Him and their law reflects a special concern for the weak and oppressed, the poor, the widow and the orphan. The prophets, Ezechiel, Amos and others constantly in the course of Old Testament history reminded the people of their covenant, and repeatedly attacked the injustices of their time, not only as social evils but also as contrary to the religion of Israel. The God who reveals Himself to us in the Old Testament is passionately concerned with the poor. His concern is revealed in Isaiah 1:11-17:

"What are your endless sacrifices to me says Yahweh.
I'm sick of holocausts of rams and the fat of calves;
Learn to do good, search for justice,
Help the oppressed, be just to the orphan, plead for the
widow".

Or again in Isaiah 58:6-11:

"Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me
- it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks -
to break unjust fetters
and undo the thongs of the yoke ..."

And we read, for example, in Psalm 82:

"Let the weak and orphan have justice
be fair to the wretched and destitute
rescue the weak and the needy ..."

And in Psalm 146:

"Yahweh, forever faithful
gives justice to those denied it
gives food to the hungry
gives liberty to the prisoners".

The New Testament is also unambiguous: entry into the kingdom of God depends on our concern for the poor:

"I was hungry and you gave me to eat ... come take your heritage the kingdom prepared for you" (Cf. Mt 25:31-46).

We can only touch on the biblical evidence here - it is a theme so well treated by exegetes today that there is no need to elaborate - all through the Gospels we see Jesus showing His love for those who were discriminated against by the religious and social structures of his time. He took sides with poor and outcast, even if it meant entering into conflict with the Pharisees. He came to bring them good news.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is transforming power, because it partakes of the power of God in raising Jesus from the dead. Christ sends His disciples out with hearts on fire to proclaim the possibility of an alternative society, where there is liberty for captives, justice for the oppressed, sight for the blind, justice and integrity for the whole of creation (Is 49:1-10; Lk 4:16-22) - to create a new world shaped by justice, compassion,

freedom, integrity, peace - "good tidings of great joy".

Perhaps, as disciples, as Church we have become content to shed the light of the Gospel 'in a private fashion', we have privatized discipleship. We have to proclaim the Gospel in "completely new terms" (John Paul II) that call us out of our private world. As the community of His disciples (His Church) we call all peoples, all cultures to conversion - to move into a new time, a 'kairos' time, the year of the Lord's favour - the kingdom of God is among us - not simply to save their souls (a privatized vision of discipleship) - in a sense, to save one's soul is to lose it. Rather, alive with the transforming power of the Christ, we proclaim the kingdom, attracting others by our witness - so that the community of justice and love grows and extends towards the ends of the earth.

The message of Jesus' life is that His kingdom does not arrive in a triumphant way but in the humble guise of a servant - it is meant for the poor, the humble, the sinners, the outcasts, not for the rich and powerful - no wonder it was provocative and threatening to the established order of His time, engaging Him in a prophetic confrontation that led to His death.

We must, then, follow the way of the Suffering Servant, challenging the rich and powerful of our time, and putting them in touch with the liberating and life-giving Gospel - conscientizing them to the injustices and inequalities of the present system, challenging the established order and its structures.

If the Church is to evangelize, it will not be with words

alone. It must itself become a visible sign of brotherhood and communion between people, where Christ's message is experienced as 'good news' - it must be a Church where the poor feel 'at home' and are treated as first-class citizens. It must in some way become the Church of the poor.

Solidarity is a mark of Christ's disciples. If we are comfortably installed in the kingdom of this world, it will be impossible for us to proclaim the message of Jesus with any credibility. Jesus has taught us that it is through 'becoming poor' that we will evangelize even the rich - if we are to build a more just world, it will be in solidarity with the poor. Art. 6 of our Constitutions call us to this kind of evangelizing action.

XIV. A PROPHETIC WITNESS

Our ss.cc. mission is carried out in a real world in the midst of the people. The renewal of our Community is very much related to the way that we respond to the real needs of the people we serve. As religious we have to understand this world "with its expectations, its longings and its often dramatic characteristics".⁷⁶

As a community we are called to be good news, a sign of a God who loves. It is not enough to be communities of faith - we need to be communities that give witness, communities that practice what they preach! If we are what we should be, we should be saying by our lives to those around us: if you want to understand the message of Jesus, have a look at us!

Our witness

We can ask ourselves some questions! As a community, are we a clear sign of people who share and care and hope and work together? Where do we live? How do we live? Who are we close to? Do we identify more with the powerful or with the marginalized? Do we really serve the people? Do we respond to their needs? Are we a sign of deep meaning in world where so many find themselves alienated, or are we almost irrelevant as a sign? Are we really signs of Gospel living? Are we, in fact, credible witnesses? Are we saying to the world, especially to the poor and to the suffering: yes, there is hope - love is possible, love is real? These are challenging questions for all of us.

We must live our vows not only as individuals, but as a community. Our community as such has a mission of prophetic witness. In fact, according to our new Constitutions, that mission should determine the whole life of each one of us. Our mission does not consist primarily in the line of doing. For so long we have defined ourselves in terms of function. It is not what we are doing, it is what we are as a community - a presence that witnesses to faith, hope and Christian love - "signs", "manifestations", "striking witnesses, "stimulating the brethren", "prefiguring", "showing to all", "showing something wonderful" ... - all words occurring in *Lumen Gentium* with regard to Religious Life ⁷⁷ - this is what is important. We are sign communities. Hopefully, we are not signs of the nineteenth century but signs for our day! Nor do we want to be signs of power and privilege - but rather signs of simple living, signs of joy and freedom in the Lord. Indeed, our Constitutions ask our community to "*allow itself to be challenged and questioned by the people it serves and among whom its members live*" - in order to discover if we are really effective signs of God's love. This will be the measure of the effectiveness of our mission as a community.

"The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission". ⁷⁸ In our Constitutions we are called to live as brothers (Arts. 42-49), to be a sign of the presence of the kingdom, reproducing the way of life that Jesus led in carrying out His own messianic mission, living in relationships which permit us to discover Gospel values in all persons (Cf. Art. 47). "The evangelical witness which the world finds most appealing

is that of concern for people, and of charity towards the poor, the weak and those who suffer".⁷⁹ How much all of us are touched by those brothers who really live out the options of the Congregation - for example, in a community really inserted among the poor! They witness to the possibility of an alternative society, founded not on riches, power, influence and exploitation but founded on compassion, communion, sacrifice and love. What a testimony! And how God's people respond!

The prophetic dimension

As communities, more even than as individuals, we are called to be prophetic, challenging the values of a society based on consumerism and injustice, and providing a social and cultural critique that activates change. If our prophetic ministry is to be effective, structural change will be a main (not a marginal) concern of our ministry.

Reading the signs of the times is a real prophetic challenge. This implies a critical evaluation of what is oppressive, manipulative, consumerist and unjust. Sometimes it demands much courage to be prophetic in this kind of way, including the risk of sacrificing something of our traditional public image - even to the point of being perceived as subversive of the public order - as some of our brothers already know! Our Constitutions insist: "*Our loyal collaboration with the local Church does not dispense us from the prophetic role that religious are called to exercise in it ...*" (Art. 42.2). "*In order that it might be a sign of the transcendence of God, the community ought to maintain a critical posture vis-à-vis the world ...*" (Art. 47.2).

Prophets must also bring hope: the prophet must energize people to rise above their human and spiritual situation. Our life needs to say precisely this to people: that the Good News is that good will overcome evil, that through suffering and death new life is possible. By our religious profession we, so to speak, seek to present a parable of a possible new way of living, a life style which is in itself a protest against the consumer and unjust society. Through our vows we become marginalized in relation to the world, with different attitudes to wealth, to pleasure and to possessions. We ourselves attempt to live the kingdom of God in the present time - an alternative offered to those who want to base their lives on the Word of God and on Gospel values.

Prophecy is a call to conversion - a seeking of God's ways - denouncing injustices, taking the Gospel seriously - "If anyone has two tunics...". In the end, it is a call to transformation - for this we need the Spirit - for we ourselves must be the first to be converted!

Witness and prophecy are absolutely central to our vocation. Our religious witness is our principal means of evangelization (a sobering thought!), and as religious we have a prophetic role in the Church. This is the vision of religious life presented in our new Constitutions, namely - we are called to be a community of prophetic witness. Is not this a challenge and a call to conversion to all of us?

XV. OUR SS.CC MISSION

We see our lives as apostolic religious, not as entering a special state of perfection for our own sanctification - all people of every state of life are called to holiness. Our mission is to offer, as a service to the Church, a prophetic testimony in the midst of God's people - making present the form of life of Jesus - celibate, poor, living a communal life in the world ... *"We commit ourselves to this following of Jesus, as out of love for Him, we embrace His own way of life by means of our religious profession"* (Art. 11).

Fr. Jean-Yves Kerrien in writing on our spirituality points out that our Founder wished that the very title of the Congregation would indicate our apostolic spirit - Fr. Coudrin's first preference was that we would be called "Zealots of the Love of the Sacred Hearts". Fr. Kerrien refers to Art. 4 of the Preliminary Chapter of our first Constitutions: "The Brothers retrace the evangelical life of the Savior by the preaching of the Gospel and the Missions". He also sees the adoration as apostolic - the adorers were destined to pray for the blessing of the Lord on the work of the brothers. He suggests that this apostolic orientation comes from our union with the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. They had only one desire: the reign of God for the salvation of the world.⁸⁰

We all know the dream of Fr. Coudrin in the granary of la Motte d'Usseau, of "a group of missionaries who would

spread the Gospel everywhere" ⁸¹ - this was his intention right to the end of his life, right to his very last words: "Valparaíso, Gambier!" We know too that our Sisters always had the custom in those early days of establishing not only houses of adoration, but also of opening schools for poor children. ⁸² There is no doubt about our call to the apostolic life right from the beginning, and therefore the need to live an apostolic spirituality, according to the circumstances of the time.

Nor is there any doubt about our Founders' intention to found a Congregation, which could be described as "a poor community at the service of the poor". ⁸³ Thus, for example, the rough draft of the Petition to the Pope at the beginning of 1801 read: "To this first intention (Reparation) we join that of educating up to a certain age children from among the poorest, and we shall carry this out when circumstances permit". ⁸⁴ In his announcement on the aim of the Congregation (1804-1805), the Good Father wrote: "Our resolutions have for their purpose and goal the four ages of Jesus Christ ... His apostolic life, by instituting a society of missionaries to be at the disposal of the Bishops to announce the Gospel to the poor". ⁸⁵ And the Good Mother's attitude: "I shall not receive boarders before the free school is opened. The latter should always come first" ⁸⁶ - a certain preferential option for the poor of her day.

Our new Constitutions also define us from our mission, which *"urges us to evangelizing action by which we enter into the interior dynamism of Christ's love for His Father and for the world, especially for the poor, the afflicted, the marginalized and those who have not heard the Good News"* (Art. 6). We are called to evange-

lize, precisely as religious of the Sacred Hearts.

Animated by the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus, we are called to be vehicles of His transforming love in the reality of today's world. Our understanding of Consecration to the Sacred Hearts takes on a new richness, impelling us towards the marginalized. Entering into the sentiments of the Heart of Christ, we grow in His passionate love for the world. The source of our commitment to the poor is our charism, our confidence in the redemptive, reparative power of his love - love as a force acting in the world to transform it. We want to make the kingdom of God a visible reality. It is an evangelical option to make His love reign - "*seeking the transformation of the human heart*" (Art. 6), in order to develop among people fraternal and community relations - to be "*agents of communion in the world*" (Art. 6). Since the minimum requirement of love is justice, it is not difficult to see that our reparative mission demands that "*we work for a just and reconciled society, in solidarity with the poor*" (Art. 6) - a reparation which does not confine itself to moments of prayer and adoration, but also fights effectively against injustice, and in favour of the victims with whom Jesus identifies. We seek both a union of hearts and a transformation of structures.

Like our Founders, our zeal and our missionary spirit call us to be available to respond to the needs of the Church and the world, adapting ourselves and our ministries to circumstances and events. We recognize the danger of installing ourselves - it is safer and more comfortable - but the needs of the Church discerned in the light of the Spirit are decisive for us (Cf. Art. 6). We try to keep ourselves available and mobile to

respond to them, with the attitude of servants.

If we are to be faithful to our vocation today, justice must be the central focus of our mission and of all our ministries. Our works need not be *_proper to the Congregation_*, nor do we need to control them - in fact, more and more we hope to collaborate with others in the work of justice - but always we want to bring the saving love of God to situations, for the building of a more just world - this is the message of our Constitutions and the orientation given us by our General Chapters. This option is a conscious decision made by our community, which affects every aspect of our lives - that is to say, our desire to build a more just world is not simply one ministry among many. It is true that not all our brothers/sisters are called to direct service to the poor, but all must ensure that their ministries in one way or another help the cause of the poor.

Not all will be able to work directly with poor people. Because of age, health, formation, community history and experience ... ⁸⁷ and for many other reasons it would be both unreal and unfair to expect all to be able to embrace the option for the poor in the same way and to the same extent. We must have a deep respect for the spiritual journey of our brothers and sisters, and for their particular circumstances. Moreover, some brothers are called by the community to offer services within the community itself, for example in formation, in administration, in supporting the sick and the aged brothers etc. Others are called to serve in other apostolates which are still necessary and continue to have validity - indeed, circumstances will determine the rhythm and the degree to which our

communities can be in direct service to the poor - but more and more we hope we can move in this direction. All of us should give support to those who are in direct service to poor people, and facilitate this movement as much as possible. Of course, we are all called to identify with the poor, in the living of a simple life, without extravagance - and the fundamental norm remains: we determine our apostolic priorities by asking ourselves what effect our apostolate will have on the poor and the deprived members of the human community. How can we help build a more just world in solidarity with the poor?

The Gospel is a message for rich and poor alike. Those of us who work in the rich North must use their access to the powerful on behalf of the marginalized. We must create an alternative awareness to the dominant culture. There will certainly be resistance to this message, yet we need to invite and to challenge people to become involved with us in this option. The poor in the southern hemisphere need not only material support (without doubt they need this), but they also need our moral support - they need to feel that we are on the same side as they are - because we are already involved in the same sort of issues here. We have to discern what can be done.

Who are the poor for us? - it could be those marginalized because of color or race, because of age or illness, those totally alone or uncared for - those who cannot, for reasons beyond their control, play their proper role in society. If we are really concerned with justice and the poor, we cannot sit on the fence. We need to be out among them. We need to be in personal contact, and they will assume a face, a specific face of a person - there will be no more need for definitions. How do we know if

we are making this option? Ask the poor! - What do they think of us as religious? As wealthy, middle class? Do they look on us as allies? Do they see us as Good News? We must remember that their needs have priority over the wants of the rich.

When we speak about solidarity with the poor, our first task is to be with them, to accompany them in order in some way to share their experience. It does not mean that all those in the North must go to the South, but we all need some experience of marginal people.

The option for the poor is not so much a question of preaching as of practice - the law of evangelization is incarnation. Many today are convinced that even the evangelization of the rich can only be really effective if done, "desde los pobres" (by those who really share the perspective of the poor). We must ask ourselves, what concrete action are we taking? Some religious are closing the credibility gap - moving to the edge of society, changing their own lifestyle, in some cases even living with the marginalized, and experiencing what it is like to be poor. This is very hard for us to do. The tendency is to defend our cherished apostolate and not to go beyond our frontiers. Yet more and more religious communities are seeking to become a prophetic presence in the midst of poor people - present as a sign, testifying that God loves them and considers them worthwhile. More and more the Church must distance itself from the privileged classes in order to open itself primarily to those who have so little. The words of Fr. Niall O'Brien, missionary in the Philippines, come to mind: "I recommend to any priest who feels his vocation to be a bit pointless: - go to a very poor place, and throw yourself into the work of starting

small Christian communities. Don't do it on your own. Do it with others. I hope your experiment will be as happy as mine".⁸⁸

If the basic cause of poverty is the structures of society, then an option for the poor will involve changing those structures, through political action. The problem in society is that the important decisions are made by those with the view from the top - it is the successful, the powerful who make the decisions for the weaker members of the society. The view from the top and from the bottom is quite different, and so those who make the decisions frequently ignore the real problems of those at the bottom simply because they don't understand them. We must insist then, that the views of those at the bottom of society be listened to.

We also need to be convinced that the poor themselves must be the agents of change. It can be difficult for us as religious with a predominantly middle class lifestyle, culture and value system to accept this - there is always the danger of paternalism. The dignity of the poor demands that they be in control of their own lives and destiny. To believe that it is we who have to bring about the changes necessary for the lives of the poor is to insult the poor. Furthermore, the poor are the experts on the subject of poverty. They have to live it seven days a week, fifty two weeks of the year. They are the ones suffering under the structures. No matter how much we may live or work with the poor, we ourselves are not poor and can never fully have their perspective. We have also to recognize that if change is to come about in the structures, confrontation (which is not the same as violence) is inevitable - there are so many vested interests in maintaining the status quo. The

changes in structures which are required to bring justice to the poor will adversely affect the lifestyle and opportunities available to the better-off groups in society.

Our role in all of this is to accompany the poor in their struggle for change. We do so in the spirit of the Gospel, knowing that the cause of the poor is the cause of God Himself.

Most of us have an education which we can place at the disposal of the poor, helping them to analyse their situation, what is happening in society, to them and to others, to analyse the structures which maintain society and to see what changes may be necessary. In such a role, we become a resource to the poor, we are at their disposal, but we do not take control of the process.

We encourage the participation of all, especially of women who for so long have been deprived of their rights (which is itself a special kind of poverty).

Frequently those who are struggling for change have to struggle with a sense of powerlessness which may lead to hopelessness. The belief that nothing will ever change, that the situation is hopeless has to be challenged constantly. We can by our presence give the poor a new faith in themselves, a new confidence - provided of course that we have it ourselves! The kingdom of God is coming, it is assured. No evil in this world or the next can prevent the coming of the kingdom of peace and justice. The struggle for a just world here and now is an essential, integral element in the coming of the kingdom - a kingdom whose coming is finally guaranteed by the resurre-

ction of Jesus.

All this is a real challenge for us, as religious. It will challenge our attitudes and values, it may make us unpopular with many, often with former friends or colleagues who do not like what we are now saying or doing. It will change our image and we may lose status. It will also reveal us to ourselves, and show us the many inconsistencies in our own lives. But I believe, we are called to be daring, to dis-install ourselves more and more. We will find that marginal places are sources of renewal. If our communities are integrated in the life of the poor, it will have big consequences for our religious lives. The poor will teach us much - they will teach us what really matters. Our mission will unfold in weakness and the cross, as Damien's did. We will meet Christ in the least of the brethren. We will discover a new understanding of the Scriptures, our spirituality will not be divorced from life, and our ministry will be both a witness to and a proclamation of the Gospel.

I am reminded of the words of our General Chapter of 1982: "Probably the most significant manifestation of the Spirit of God in our midst came from those of our brothers who have made and who are in the process of making a radical choice for being in solidarity with the poor".⁸⁹

XVI. AN APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY

We are defined as a Community of Apostolic Religious Life - our community life and our mission are interdependent - they are two poles of the same reality each implying the other; in the words of Art. 40: "*We structure our community life so as to serve our mission and at the same time, we consider community life to be a fundamental part and the primary witness of our mission*" - that is to say, without community there is no religious life - and our apostolic fruitfulness will be rooted in the quality and the power of our witness. We need not only prophetic persons, but prophetic communities.

"*The community values the gifts and the charism bestowed by God on each brother and accepts them as a grace ...*" (Art. 41.1), but the Constitutions also stress: "*Our ministerial activity is the fruit of community discernment and community decisions*" (Art. 41.2). This is necessary if we are to actively work towards communion in mission. It is fundamental if we are to have a shared vision on which to base our apostolic priorities. In a time of increasing pluralism, we can lose a sense of common purpose. Our commitment is not to some private spirituality or ministry. This doesn't mean that we all do the same thing. Our unity is not formed around a common work as such but around a common vision. We recognize the variety of gifts and perhaps different works but we share a corporate sense of mission, a common focus for our mission - not my mission but our mission. This is central - mission assumed in common - to which all contribute. A common vision is the basis for unity in the midst of a plurality of work and lifestyles. That is why our Constitutions

often speak of the necessity of a plan (at various levels) for our apostolic religious life (cf. Arts. 45.4, 89.2, 113.22; Statutes 7, 44.1, 62 etc.).

When we speak of a Provincial Plan, we are speaking about a community process that helps us face the challenges of the present and the future creatively. The purpose of the plan is that the brothers can walk together in the spirit of the Gospels, and in accordance with our ss.cc. charism. It is an effort to read the signs of the times, and to respond as an ss.cc. community - integrating the capacities of all the brothers for the mission.

Statute 7 gives us guidelines:

- "1. In the process of communitarian discernment of the will of God, we must keep the following criteria in mind:
 - a) the Gospel criteria,
 - b) the mission and the orientations of our Congregation,
 - c) the directives of the Church, both universal and local,
 - d) the needs of the people,
 - e) the possibilities and aptitudes of the community and its members.
2. This process is followed in an atmosphere of prayer and of availability. It requires the fullest participation of all the brothers in dialogue and normally leads to the taking of a decision".

Thus, we examine our situation in the light of the needs, our resources and circumstances so that the future is not forced up on us, or without purpose - rather we move to choose our future together. The plan will enable us to choose our apostolic

priorities as a religious community. The plan should include:

- the pastoral choices we wish to make concretely and why we make them;
- a vision of the community we want to form and the values to which we wish to give priority.

Our analysis of the situation should be realistic - facing up to the problems of shortage of personnel, the age of the brothers, the possibility of assuming or leaving works etc. given our actual circumstances. The plan should be more than a set of beautiful aspirations, it should be realistic, clear and concrete. It should treat all the major areas of the province's life - the various apostolates, community life, initial and permanent formation, vocations, administration of material goods etc., with built-in opportunities for evaluation. In fact, the Provincial Plan should be the practical application of our Constitutions to our actual situation.

In its Report to the General Chapter of 1988 (No. 158), the General Government noted: "We have observed that each community that has such a plan is now more dynamic and also more united ... In some Provinces, having such a plan could have prevented a dispersion of forces into too many diverse commitments. Such dispersion quickly has repercussions on the mobility of the brothers, on the quality of communion in the Province and on Congregational solidarity".

Actually, most of the necessary elements for a plan exist in our Provinces. Sometimes it is a question of coordination, giving them a systematic presentation, so that all can assume and support a common vision.

We can be sure in advance that the real value of a Provincial Plan and the chances that it will be an effective means for the renewal of the community are in direct proportion to the degree and the quality of the brothers' participation. Of course there are many obstacles: some will not be convinced of the value of such a plan - "We don't have time to waste on such 'things'" - they may see it as just one more project. Others will feel such a plan is impossible because of our diverse works. Some may feel threatened, as they are very installed and attached to particular works and to places. However, what is important for all of us is that we should be doing God's will, not our own. We can be confident that the charism that we share will enable us to discover together what God asks of us. His will is "made manifest in the midst of the brethren".

If we discern together in a spirit of faith and prayer and openness to His will, in a spirit of dialogue and hope, our whole religious life will take on new meaning and our missionary spirit will be re-vitalized. We need not be afraid to leave our individualism behind. God will make all things new in us. We need to actively question our present apostolates. Should we be doing what we are doing? Is this the best way for us as religious to serve the Church at this time? *"The experiences, criteria for our apostolic activity... are evaluated in the light of the Gospel and in accordance with Art. 6 of our Constitutions"* (Art. 41.4). If we are prepared to go beyond our personal preferences to a shared vision, we will be able to develop community projects through which we can live out our mission in today's world.

A shared sense of mission creates a real communion of

spirit and heart (we see this very often in our missionaries), and it gives all of us a sustained sense of direction. Each of us will be aware that we are sent by the community (Art. 41.3), to live a certain prophetic type of existence. We recognize that each has his ministry, but this ministry takes on meaning only insofar as it is integrated into our common mission. That mission goes beyond the many ministries, and in a certain way incorporates them. In this context we must not forget that in God's Providence, our retired and sick confreres are an integral part of the mission, even if their ministry is exercised largely in a quiet support of others in their prayer and their faithful acceptance of their sufferings. In this sense also we speak of those, who live away from our houses, as brothers sent by the community for a particular mission. It is, of course, necessary that the relationship between the common mission and the particular ministry which requires that someone live apart be clearly discerned with the community, and that he be mandated to respond to a particular need or to develop new dimensions of our mission.

Our mission will determine our lifestyle - the form of life that Jesus lived. It is a way of life more than a way of working (cf. next chapter). When we have the vision, the structures will follow - persons, places etc. - "*we structure our community life so as to serve our mission*" (Art. 40). We do not have a predetermined model of community life. Although a minimal structure will be necessary if we are to live in community, different communities will have different life-styles - there is a legitimate pluralism - depending on the needs of the members, their age, culture, apostolate etc. - but always in the same spirit, for we share the same charism, which is the source of our

identity.

There has been a real change in religious life, as we know - towards smaller communities where communion rather than observance is the prime value. Such a life can be more demanding than community life in the past. Today, when the pervading culture favors individualism, living in community is not always easy. In a consumerist culture we need to sustain and strengthen our sense of the spiritual purpose and meaning of being together. Perhaps at times we are not sufficiently critical of the culture in which we live.

For the most part, we do not lead the conventual life of the past. Our mission, our various ministries and duties make different demands on us than in the past. Our Constitutions remind us that our "*apostolic ministry and community life enrich each other and at the same time entail some tension*" (Art. 43). In order to ensure this mutual enrichment of our ministry and our community life, the Constitutions indicate two essential factors - a continual conversion on our part and a willingness to be evangelized and challenged by the people we serve and among whom we live (cf. later chapters).

In conclusion, we are reminded that we need to keep alive in ourselves the love our Founders had for the Church. We are part of the local Church wherever we are. We need to collaborate with it in a spirit of loyalty, and indeed with other churches and people in an ecumenical spirit - always working for the unity desired by Christ as a sign of communion and love among all. This however does not dispense us from the prophetic role that religious are called to exercise in the Church

or from the specific contribution we can offer as members of our Congregation (cf. Art. 42). Our new Constitutions, approved by the Church give us an authentic evangelical path. It is inevitable that there will be moments of difficulty for those called to a prophetic vocation, as indeed there were for Jesus, who was "a sign of contradiction". Such tensions we must always try to resolve by Gospel means - with a deep respect for others in a pluralistic Church - always seeking "to do the truth in love".

XVII. A COMMUNITY OF BROTHERS

"We live our vocation and mission in community. Simplicity and the family spirit are the characteristics of our relationships within our international Congregation which desires to be open to all people ..." (Art. 7).

In Cahiers de Spiritualité No. 10, Chapter V is entitled: "Community of Communion, Fraternal Communion, Family". Here you will find twenty five pages of texts capturing the spirit of the Primitive Community of the Congregation - both brothers and sisters. Perhaps they can be summed up in the words of the Good Father: "My dear friends, I have no other joy than yours; if you suffer, I am not at ease, and our hearts are so strongly united that it seems to me that all of us are one. Be one, then, all of you, in the charity of the Good Master Who unites us".⁹⁰

For the Founders, fraternal love had an absolutely central value, that is, human companionship destined to lay the foundation for the happiness and joy of the Community and its members; warm, loving relationships like those of a family, based on faith - "a union in Christ Jesus". Fr. Juan Vicente González ss.cc. points out that "during his whole life Fr. Coudrin remained deeply attached to the image of the early Christian community which the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of St. Paul have conserved for us. Upon feeling himself called by God to establish a new religious community he wanted it to be faithful to that image".⁹¹ This same idea is captured in our new Constitutions: "*Our communities take their*

inspiration from the ideal of the first Christians, who had only one heart and one soul" (Art. 38.2).

Our profession creates *"bonds of solidarity among us, making us members of one and the same family"* (cf. Art. 12,3). The picture our Constitutions paint is of a group of brothers who make *"fraternal charity the very heart of their life together"* (Art. 39). We are ready to place our lives together, sharing with each other in a personal way. We are committed to doing all we can to strengthen the union of minds and hearts so that we can be truly brothers to each other.

In earlier times community referred more directly to a place. Now, when we speak of community we refer more directly to people - it involves reverence for each other, presence to one another, for celebration as well as for dialogue and reflection, it involves honesty so that we can affirm each other or call each other to growth, it involves commitment to the goals and the developing agenda of our Congregation. It demands some physical presence, not just of our bodies, but a presence of our hearts for interpersonal communion. Community is really an attitude - a sense of belonging in a real way to and with each other - dialogue, friendship, sharing faith play an important part.

In the modern world, it is not always easy to maintain a strong sense of our ss.cc. community identity, a sense of who we are and what we are about - especially, when we are busy about many things. Our Statutes (No. 9) recommend that as far as possible our communities will have at least three members, and that the very small communities be grouped together into

area communities - this facilitates richer and broader interpersonal sharing of our spirit and charism - we enrich each other. It is a great loss, if this kind of interaction is missing in our lives and our fruitfulness in the apostolate will certainly be diminished.

Those brothers who for a legitimate reason live alone, should be attached to a local or an area community. The brother who lives alone needs real community, and should do everything possible to participate in the life of the Congregation. Otherwise, he becomes isolated, and it will be very difficult for him to live his vocation authentically as an ss.cc. community person. Our ss.cc. charism is deepened and developed and enriched through our community encounters.

Our communities should be centers of communion and hospitality - simple, open, joyful, where people who come experience God's love, and friendship, where there is a climate of warm cordial relationships, transcending exclusivity and genitality, - where the dignity and the equality of all the brothers/sisters are respected, where there is an atmosphere of evangelical liberty, and where people are valued as adult persons. We need not be many, but we should be communities characterized by generosity, forgiveness and gratuitousness. According to Art. 44 of our Constitutions: "*Our fraternal life involves a network of relations that build up communion. For this reason, it cannot be taken for granted but is, rather, something which remains always unfinished. Each brother has to play his part in the strengthening of this communion*". We feel ourselves to be members of one religious family, not residents in a hostel or a hotel - we feel that we can count on each other for support, we

are committed to each other in a permanent way as true family members are. This is why Art. 49 of the Constitutions can confidently state that "*Our elderly and our sick brothers will receive our best care and our most solicitous fraternal charity*". It is worth quoting Statute 14: "The sick should receive all the ordinary useful help they need for recovery or relief. All necessary means will be taken so that the elderly brothers may enjoy a dignified retirement free from loneliness or the feeling of being useless. The community will find ways to enable these brothers, in their new situation, to contribute to the building up of the Provincial community and of the whole Congregation".

Life is constantly changing, so we need to be constantly building the communion and the community spirit - knowing, loving, helping one another - we need time together for community, dialogue, prayer in a program that facilitates the objectives of our community, so that we do not live parallel, separate lives. Of course we recognize that each of the brothers/sisters will also have other communities that will lay claim on his/her time, energy and affection and this needs to be respected - it is healthy and necessary. However, it is really fundamental that we reserve quality time for a genuine community life as religious, if we are to be faithful and fruitful in our vocation - we will bring so much to all our other relationships, if we respond to our primary calling. Some very good things are happening. Many of our communities have a Community Project, which is very helpful. Some communities give over one day, or at least one evening each week, and reserve the time for prayer and adoration, for dialogue and to 'relax together'. Those who do so, testify to the value and the importance of this practice. Indeed, the more occupied we are,

the more we need to do this.

Our Statutes emphasize the importance of informal contact among the brothers, whether it be simply spending time together as friends, sharing a meal, recreating together, celebrating feasts in a fraternal atmosphere. Friendship is the greatest of all gifts, and we really need to feel we live in a family of friends. Our Constitutions (Art. 46) also ask us to foster relationships between our different communities both inside and outside our Provinces, so that we have a deeper awareness of belonging to our Provincial community and to the whole Congregation - thus giving substance to our solidarity with each other. Statute 12 encourages both community and intercommunity meetings, where the brothers pray together, reflect on aspects of our vocation and mission and where we meet members of other communities of our Province. It is up to all of us to support each other in all these contacts both informal and those which are more formal. There is no community without the brothers! We owe 'the debt of love' to each other. We are all responsible for the life and health of our community - it is from this center, living this charism of community that we are called to be a 'loving presence' everywhere.

There are so many lonely people today, both inside and outside religious life - both rich and poor, successful and unsuccessful. Everywhere we go we meet people who live lives of isolation and of broken relationships ... the whole world is crying out for affection. Power, prestige, success, accomplishments will never make anyone happy - happiness is the fruit of living in love. If we do not experience genuine friendship and community in our lives, we will be very empty indeed. To love

is to be with and for each other - it takes time to know, to love, to listen, to laugh, to cry ... we need to waste time together. When we give each other time, we give ourselves and the bonds of friendship can grow - we have no greater gift to give for "where there is love there is God!"

In our culture today permanent relationships and commitments are not easy to make - they can only be maintained through authentic dialogue. Art. 45 expresses this reality well: "*Constructive dialogue among the brothers is a necessary means for building fraternity.*

1. *So that each brother may grow as a person within the community, he must feel that he himself, his values and his contribution are appreciated by the others.*
2. *Fraternal correction, given in the spirit of the Gospel, contributes to the dynamism of the brotherhood.*
3. *In order that true communion and evangelical friendship can develop, tensions and conflicts must be confronted with lucidity, courage, and the spirit of pardon".*

Our charism will give us the strength from the heart of Christ to be merciful and forgiving again and again, helping us to confront the tensions of community life in a creative way. If we do not have communion among ourselves, how can we engage in mission? This demands more than new Constitutions - it demands conversion.

Practical love, the daily grind, accepting temperaments,

ceding to others, not taking offence too easily, not giving too much importance to our own sensitivity, actively working to create a joyful community - demands real sacrifice - however, it is important for us to relativize our sacrifice, and not to feel too sorry for ourselves, thinking we are great martyrs! There is also the need to get on with the business of living and not to nurse our wounds too much - rather see our vocation as "repairers", who constantly seek to give heart to our brothers and sisters. As Art. 48 puts it: "*Living a community life oriented toward the ideal that has been described involves trials which constitute a death to the individualism and selfishness that may be present in each member. In this way, the brothers are led to a fuller and more joyful life*".

Inserted Communities

"The community seeks to insert itself in the world in which it lives so as to be a sign of the presence of the kingdom of God" (Art. 47.1).

As we mentioned already, some brothers have a desire to live a more radical life, they feel called to open up new ways through the formation of communities of insertion... They want to offer their lives in a more significant way. They want to cross over to the world of the marginalized, living not only for and with, but even as the poor. They want to form communities which will take on their lifestyle and dialogue with their culture, relating to poor people more from 'inside' their world. They want to be a respectful, listening presence close to those who suffer, in solidarity with them, calling them to life. The presence of a community of insertion will challenge consume-

rist values and oppression of whatever kind; the simple lifestyle of the brothers can offer a living parable of an alternative society.

Experiencing their culture, living in horizontal relations of closeness and equality with them, the brothers can offer a prophetic service of hope, based on Christ's death and resurrection (Jn 15:20) to those who for whatever reason are marginalized. Such communities of insertion witness to God's loving care and His presence - ministering to the people 'sur place', where they are - open to collaboration with all those who contribute to human dignity and human rights.

We think this is a very healthy development in our Congregation, a sign of its vitality, and very much in the line of our new Constitutions. Our brothers wish to accept in a radical way the invitation contained in the words and the life of Jesus. *"The mission of the Congregation leads us to share the life of the poor and to take up their cause, knowing that solidarity with them can bring us face to face with a world marked by injustice"* (Art. 25.1). Such insertions will also change the face of the Congregation, as more brothers commit themselves to the poor.

Nothing will change any of us quicker than direct experience of the misery and suffering that people have to endure. It was not enough for the Word to remain a word, it had to become flesh. We have to experience new circumstances so that reality can touch us, because that's where Jesus has hidden Himself, in human flesh. The change has to be concrete. Jesus asks the rich young man to change from here to there -

and he meant economically. For most of us this means turning to people who are different from us. Maybe it means that as younger men and women we go to our elders, or maybe as healthy persons we go to the handicapped, or if we're homophobic we work in an Aids hospital - circumstances not sermons will change us - if we head into a world, where we are poor and powerless, then we'll be converted despite ourselves.
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We need not be afraid of the movement towards insertion - it will move all of us closer to the people. We realize that not all are called to these new ways - it is not necessary that everyone do everything, but we can give our support to those who feel called in this direction. We must not extinguish the enthusiasm and zeal of these brothers. We must be open to the future. In the words of John Paul II: "We have to proclaim the Gospel in completely new terms that call us out of our private world. We must put forward a completely new and creative synthesis between the Gospel and life" (11/10/85).

Our God is a God who loves the poor. Our Church must become the Church of the poor: "The preferential option for the poor which is never exclusive nor does it exclude has in fact led many religious to be generously 'present in the barrios on the fringe, among the indigenous, the elderly and the infirm and in countless situations of misery which Latin America lives and suffers through, as well as in the new situations of poverty which affect young people most of all, from alcoholism to drugs'".⁹³

For religious to live in an inserted community can be a real exodus experience - a loss of securities, a moving towards a

new relationship with God and with others, indeed a new form of religious life. Such insertions demand real preparation and formation - they require a radical entering into the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, a living out of the love of the Father, according to the mind and the heart of Jesus - religious with the heart of Christ. "Evangelizing out of a deep experience of God and the search as a community for the light and discernment to face the problems of daily life will be an effective and clear preaching of the Gospel to men and women of our time" ⁹⁴ - that is why in communities of insertion special attention should be given to both the community and the personal projects of life (cf. Art. 45.4; 58) to ensure that the brothers/sisters witness by a really vibrant religious life.

Young people need very close accompaniment if they are to live in an inserted community, for the life demands a considerable level of maturity. The new document of the Church on Formation speaks to this point:

"Small religious communities inserted in a working class district, on the periphery of certain large cities, or in the inner city or in the more remote or poorer areas of the country, can be a significant expression of 'the preferential option for the poor', since it is not enough to work for the poor but there is also the question of living with them and, as far as possible, like them. However, this demand should be modified at times according to the situation in which religious find themselves.

First of all, it is necessary to insist, as a general rule, that the requirements of formation (spiritual, intellectual, cultural, liturgical, communitarian and pastoral) should prevail over

certain apostolic advantages that come from an insertion into a poor milieu. It must be possible to realize and maintain solitude and silence, for example, which are indispensable during the whole time of initial formation.

On the other hand, the time of formation contains periods of apostolic activities where this dimension of religious life can find expression, on condition that these small, inserted communities conform to certain criteria which assure their religious authenticity; that is, that they offer the possibility of living a truly religious life in accord with the ends of the institute; that, in these communities, the life of communal and personal prayer and, consequently, times and places of silence, can be maintained; that the motives for the presence of the religious be first of all, evangelical; that these communities always be ready to respond to the demands of the superiors of the institute; that their apostolic activity not be primarily a response to a personal choice, but to a choice of the institute, in harmony with the pastoral work of the diocese, for which the bishop is primarily responsible".⁹⁵

XVIII. A PRAYING COMMUNITY

A Christian community is one of faith, hope and love. We cannot neglect the faith dimension - it is the Lord who calls us. Our communities are based on the Word of God, and they should be signs of His presence. Our communion doesn't arise from merely natural qualities - it requires an attitude of faith and prayer, otherwise we won't sustain it.

Already in the letter in which our Founder presented our first Constitutions, he quotes from Chapter VI of the Rule of St. Benedict, On Silence - "The Founder, who prepared his preaching in the reading of Scripture and in the silence of prayer, knew by experience that silence is an important moment in the apostolic life ... it is necessary first to set aside in one's life space for contemplation in order to grow as a disciple and listen personally to the Word".⁹⁶

Our Constitutions also require that "*each community reserve a suitable area where the brothers can experience a climate of silence, prayer and rest*" (Art. 47.3). Even from the earliest times, there was great flexibility in the way the brothers organized their community prayer, e.g. the brothers' Chapter of 1825 left great freedom for the organization of daily observance. Apart from fixing the hour to sing the Salve Regina it allowed the communities to adapt themselves to circumstances.⁹⁷ In fact, Fr. Coudrin was not one who wished to multiply obligatory pious exercises: "Could we not be satisfied with our Little Offices and Breviaries? The adoration at night and in the

daytime should take the place of all else" ⁹⁸ ... experience proves that no one should be overburdened with vocal prayers". ⁹⁹ As with our Founders, "*Our communion in mission is most deeply rooted in our personal encounter with the Risen Lord... Whether it be adoration, praise or the silence in which we abandon ourselves to the action of God within us, prayer has a value in itself*" (Art. 50.3).

Personal and Community Prayer

It is worth reflecting on this personal encounter with the Lord in prayer. It is that special time when we come aside to 'be' with Him. I like to think of it as the Lord Himself, luring us into the wilderness and speaking to our hearts - where He will betroth us to Himself... with tenderness and love, where He will betroth us to Himself with faithfulness, and we will come to know the Lord (cf. Hos 2:16-18, 21-22). It is a time to listen with the spirit, with the heart, and not just with the head. For this kind of prayer we need time to let go of all the activity of our modern world, with all its pressing problems and many distractions... time to slow down to make the journey inwards. We need not worry about results, consolations, experiences - just to 'be' with the Lord is already to show our love. To give the Lord our time is to give Him ourselves - He will teach us His ways - no one else can teach us to pray, for each of us is unique - what he asks of us is to find times of quiet daily to discover the Gift of God. If we 'waste time' with Him, He will give us His Spirit who will teach us how to love.

We do not seek a God who is outside or above, but the God who is deep within us. In fact, he is very close, for He has

"taken up His abode" within us. We need to enter into the depths of our own heart, into the Mystery of Jesus and the presence of His healing Spirit. The Lord invites us: "Let all who are thirsty come; all who want it may have the water of life" (Rev. 22:17). We will drink from that unfathomable source - the wounded Heart of Jesus.

In every one of us there is a spring of water waiting to flow forth - a well deep down below the surface - where God dwells in the depths of our hearts. We have to find a way to get behind our thoughts, our feelings, beyond the images, the miseries, the trials, the countless distractions of every day - to look behind the world of appearance - to where we can meet Him at the still center of our being. Contemplation means that we return to this deep source, to that place where love dwells. It is a place to which we need to go often - it is a place of healing, a place of liberty ... "near restful waters He leads me, to revive my drooping spirits". Contemplation is a long loving gaze at that goodness which is at the heart of things. It is in our hearts that we will experience the "mystery of Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27).

The greatest human suffering is isolation and the lack of love. God alone can change the interior of our hearts, revealing to us that we are loved, and lovable, that we are of value and loved by God, just as we are, with all our resistance and our darkness, as well as with all our gifts. There is no need to be perfect; we are each one of us, God's beloved children. He will give us the life and strength to grow ever deeper in love towards a new wholeness.

Jesus has said to each of us: "Fear not, I love you ...". We need to enter into our inner selves to listen to Him, the Silent Lover, hidden in the centre of our being. Many never discover the richness that is within them.

When we discover that we are loved with an eternal love, with a love beyond all time and space, a love that goes even beyond death, then everything begins to change, all becomes possible, all can be accepted and loved. This awareness comes, above all, through a personal union with Jesus who has revealed that He is the Friend and the Beloved, who touches, awakens, and fills the heart.

Before Jesus Himself began His ministry, He already knew that he was loved: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased". In those moments of contemplation He will let us know our election also - He speaks to us: "You have not chosen Me" ... "He calls us by name". In those moments of prayer, we, so to speak, let Him love us - that is the whole point of prayer, to become aware of the love of His heart. "To His open heart the Saviour invites us, to draw water in joy from the springs of salvation" (Preface of Mass of the Sacred Heart). To contemplate signifies to look upon the transpierced heart of Christ, to know that heart intimately, to have His heart - our prayer will pull us into that place which is the center of universal compassion, the heart of God.¹⁰⁰

We must note, of course, that there has always been a strong tradition and practice of praying together as a community, according to the circumstances. We all have the experience that *"our community prayer and our personal prayer nourish one*

another. Both are vital for the life of the community and of its members" (Art. 50.2). Our prayer life is more than specified spiritual exercises: "Our communities need to be communities in prayer, not just communities of persons who pray by themselves ... together the community will seek to grow in a way of prayer which expresses its deepest reality".¹⁰¹ Article 57 of our new Constitutions reads: "Community prayer is a key element in the plan of life with which we build our communities. The Liturgy of the Hours, especially Lauds and Vespers, will occupy a privileged place in this communal prayer; other times of shared prayer or of reflection on Sacred Scripture may be included, as well as the traditional prayers of the Church and of our Congregation".

The contemplative approach embraces the whole of life. Not only each one of us, but also our communities as such, should have a contemplative attitude - they should be centers where we try to listen together and to experience God's action in our lives and in the world, which we express and celebrate especially in the Eucharist (cf. Art. 52). As an apostolic (missionary) religious community our spirituality must not be divorced from life. As religious we must live both "in the desert" where Christ is encountered in Word and silence, and "on the frontier" at the margins of society where we will discover the God of the poor. In fact, we must not compartmentalize our prayer life. We are learning how to move from an introverted other wordly spirituality to a more involved incarnational approach to God and to contemplation. Our community prayer seems to be less and less according to established and impersonal forms - becoming more spontaneous and more shared, especially in our smaller communities - it is an effort to respond to the needs of the times, as our Founders responded to

their times (through reparative prayer).

Especially if our religious lives are more inserted among the people, our spirituality will take on new expressions. The option for the poor will become more and more the focal point for the re-reading of our charism and for the following of Jesus. Our liturgical life, our reading of the Word, with prayerful attitudes, with and from the people will enable us to discover new riches in that charism. Close to the Word, not only in our hearts, but also close to the Word made flesh in the poor, we will experience the God of life. In the words of the Asian Bishops: "all action springs from contemplation - proclamation of the message, animation of Christian communities, social involvement ... everything originates in contemplation and prayer. In the same way, all action ends in contemplation". It is a question of a spirituality which springs from a new experience of Christ present in the poor, which invites us to follow Him and to collaborate with Him in the building of the Kingdom, in affective and effective solidarity with the most needy.

The Eucharist

"Our life of prayer:

1. is centered in the Eucharist as the living expression of our personal and communitarian commitment;

2. is enriched and purified by means of the experience of faith which our ministries bring us;

3. is nourished by the Word of God and by the Liturgy, as well as by the diverse expressions of authentic Christian spirituality, especially that spirituality that is the heritage of our own Congrega-

tion.

4. *associates us intimately with Mary, to whose prayer we unite our own*" (Art. 51).

We gather together as a community in a special way around the Eucharist, the great community prayer. This is not the place to develop the theology of the Eucharist. However, as we can see, our Constitutions express very well the centrality of the Eucharist which gathers our whole life together, a living expression of our commitment. "*Like our Founders, we find in the Eucharist the source and the summit of our apostolic and community life*" (Art. 5). For us, the Eucharist which we celebrate daily, in so far as is possible, is "*the basis of fraternal communion and of apostolic service*" (Art. 52).

Through the Eucharist, we share in "*the attitudes and sentiments of Jesus before the Father and before the world*". The sacrifice of the New Covenant is the total gift of love which Jesus makes to His Father. "*We enter into communion with the thanksgiving of the Risen Jesus, Bread of Life, Sacrament of Love*" (Art. 5). The Eucharist is a sign of His saving love present among us. He offers "His flesh for the life of the world" - this is the Heart of Jesus loving and giving Himself completely for us - a source of new life and freedom for all. The host and the chalice concentrate the whole sense of His historical existence - visible signs of His gratuitous self-giving love.

Through the Eucharist we are offered the marvellous possibility of entering in intimate communion with the Risen Lord and to experience "the power of His resurrection", on condition that we are willing "to share His sufferings, by

reproducing the pattern of His death" (cf. Phil 3:10). "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it will not bear fruit". He invites us to participate by eating and drinking - "take ye and eat" - it is a strong call to give ourselves without reserve ... Our participation strengthens our communion and our sense of mission. The breaking of the bread together is the sign par excellence of fraternal love. "We, though many, are one, because we share the same bread" - We are 'companions' with Jesus and with each other - members of His family. When Jesus told His disciples: "Do this in memory of Me". He referred to more than the institution of His body and blood. His words would have included also the whole spirit of self-giving that underlay them. His comment to "wash each other's feet" is closely related to "do this in memory of Me". He asks us to serve each other in a spirit of mutual love. In a sense, the Eucharist and the washing of the feet are the same reality, for "when there is love, there is God".

The bread that is broken not only unites us to each other - it draws us to love and serve the poor, who are truly the broken body of Christ in our day. In the Eucharist, the Lord prolongs the compassion of His Heart for the multitudes. Our Eucharistic life will enable us to share in "*the attitudes and sentiments of Jesus*" impelling us "*to assume a ministry of intercession, and reminds us of the urgency to work for the transformation of the world ...*" (Art. 5). Our prayer proceeds more and more from reality illuminated by the Word of God. In fact, the Eucharist is celebrated with constant reference to the life of the poor and the signs of the times. All must be invited to the banquet of the Lord and to share the blessings of the Kingdom.

Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we will

recognize Him in the breaking of the bread. Like them, we too may be discouraged and preoccupied with self - but contact with the living Christ brings new hope, a hope that no circumstances can crush, a hope that we can be "His witnesses to the end of the earth" - we will put on His mind and His heart. He will empower us to be good news to the poor, to be His presence everywhere.

Adoration

This Eucharistic spirituality is prolonged in our adoration which has always been "*an essential part of our Congregational heritage and of its reparative mission in the Church - a time for contemplation with the Risen Jesus ... who came to serve and to give His life*" (Art. 53.1 and 2).

We all know the importance our Founders gave to this practice, which they regarded as a special ministry confided to us by the Church. As regards the Good Mother we read: "Reparative adoration of the Blessed Sacrament had an irresistible attraction for her soul. As a response to it, She passed long hours, often the entire night before the Tabernacle".¹⁰² Fr. Coudrin himself describes how already in La Motte d'Usseau, he spent many hours in adoration. So often, too, during the revolutionary times he carried the Blessed Sacrament on his person. As we have seen already, in the midst of a very busy life, he was convinced that "adoration of the Blessed Sacrament would make up for many other exercises".¹⁰³ His thinking is very clear: "The adorer is sent, delegated by the Church, to adore, praise, repair, thank ... The adorer should adore with

Jesus Christ and through Jesus Christ first for herself and for the sins committed throughout the world; to ask for the conversion of sinners, the propagation of the faith, to pray for the Church ... but above all, offer a total gift of self to the Heart of Jesus. This devotion, born on Calvary, came from the Heart of Jesus Himself pierced on the cross after His death ...".¹⁰⁴

Our adoration had for the Good Father the traditional ends of the Sacrifice of the Mass - adoration, thanksgiving, reparation, petition - it is its prolongation - it is a time during which we enter more and more deeply into the mystery of the person of Jesus. As we "look on Him whom they have pierced", the sacrificial Lamb present before us, we are reminded that He continues to suffer in our brothers and sisters. When we meet Him in the Eucharist, we can renew our faith in His incarnation in the world, and especially in the poor and suffering, for the Eucharistic presence is that center where the sacramentality of all reality is summed up. Here we will become aware of the face of Christ also in the poor, who have been wounded by the sin of the world, and we will be moved to make reparation.

Our adoration has always been understood as a way to "retrace" the hidden life of the Savior. Before the Sacrament of the Crucified Risen One, we enter more and more into the attitudes and sentiments of His Heart "*uniting ourselves to His incessant intercession before the Father, to His cry in solidarity with*

a humanity, wounded by sin" (Art. 53.3). The Chilean Provincial Commission on Spirituality said it beautifully:

"In the silence of our small chapels, we recall the events

in the mortal life of Jesus, from His birth to His death, contemplating in them the suffering of our people and the work of our brothers in the Sacred Hearts.

Let us repeat with simplicity this gesture which has come to us from our Founders; let us manifest by it how truly we want to follow Jesus and how much we want to enter into His heart. There let us beg graces for our missionaries, for our Congregation, and for our people.

We ask the Risen Lord, Who lives mysteriously in the Bread we offer, that he give courage to the poor and the sick, to the afflicted and the abandoned. In adoration we are in solidarity with the passion which Christ undergoes in the history of our times ...

In adoration lies our missionary strength ... it derives from the same Christ, alive and committed, that we adore. He it is Who grants us unity as Brothers, the strength to leave all, and the joy of taking His message to distant peoples".¹⁰⁵

This is very much the spirit of our primitive community. As we read the letters of our early missionaries, we realize how united they were with all the brothers and sisters and how much they depended on the adoration for the efficacy of their work of evangelization. It is during adoration too that the Good Father felt closest to his religious family: "Remember often during your adoration, that I unite myself to you and that never a night passes which does not bring me close to you and to all our houses, as I pray that the Divine Heart of our Good Master will guard you and bless all of us, granting us His grace and His

peace".¹⁰⁶

"From the day that the Good Father felt the weight of his providential election toward the end of his stay at la Motte, he had the feeling that the force of a mysterious Love was leading, protecting and strengthening him".¹⁰⁷ Fr. Coudrin had a deep sense of Providence, a constant sense of being loved.¹⁰⁸ I believe that he developed that awareness of God's closeness, during the long hours of prayer and adoration in the granary of la Motte. This spirit of unconditional trust in God's love grows as we come to know the Heart of Christ. We can see the close connection between our devotion to the Sacred Hearts, and "*a permanent attitude of adoration*" (Art. 53.4b). What a rich notion of adoration is now incorporated in our Constitutions! Our daily adoration is not simply the fulfilling of a duty or an obligation - it is the opportunity to strengthen and to express a permanent attitude of adoration and thanksgiving - a time to deepen our trust in His Providence, our dependence on a Source of strength and power above and beyond ourselves. As the poor of Jahweh, it is a time for us to express to the Lord our permanent attitude of faith and trust in His constant loving presence with us at all times. Little wonder that our Founders had such trust in God's good guidance of their lives!

Of course this permanent spirit of adoration of the Lord and of His will in our lives will never grow without the practice of this form of prayer so dear to our Founders, and each community is asked "*to seek concrete and significant ways in which to live the adoration and to ensure that the Eucharist will be the constant point of reference in its life*" (Art. 53.4a), and "*each brother commits himself to spend a time before the Blessed Sacrament each*

day" (Art. 53.4b). We ask each brother and each community to really examine this aspect of our life together. On the community level, many initiatives are possible. Especially, in latter years many of our communities plan creatively common adoration - on big feasts, at special times, sometimes inviting the laity to join with them: when this happens it is much appreciated, and it can profoundly influence the quality of our lives within the community and with those whom we serve. I can say that there also seems to be a renewed appreciation of the value of our adoration, an awareness that it is an essential element of our vocation, and that it bears abundant fruits in our apostolic lives (cf. also Rule of Life 67, 68).

"In adoration we are urged to commit ourselves more fully to the mission so that 'by Him, with Him and in Him' our lives and the world - liberated from evil and sin - may give glory to the father" (Art. 53.3b). Our reparative adoration must be translated into action in our lives.

As we conclude this chapter, it is important to insist that as apostolic religious there is no dichotomy between our life of prayer and our mission in the world (cf. Art. 52). As ss.cc. religious, we do not regard our contact with people as occasions that weaken our spiritual strength, but rather as encounters in which Christ is ready to transform us. God came into this world and we must encounter Him in the midst of this world. The Word to be proclaimed is the Word made flesh, the Word who is life and love. "God so loved the world that He sent His Son into the world". Jesus Himself was in the streets, meeting people, touching people, healing people ... "Not he who says Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does

the will of my Father" (Mt 7:21). We need to avoid dualism, the separation of our prayer life and our apostolic life. In the midst of activity we need to be contemplative. If we discover the Lord in the Eucharist, where He is present par excellence, we will begin to find Him everywhere.

Finally, many of our brothers and sisters live very rich spiritual lives. However, there is always the danger of being overwhelmed with activities. That is why it is important not only to have a community plan (cf. above), but also for each one to have his own personal project. We need to know how to create space and balance in our lives if we are to maintain equilibrium between the needs of the person, the community and our apostolates. It is not always a question of too much work, although many times brothers/sisters accept more than is necessary. It is also a question of the way we distribute our time - with half the work the same problem can exist! We need to ensure that we build a contemplative dimension into our lives, and also time for rest and for relaxation. "*In our personal plan of life we need regular time for individual prayer, for study and meditation on Holy Scripture; for reviewing our lives and commitment as religious, in the light of the Gospel; and for an annual retreat*" (Art. 58). We owe it to ourselves to ensure a healthy growth both as human beings and as men and women of God.

XIX. AN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Our new Constitutions put a lot of emphasis on the universality of our mission, that is to say we have a mission that *"can be carried out in all cultures, in keeping with the initial intuition of our Founder, who saw us as a 'group of missionaries who would spread the Gospel everywhere'"* (Art. 60). As the world becomes more and more a global village, we need to develop this broader vision - a willingness to be at the service of the whole Church. A sense of internationality helps. Our new Constitutions clearly call us to grow as an international community, and in recent years I believe we have made considerable progress in this aspect of our lives. The developing of our international community implies a) an attitude of openness to diverse cultures, b) an appreciation of the richness that comes from being international, and c) a willingness to do all we can to collaborate and to coordinate our efforts.

a) Openness to diverse cultures: we need to be very aware that the historical, cultural roots of the Congregation are very European. This is not a criticism - it is simply stating a fact - but a fact that continues to influence very much our way of thinking and being (not only ours but that of the whole Latin Church). For nearly two hundred years European culture has been the dominant one in the Congregation - the influence of non-European culture has not been too great. We need to be conscious of this, for it is often very difficult for the dominant culture to respect differences. As the face of the Congregation begins to change, and more young people enter our community, especially from the countries of the South, we are

becoming aware of the importance of cross-culturation. "*When we exercise the mission of the Congregation in countries other than our own, we try to become inculturated in all that concerns our way of being and living, and also in our way of proclaiming the Gospel message*" (Art. 62). When our charism is lived more and more in dialogue with other cultures, we will discover entirely new dimensions of its richness - that charism is not frozen, it is dynamic and open to a variety of expressions.

A spirit of internationality should be synonymous with mutual respect, acceptance of differences, dialogue regarding cultural diversity. Internationality is not only a challenge - it is a real value. "Any one incarnation of our charism does not express it completely. Each inculturation of it contributes to making its original richness more explicit. Our internationality calls us to a greater solidarity both in giving and in receiving".¹⁰⁹ This is particularly important as we seek to implant and develop the Congregation in the non-Western world. "*The universality of our mission normally includes the implantation of our Congregation in the places where we serve, and an openness to accepting local vocations*" (Art. 60,2). We need to be very open to cross-culturation with non-Western cultures - indeed not only non-Western but non-Christian cultures as well. As Christians we believe that the Holy Spirit is still working always and everywhere, unpredictably and outside the boundaries that we have set. The Spirit sets no boundaries: "the Spirit breathes where he will". All are already living in the favour and the love of God. Every time a person acts in a truly human way, grace is there, grace is active. Every time a person laughs in joy, cries in sorrow, loves what is beautiful, stands up for truth, breaks away from selfishness, refuses to be embittered and to despair -

there is grace, there is salvation. "The Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God" (Gaudium et Spes, 22).

Our missionaries recognize the reverence for life and the values present in non-Western cultures. They need to be solidly rooted in their own culture and at the same time speak the language and adopt the way of life of those whom they serve, if they want to communicate. When they enter into dialogue they must be open to conversion to a fuller truth (otherwise it is not a dialogue). We must accept that others, too, possess their truth - their customs, their prayer forms, their traditions. Dialogue is not only understanding, but sharing values - "you have some values, we have others". We are all enriched by the sharing.

When we say that the Church is a sign, we mean to say that she points to the presence of God who is active everywhere. As a community we witness to His redemptive love embracing all people. Discovering His presence will be an enriching experience for ourselves. I know, for example, at the Mission Seminar in Indonesia, many of us from the West began to get an intimation of how Asian spirituality - a spirituality obviously influenced by non-Christian religions and cultures - could open up unsuspected dimensions of our charism.

Internationality then, involves moving beyond the borders, psychologically and at times physically, of one's own culture, country, nation. It means acceptance and pride in one's own culture but also an acceptance of differences, a readiness to change as a result of dialogue - and a willingness to be part of and at home in the global village of the Congregation.

b) The richness that comes from being international: our General Chapter of 1982 spoke of the international dimension of our community as a gift of the Spirit and asked us to develop it. Indeed, the experience of the past ten years in this regard has made its value clearer. Our General Chapter of 1988 asked us "to intensify our commitment to the international level, in order to accomplish our mission more effectively" (Recommendation 17). I believe in fact that a sense of international unity continues to grow among us. The rich variety of presences and ministries of the Congregation present in Asia and the Pacific, in Africa, North and South America and in Europe helps keep us from being too inward looking, and it deepens our awareness of the world in which we live and which we wish to serve. This in itself is formative for us, drawing us out of our narrowness and broadening our horizons.

We have a strong base for our unity - our common vocation, a sharing of the same charism and mission in the Church as expressed in our new Constitutions - it is the call of the Holy Spirit. As the sense of unity grows among us, I believe, our evangelization will be more effective. Internationality challenges us corporately and individually towards living and working more and more in harmony for the sake of our mission. The world is getting smaller, it is becoming more interdependent and it is becoming more aware of the need for solidarity.

We are called to be signs of a new society, defined in terms of communion rather than competition, a society based not on political power but rather on solidarity with the weak -

people willing to serve rather than seeking to dominate. By our lives together we can be true signs and witnesses to the possibility of international collaboration among people(s). We can raise our corporate voice and work together to build a better world. As an international community we can have an impact on the injustice in the world... on the rights of women, racism, the rights of all to participate in decision making, the right to respect for their cultures, to share the world's goods etc.

In the Church too, the experiences of international communities can be helpful, showing how different cultural expressions of our faith, a more dialogical approach to differences, respect for increased local autonomy etc. need not be an obstacle to the mission of the Church - rather on the contrary, they can express the richness that can come from diversity in a Church that manifests the many faces of Christ.

c) A willingness to collaborate and to coordinate our efforts: we emphasize the importance of the international dimension of our community, not only because of our desire to be open to diverse cultures, not only because of its prophetic value for the contemporary world, but also in order to be more effective in responding to the many needs of the Congregation. *"We regard the evangelizing mission undertaken in any part of the world as a responsibility affecting and enriching every brother"* (Art. 61). We are all co-responsible for the mission of the Congregation. Both the individual members and the Provinces must look to the mission of the whole Congregation. That is why our Constitutions very much encourage collaboration and the coordination of our efforts. This demands of us a wider sense of belonging, and a spirit of generosity - a readiness to share our

resources with each other for the good of the whole.

Becoming international is really a conversion process - it involves trust, vulnerability, openness to change, dialogue, a sense of mutual dependence - this is not easy. Consciously or unconsciously everyone of us has his/her own prejudices - a touch of nationalism, even racism, a sense of cultural superiority, classism etc. - and of course there is always fear and resistance on the part of some to change the status quo, but we must be magnanimous enough to leave all that behind, and be humble enough to learn from and to help each other: "there does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

We are at an important time in the development of the Congregation and its mission (for example, the implantation of the Congregation in the Churches of the Third World is a tremendous challenge for the whole Congregation). Happily, there is already much good will and conviction among the brothers. There is "*a deeper awareness of belonging to the Congregation*" and a willingness "*to give real substance to our solidarity*" (cf. Art. 46). Many are "*ready to leave country, family and familiar surroundings to serve wherever they are needed*" (Art. 61). Our Constitutions recognize "*the right of each brother to volunteer for any mission of the Congregation*" (Art. 64.3), and more and more, the Provinces are ready "*to contribute to the financing of missionary projects, and to free some of its members so that they may collaborate personally in the mission of other more needy Provinces*" (Art. 64.4).

The international contacts among us have been growing

in recent years - already there are international communities in several of our missions. Since the Chapter of 1988 there is, I believe, a greater awareness of the need to share our resources for the sake of the mission. Stronger Provinces are already helping weaker ones. The Inter-Provincial Conferences and the various Inter-provincial Commissions on Vocations, Youth, Formation, Missions, Meetings of Economists etc. have become real instruments of communion and discernment. There is special emphasis on the need for international solidarity in the fields of formation, finance and personnel.

The General Government is called upon in our Constitutions to animate and coordinate the diverse missionary initiatives of the Congregation (cf. Art. 64). It is in a spirit of non-hierarchical, collaborative mutual dialogue that this can be accomplished. It is a question of finding the structures and the means for fulfilling our mission together as apostolic religious in the Church. Our General Chapter of 1988 recommended that the General Government give close attention to the reality of our communities in order to adapt the structures and services where necessary (Recommendation 18-19).

With all this in mind in our preparation for the meeting of the Enlarged General Council at Quito, we asked the brothers to go beyond their national or provincial boundaries and to place their reflections on a broader level, in order to open the way to further international and interprovincial collaboration. We deliberately aimed the preparatory questionnaire at the Continental (Europe, Latin America, United States) or the International Region (Asia, Pacific, Africa) level. The purpose was to stimulate a reflection on the reality of each

Continent/Region at this time and on the challenges this reality presents for the Church and for the Congregation in the years ahead - all this with a view to collaborating together as ss.cc. religious, in order to respond to the most urgent needs of the Church and society.

We already have clear orientations from our Constitutions and from our last General Chapter, which called us to focus in a special way on the poor, on the role of the laity and on youth, wherever we serve. However, the reflections of the Enlarged General Council in Quito and our preparations in the whole Congregation for the General Chapter of 1994 should help us identify better the particular needs of each Continent and Region, especially with a view to pooling our resources, in a spirit of interprovincial collaboration - always realizing that our structures are for mission, and therefore should not be too rigid. It is with this background and from this wider perspective that we want to treat the documents on Mission, Formation and the Secular Branch which we hope can be instruments to help us concretize our options as ss.cc. religious. It is only if, like our Founders, we listen to the signs of the times and respond together to real needs in the world - only then will our Congregation have real relevance - it is not simply a question of survival but rather a question of responding to our vocation.

All that I have seen in the last ten years makes me believe that a new sense of internationality is beginning to form us for a new world. Not only on the level of structures (Interprovincial Conferences, Commissions etc.) but also on the level of concrete realizations we have experienced the value of international collaboration - shared novitiates, common time for

young professed, stages of young professed in other Provinces, the Mission Seminars, the Enclaves, the International Youth Meetings etc. continue to strengthen the bonds of unity among us. They have enriched the life of the Congregation enormously.

The future is full of hope and possibilities if we are ready to continue to pay the price in terms of time, energy, openness, mobility and availability to collaborate with each other for the sake of our common mission. Given the generosity of our brothers and sisters, there is every reason to believe that this spirit of internationality will continue to grow and flourish among us with all its attendant benefits.

XX. BROTHERS AND SISTERS: A COMMON VOCATION AND MISSION

"The Brothers and Sisters of our religious family constitute one Congregation ... 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" (Art. 8).

Another very positive and happy development in recent years has been the strengthening of the bonds of unity between our brothers and sisters, so much desired by our Founders. While the initial inspiration for the foundation of our Congregation can be traced back to la Motte d'Usseau, the foundation in fact took place in Poitiers. Mother Henriette was the person called by God to work with Fr. Coudrin to initiate the community, which was to become the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts. Together they accomplished what they saw to be God's will: the foundation of a community whose whole spirituality was based on consecration to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. All through their lives they collaborated very closely to develop "the Work", and a strong family spirit of unity characterized the relationship between the brothers and the sisters of the primitive community.

In a beautiful article in the Annales of September 1895 ¹¹⁰ entitled "The Servants of God", the relations between Fr.

Coudrin and Mother Henriette are described very well:

"It is worthy of interest, and even of admiration that a man and a woman working in harmony in a parallel work, with distinct though subordinate authority, should remain during nearly half a century with the same fullness of peace in their mutual relations of confidence and esteem and in the most perfect charity".

The author goes on to illustrate their relationship quoting Father Coudrin, who in his humility attributed the greater part of the work to Mother Henriette:

"Yes, there has been a lot of progress for a time like ours, and above all for a father who is so timid and fearful. It is true that the Good Mother carries the light. I only hold the candlestick". ¹¹¹

On her part, the correspondence of Mother Henriette constantly expresses her great respect and love for Fr. Coudrin - whom she calls 'the Incomparable one'. To one of the sisters in Paris, where the Good Father resided at the time, she writes:

"You know all I would like to say to him, who after God is everything for me. I ask him to offer a Salve Regina for me every day". ¹¹²

The author continues his article repeating that the relations of intimacy and mutual confidence between the Good Father and the Good Mother lasted forty years without clouds or changes, rather with a growth in supernatural trust - and he concludes:

"Without doubt God was preparing for the Congregation in the life of the two Founders a model and a grace of union, of deference, of devotion and of holy charity which would assure its harmony and prosperity".¹¹³

Anyone who knows our history will be aware that this same family spirit characterized the brothers and sisters in the formative years of the Congregation - in fact, they saw themselves as one community - the brothers and sisters were in daily contact in down to earth, cordial relations of mutual support and practical services - with a strong sense of being in mission together. This unity and collaboration was itself an important dimension of their mission and of their apostolic action, and of their response to what they perceived the Spirit to be doing in the world of their time. It was a unique grace, a precious gift, the richness of which we are beginning to rediscover in our day. Particularly, in recent years, there is a new consciousness that the unity of the two branches is a gift, not only for the Congregation, but that it can inspire in the Church and in the world a real sense of the equality, the complementarity and the mutual enrichment of men and women.

In the light of our history and heritage, and with a growing awareness of the importance of this aspect of our charism, the first chapter of our new Constitutions, on our vocation and mission, was studied at our General Chapter of 1988 in consultation with the Sisters' General Chapter. There was a wonderful convergence of views. It was as if the Spirit was at work, reawakening and renewing the primitive spirit of our religious community. We had a feeling that in God's Providence the desire for greater unity that had been growing

among us in recent years, was being authenticated. Without doubt, the historic meeting of the two Chapters (28/09/88) and the symbolic vote of approbation of the common first chapter of our Constitutions encouraged us to commit ourselves to collaborate with our sisters wherever and whenever possible. This circular letter is nothing but an elaboration of that first common chapter, which applies to brothers and sisters alike, and I write with this very much in mind.

Our unity is then, a fundamental and indissoluble fact implying a joint responsibility. Our brothers and sisters are coresponsible for the mission of the Congregation. If we are true to our Founders, our unity must take concrete expression not only in our laws, but also in our lives.

Our Constitutions reflect clearly the desire expressed at the General Chapter that, as a religious community, we rid ourselves of 'clerical' type attitudes. We do not wish to maintain clerical privileges and distinctions which do not serve the mission. Furthermore, as religious freely choosing celibacy, working together in the same vocation and mission, perhaps we can offer a prophetic sign of a new conception of male/female relationships.

If we read the signs of the times and observe the growing feminist movement in society today, it is important that the Church itself develop a contemporary Christian feminism - recognizing the complementarity of men and women more clearly, and seeking to ensure that women can play their rightful part in society. We are all products of a male-dominated society - maybe our Congregation can make a real

contribution, by the way we accept each other as male and female, as brothers and sisters, equal in dignity, with a mutual respect - this could be a real witness. In fact, many of us have the experience that when such a relationship is lived within the Congregation, members of other religious Communities and indeed many lay people express their admiration of the family relationship and collaboration that exist among us. Nor is it accidental that among young people today the unity of the two branches is deeply appreciated. I feel these are signs of the times that come from the Holy Spirit.

Besides, we have so much to receive as well as to give each other, if we regard the unity of the two branches as a gift of the Spirit rather than as a threat! There can be something very humanizing about being in healthy relationship with our sisters. Probably all of us men have feminine qualities within us that are underdeveloped. In general, women tend to stress partnership and mutuality more than competition in their relationships. They speak more in terms of real life experiences and needs than they do in abstract concepts. They care as much about people as they do about structures and forms. They are more ready to relate in small faith sharing circles than along hierarchical formal lines. They seem to be closer to the earth, with (in general) healthier attitudes to their bodies and to sexuality. We all need those feminine qualities of empathy, listening, enduring ... Perhaps we men need to be a bit humbler and more courageous. We need to develop those nurturing, caring, sensitive qualities which will humanize society. Perhaps we need to even revise our patriarchal idea of God whom we wish to experience not only as Father, Lord, strong warrior, but also as Mother, protective, tender and gentle. As with our

Founders, those of us who have experienced good brotherly relationships with our sisters, and who have experienced collaboration in practice will testify that it has been very rewarding. It has been a genuine experience of mutual support and esteem, including a source of personal growth. The sisters will testify that for them too it has been a positive experience, and they have benefitted from the masculine influence in their lives.

There is still a long road to travel. There are obstacles to be overcome. We recognize that there can be insecurity, fears at every level, prejudices - our particular history, our formation, culture, age, traditions, clerical mentality can make it more difficult - we must be patient, but we must continue to search for ways of responding to the Spirit, not just in theory, but collaborating concretely in our everyday lives. Developing a real unity in mission will depend a great deal on the openness of all, on good personal relationships and on the will to work together. If this good will is present we will find the structures necessary to facilitate collaboration. The experience of recent years has (in general) been very positive. Where real collaboration has grown, it has become an important element in the mission and the apostolic action of the community. It has been based on a common vision and common criteria, plus a balanced approach - with on one hand, respect for the autonomy of each branch, and on the other, a willingness to work closely together, giving each other familial support.

In various parts of the Congregation a healthy climate exists - easy, natural (non-artificial) relationships of friendship and mutual respect, helping both brothers and sisters to

minister more effectively to God's people. The lived experience of these communities has encouraged more and more communities of both brothers and sisters to ask for the presence of the other branch to collaborate with them in mission. In the Congregation, I believe, genuine affection and appreciation of each other is growing. Our Constitutions point out that this unity of mind and heart has its most profound roots in our charism, a unique grace of the Holy Spirit, that makes us members of the one family - "*Aware that it constitutes a significant value, the Brothers and Sisters assume together the responsibility to maintain and strengthen their unity*" (Art. 8).

XXI. COLLABORATION IN MISSION: WITH THE LAITY

"We see ourselves likewise as pilgrims, together with the whole people of God ... In equality and shared responsibility we desire to advance toward full communion among ourselves, with our Sisters and with all lay Christians" (Art. 153.2).

Our new Constitutions begin and end expressing our communion with all the people of God, whom we wish to serve, and whom we see as our partners in the mission of the Church. Our General Chapter of 1988 asks us "to do whatever is possible so that the laity may assume their proper active role in the Christian communities and in the evangelizing mission of the Church".¹¹⁴ We commit ourselves therefore to collaborate and to work with them on a level of complete equality.

Sometimes in the past we had the idea that lay people were there to help us, and they were really treated almost as second class citizens. In fact, we are there to help them play their proper part in the life of the Church. We welcome them as our partners. Together we try to create compassionate caring Christian communities. We must avoid any kind of clericalism. The laity have the right not only to be consulted, but to exercise responsibility, with the possibility of real decision-making power in the Church. We are not used to this - if it is to happen, most of us will have to change our way of thinking, otherwise mutual collaboration will be just a dream.

If the Church is to have real life at the local level, it will

be through the creation of small basic communities which Paul VI called "nurseries of evangelization" ¹¹⁵ - and for this, systematic participation is a 'must'. Together we have to develop a gospel vision. According to Paul VI: "The one central issue that lies at the heart of structural injustices today is lack of participation by people in determining their own destiny". ¹¹⁶ Likewise, the American Bishops in their incisive economic pastoral, insist that participation, not simply the provision of goods, is what is important, if we wish to achieve a more just world.

"In the Church's openness to ministries, and in a continuous and orderly communal growth, religious are able to discover new forms of active participation, involving the Christian community increasingly in their initiatives and works". ¹¹⁷ - We need then to put our confidence in the laity. We need to search for the structures through which they can participate. We need to give strong support to those who are committed, helping them discover their gifts and possibilities. We need especially to encourage and form lay leadership in the communities we serve, so that they can play a central role in pastoral planning in the future. In all of this we must reject, in ourselves or in others, any attitude or approach that would in any way treat women as of lesser worth than men - "all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Pope John Paul himself said in Antwerp in May 1985: "The faithful community expects the enriching intervention of women not only in the family, but in all areas of life: in spirituality, in theological thinking, in the life of the community, in missionary vocations, in consultative bodies, and in pastoral ministries".

We are all associated with lay people in one way or another, in the parishes, in the colleges, in our various apostolates. Do we have a real idea of their place in the work of evangelization? This is a challenge demanding reflection, creativity and practical initiative in our concrete situations.

A factor that can facilitate the growth of small communities is the witness of our religious community - especially if the religious community is inserted among the people. We have already said that we wish to live our lives in the midst of the people. Sharing the people's life experiences at close quarters, we can respond better to their needs. Our commitment and our values, if lived authentically, can be a source of inspiration to them. That is why our General Chapter of 1988 "encouraged the brothers to share and communicate explicitly the gospel values of our ss.cc. vocation and mission in our work with the laity. The three Orientations which animate our mission will help the laity in general, and especially those who desire to engage themselves with the Congregation in its evangelizing mission".

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We in turn learn from the laity - not only from their field of specialized knowledge, but also from their spiritual experience and practical knowledge of God. How often have we been deeply moved and even humbled by the generosity and faith of our lay brothers and sisters. We must learn to have not only a deep respect for their gifts, which are often greater than ours, but also for their distinct vocation. We can help them develop a real sense of mission - moving from a more individually centered understanding of faith to a missionary orientation. The laity can bring their faith to bear in ordinary life

witnessing to gospel values in the family, in their neighbourhood, in their work situation etc., and we can help them form communities which are not closed in on themselves. Small Christian groups/communities are very effective in overcoming individualism in religion and they can be a real leaven in society.

Lay involvement in evangelization envisages the whole Christian community responsible not only for catechesis, eucharistic ministries, bible study and other Church related matters, but also for human promotion. These faith communities can be signs and also seeds of the Kingdom, containing within themselves much new life for society - caring in a special way for the destiny and the dignity of every human person. They can be centers of welcome and support for the weaker members of society, and they can accomplish much to further the cause of justice and peace.

We wish to support and collaborate in every way with these lay communities, movements and groups within the Church. Indeed, our Constitutions remind us that our collaboration is not restricted to communities with a 'catholic' label in the denominational sense: "*Our reparative vocation encourages us to collaborate with all those who, led by the Spirit, work to build a world of justice and love, sign of the Kingdom*" (Art. 4).

A Secular Branch

"Since its origin the Congregation has had a secular branch. Its members commit themselves to live the mission and the spirit of the

Congregation, and it has its own Statutes approved by the Holy See" (Art. 9).

The charism of the Congregation doesn't belong only to the institute, but to the Church. All are aware that there are lay people in various parts of the Congregation who wish to share the richness and the support of our charism in a real communion. They wish to participate in the life and spirituality of the Congregation, to share its mission and its apostolates - and of course they would like to have some structure of 'belonging', to be in closer union with us. In fact, in various Provinces of the Congregation we have seen groups of lay people very much in touch with the Congregation and already engaged in its mission. Indeed, some have left their countries to take part in the missionary efforts of the Congregation. We see this also as a movement of the Holy Spirit, a movement which also responds to the wish of our Founders, who from its origin wished to form a family composed of brothers, sisters and lay persons.

The General Chapter of 1988 was very interested in responding to the desire of those who seek a certain integration with our religious family. The Chapter wished to support already existing "ss.cc. lay communities or groups" and encouraged the Provinces to promote "temporary lay missionary experiences". It expressed the hope that the Congregation might be able to structure a movement of ss.cc. lay life which would have a special bond with the Congregation - always respecting both the nature of the lay vocation and fidelity to our spiritual heritage. The Chapter asked the General Government to begin a consultation process which would facilitate the coordination of the "ss.cc. lay communities and groups", and

make it possible to propose common orientations.¹¹⁹

After consultations with the Brothers and the Sisters and various lay people and groups, a document was drawn up, which will be presented to the Enlarged General Council at Quito in October of this year. The intention is to provide suitable Statutes for the secular branch, in accordance with Art. 9 of the Constitutions.

The document insists on the lay nature of the vocation of the members of the Secular Branch. We must not try to make religious of them. They are called to participate in the mission of the Congregation, in accordance with the first chapter of our Constitutions, and they are called to incarnate our charism in the milieu that is proper to them as lay persons. The document gives orientations with regard to the prayer life, the communal life, and the apostolic service of the members. It gives special attention to the solidarity that should exist between the members of the third branch and the ss.cc. Brothers and Sisters. Some possible structures and some principles for the incorporation and formation of members are proposed.

Our intention is to offer criteria that will be broad enough to be adapted to various ss.cc. lay groups according to their needs, while at the same time giving a certain stability and structure, which could ensure a rich participation in our life and mission. When Statutes are agreed by the Brothers' and the Sisters' branches, they will be submitted to the Holy See.

All this opens up real possibilities for the future. If a really active, dynamic secular branch were to exist in our

various apostolates, there would be a marvellous multiplication of apostolic energy released, to serve the mission of the Congregation.

Youth

In speaking of lay people, our Congregation wishes to pay special attention to the youth. We want to be close to them in order to respond to the basic religious hunger in young people, a hunger that can be so easily smothered in modern society. They especially need to experience real Christian community. Our own family spirit will help us to engage in family-centered apostolates - we all know that renewed family relationships and such family-centered apostolates have a crucial role to play in handing on the faith in a complex world. We cannot emphasize enough the deep influence of the home.

The best way to evangelize the young will be to love them from the heart. "Jesus looked at the young man and loved him". His kind of love cannot be faked. Faith cannot stay alive without community, and young people need to experience a community that believes not only in God but also in them. This is why small groups and self-involving exercises are important for them. We can help them by our presence among them. We can accompany them, listening with love, believing in them, affirming them, respecting their liberty - sharing their hopes and fears - it is not so much new ideas, but new relations of confidence and trust that will help them discover love incarnate.

Young people today are subjected to so many pressures in the consumer society, that we must help them find inner

quiet. Many young people are really searching - looking for an alternative to a world which is so competitive and unjust. The Gospel has a power all of its own to touch their hearts. We need to be open and vulnerable so that young people can experience us, not as distant and remote but as persons full of the joy that comes from living the Gospel. We can challenge them to join with us in building a more just world.

In the words of Pope John Paul II: "The Church looks to the young. The Church sees herself in a special way in the young - young people are the hope of the Church and her mission in the world". Let us believe in them, let us trust them, let us love them!

XXII. INCORPORATION AND GROWTH IN THE COMMUNITY

Vocations and Vocation Ministry

Our Constitutions remind us that "*the task of awakening vocations is an indispensable part of our apostolic ministry*". The promotion of vocations is "*the responsibility of every member of the Congregation*". We are encouraged to promote vocations because "*of our belief in the validity of our charism*". It is normal that if we believe in the mission of the Congregation, we will want to invite and welcome young people, as the Lord Himself did, to "come and see". We will not be afraid to "*share our life and charism, our tradition and history*". If our experience is a joyful one... - surely we would want to share this joy with others. The Constitutions point out that "*the evangelical witness of our communities should be the most effective invitation to others, especially the young, to come to us, to learn more about our life, and eventually to choose to make their own our way of following Jesus*" (cf. Arts. 68. 69). The most convincing argument for young people will be the testimony of joyful persons and happy communities.

In fact, our General Chapter asked all our Provinces to give special attention to the nurturing of religious vocations. As our Constitutions point out "*a good vocation pastorale is a part of the building up of the Christian community*" (Art. 69,3) and of course new vocations bring joy and hope to all of us and they are "*an invitation to grow and to renew ourselves*". Vocations are a

gift from God, so we need to pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into His harvest" (Mt 9:38), but we also need a plan in order to ensure that we are doing all we can to have an effective vocations ministry in our respective Provinces. Some Provinces have developed a good Youth and Vocation Pastorate, sometimes in collaboration with our Sisters as recommended by our General Chapter.¹²⁰ In recent years the European Youth and Vocation Pastorate Commission has functioned very well and makes us aware of some dimensions of our life that are particularly attractive to the young: our commitment to the poor, the unity of the two branches and our spirit of internationality. Obviously, the better the quality of our youth ministry, the more effective our vocation ministry will be, for a good climate can be created where budding vocations can be fostered. However, the two ministries should not be confused.

Discerning vocations is a delicate task, it is most important, because of its consequences for the candidates - their whole future life is at stake - and of course also it has many consequences for our community and for its future.

Let us remember that the young people today are of a different generation to most of us - their views of the world will be different to ours and we have much to learn from them. Many of them really love life, they are very generous and are ready to sacrifice themselves to bring life to others. They have a strong sense of social justice and a desire for real brotherhood. Perhaps they are more open and more spontaneous than our generation, and many of them are very attracted by the family spirit of our Congregation. However, we know that sometimes in our secularised world, the climate of faith is not so strong,

many young people come from less stable home situations - sometimes they are psychologically fragile and their affective life is not so well-ordered. They may not have as much self-discipline as the previous generation and we know that permanent commitments are more difficult than before.

I do not say they are better or worse than former generations, but we need to keep in mind that in general the candidates for religious life will be different to those of the last generation, and of course their formation will also be different - adapted to their needs and to the mission of religious today. A radical following of Jesus is extremely demanding - and we need to move more and more in this direction, if we are to be real signs and witnesses of the Gospel.

Our life, then, is more challenging than ever before - perhaps the number of those who can respond to the challenge will diminish, but those who do have to be of high quality. Candidates today will need a gradual initiation, a process of formation that will enable them little by little to internalize their vocation and to follow the path of Jesus Himself, entering more and more profoundly into the mystery of the Lord. We must ensure that the candidates who are accepted already have a human and Christian foundation on which to build - a foundation that would give reason to believe that they have the potential to grow and persevere in our life. ¹²¹

Formation, a Life-Long Process

"When we enter the Congregation, we commit ourselves to

begin a life-long process of formation, growth and renewal" (Art. 66).

Our Constitutions point out that such a process means that each one of us and our communities need to be in an attitude of continual conversion, if we are going to follow Christ in a radical way - which is what we are called to by our ss.cc. vocation. Nor is it easy to maintain that communion with each other which we need in order to fulfil our mission together - hence the need for constant renewal and conversion, which will keep our commitment creative and fresh. This is why our Constitutions insist that "*in addition to the General Plan of Formation, each Province will have its own plan for Initial and Ongoing Formation*", based on the norms of the Church and on our Constitutions. The formation plans of the Province will be an integral part of the Province Plan of life and mission.

Without doubt, the quality of our Congregation life and mission depends on the quality of our formation. We have limited resources of personnel, but if we accept candidates, in justice we must give them a good formation:

- a formation that will help them discern and live out faithfully the vocation to which they are called, in a world in which so many signs of life and signs of death are present;
- a formation that enables them to develop as integrated, free persons, deeply committed to communicating God's love, by their presence and by their service to the people;
- a formation that is soundly based on the gospel values of our

Congregation.

We wish to be able to transmit our ss.cc. spiritual heritage to our new brothers. We have a body of convictions and lived experience, already captured in Congregational documents such as the new Constitutions, the Rule of Life etc. These documents express values that are of great relevance to our modern world - how can these values become part and parcel of the lives of our young people? This in fact is the purpose of a General Plan of Formation - to provide criteria for a formation that will help our brothers live their religious vocation authentically - a formation that will strengthen our ss.cc. religious identity, yet at the same time respect the pluralism that rightly exists in an international Congregation.

At the time of writing, the results of a wide-ranging consultation, based on the lived experience of the brothers, are being collated. They will be presented to the meeting of the Enlarged General Council at Quito in October, with a view to drawing up a General Plan. This plan should provide us with guidelines, for a really good ss.cc. religious, pastoral, missionary formation. Here, I will limit myself to the most important elements to be kept in mind in formation, according to our Constitutions. Hopefully, before too long, the Congregation will have an up to date General Plan of Formation which will serve us for the years ahead.

Initial Formation (Articles 70-84)

Our Constitutions ask that "*the Initial Formation Plan*

indicate the way in which new members progressively integrate themselves into the community" (Art. 70). I already mentioned the need to be demanding in our requirements for acceptance. Statute 37 outlines the elements we look for in the discernment of a vocation - a positive attitude towards life, an open spirit, psychological balance, a healthy relationship with God, sufficient intelligence, the ability to relate to others in a healthy way and proper motivation. Formation today will be very different from that of the past, from what most of us have experienced. It will be more personalized - the candidates in general come from a diversity of backgrounds, with different levels of preparation, and they will need to develop at their own pace.

The objectives of initial formation are that the candidates might discern God's call, respond to it in a personal way and gradually integrate themselves in the life and spirit of our Congregation. We must remember, in responding to the Holy Spirit that the candidates are the first agents of their own formation. However, as they try to be faithful to their call, they need to keep themselves open to the formation personnel appointed by the Congregation. The formators, on their part, will accompany each one personally in his discernment and growth:

- with a deep respect for the person and the freedom of the candidate;
- in a spirit of open dialogue with each one in his situation;
- seeking each one's holistic, well balanced growth.

Pre-Novitiate: There will be a strong emphasis on community life from the very beginning of the process of formation. It is

very helpful when our religious communities are open to welcome aspirants to our life, who wish to have real community experiences. In any case, "the novitiate is preceded by a period of time during which the candidate and the community get to know each other and make an initial discernment of his vocation... This pre-novitiate seeks to prepare the way for the novitiate to be a solid experience of faith and religious life" (Statute 36). This is a time when the candidate can discover our mission and the meaning of our life together. They can experience the simple family lifestyle of our community. We must remember that "*community life is the most important factor in the discernment and the formation of each candidate*" (Art. 73).

Novitiate: The Novitiate is a privileged time for initiation into a deep spiritual life and to really understand the meaning of religious life. It is a time to assimilate and conform our hearts and minds to our ss.cc. charism.

"Time, space and help should be made available to the novices to deepen their relationship with the Lord in personal and communal prayer" (Art. 75,1). This is crucial. Time for quiet, for solitude, for silence in the presence of the Lord. Time also to share prayer and faith with others. Our spirituality is, above all, a matter of the heart, a way of the heart, the transformation of our hearts. Jesus Himself, in order to form His disciples, invited them to "come and see", to be with Him, to live with Him. The Novitiate is a special time. As they enjoy His company, coming aside to "rest awhile with Him" - they will experience that particular grace of the Holy Spirit which is our charism. They will begin to know His heart, they will begin to know his love. This is the gift that will give them the confidence, and strength, that comes

forth from the fount of life, the heart of Jesus. They will sense the power that "goes forth from Him". They will understand how the fruitfulness of all our apostolic work depends on how much we "abide in Him". His compassion and love will bring a new unity and freedom to their lives. As they begin to participate in experiences of apostolic ministry, they will begin to integrate their prayer life and their apostolic work and develop a real apostolic spirituality.

The Novitiate is also a time for our novices to understand our religious vows more profoundly - they will begin to experience the Paschal mystery at the heart of everything - they will learn that the following of Jesus is the way of the cross, and that our religious lives demand of all of us a certain self-discipline and asceticism. They will also experience the joy and the freedom that comes from committing ourselves without reserve to the Lord and to His people.

In the Novitiate, they will not only grow in their understanding of the history, the tradition, the values of our community as expressed in our Constitutions, but also on the practical level, there will be opportunities to get to know the brothers and sisters of their Province or Region as it is in the present day (cf. Art. 75.2) - thus integrating themselves more and more into the life of the Congregation.

Temporary vows: "*Formation during the period of temporary vows seeks to foster the maturing of the religious in all that he acquired during the novitiate*" (Art. 82). These are years when the young religious benefiting from the dynamism and stability derived from first profession,¹²² will continue their formation, gra-

dually acquiring the autonomy sufficient for living religious life faithfully. Those in temporary vows should be in a formation community, or at the very least under the immediate responsibility of a formation person (Statute 38). *"As he takes his place in the professed community, a religious must be helped to continue integrating the experience of God, community living, apostolic activity, study and reflection, in the context of our life and mission as religious of the Sacred Hearts. The new religious ought to be open to knowing the world and to be inculturated in it so that he might be able to serve it"* (Art. 82, 2,3). At the end of the years of temporary vows, a more intense period of preparation precedes the profession of perpetual vows.

There are many other factors that need to be taken into account in our Formation Plan - just to mention a few:

- For each stage of the formation process, there should be clear objectives. There should be a unity of criteria and a real continuity between the various stages of the process (cf. Art. 70).
- The focus will be on formation for living in an apostolic religious community.
- Formation will include education for freedom, co-responsibility and dialogue. Candidates should be formed to be open to the world, but also to develop a critical approach towards it in accordance with our prophetic vocation.
- "When determining where to locate formation communities, it is important to consider, as a criterion, solidarity with the poor, along with what is needed for a particular stage of formation" (Statute 33).
- In the stage of initial formation:

1. Those in formation must be shown the internationality of the Congregation's mission in the context of history and the present day.
 2. Every effort will be made to give them a significant experience of our evangelizing ministry, especially in the Third and Fourth Worlds.
 3. Candidates are normally required to learn a second living language from among those most common in the Congregation.
- Collaboration from an early stage with our Sisters' formation communities should be encouraged where possible.
 - The formators have a decisive role to play. It is important that each major community develop good criteria for the selection of their formators, and that these formators be prepared well for their task. They should not be overburdened with other work, which would impede the primary work of formation.
 - Every support possible should be given to international collaboration for Initial Formation. This is something we expect will develop in the coming years, and many of our smaller groups will simply not be able to cope without outside help. We ask also that this openness might find expression in the Provincial Plans now being prepared. We hope also that this collaboration will continue to receive the special attention of the Continental Conferences (cf. Statute 31).
 - Finally, the community which receives the young person who finishes his initial formation is very important. We feel that each Major Community should ensure that such a community should be one in which the values which were so important

during formation years are truly lived.

Our General Plan of Formation will no doubt elaborate on what has been said here, incorporating also the important orientations of the recent "Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes" from the Holy See. Without doubt, the Plan will be a tremendous help to our Formators in their very vital service to our community. I would like to thank all who are participating in its formulation.

Ongoing Formation (Articles 85-86)

Our Constitutions emphasize the fact that "*our formation as religious is never finished. God calls us each day and invites a renewed response daily*" (Art. 85.1). If we are really going to respond effectively to the challenges of a changing Church and world, we need to insist on ongoing formation, and we need to live in an attitude of continual conversion.

We need to constantly return to the spirit of the Gospels - especially, the gospel vision of our Founders, and we need to respond to our times from this perspective. In effect, it demands that each one of us "*must be committed to deepening and updating his formation in the areas of theology, spirituality, religious life, the Congregation, pastoral ministry and our particular professional work*" (Art. 86,1), if we are to continue to grow in enthusiasm and zeal in our vocation and mission. We can easily slip into a routine, and become almost functionaries, losing the real taste and desire for the Lord and His kingdom -then our life becomes insipid and burdensome and in fact makes no sense. If we are

continually converted, every day is a new day, full of challenges but also full of the deep joy that the Lord Himself has promised His followers.

Our community life itself can be a source of constant renewal, if we review frequently our life together. In our dialogue we can stimulate and support each other, as we reflect together on our apostolates, on the quality of our community life, and as we share our faith and prayer experiences.

According to our Statutes, our "Provinces will foster the ongoing formation of their members by providing retreats, meetings, workshops, assemblies, 'second novitiate' programs, etc. Each Province's formation plan must also provide its members with extended periods of specialized formation, updating and renewal" (Statute 40,1,2).

The Directives on Formation, referred to above, suggest certain times that could possibly be particularly appropriate for extended periods of ongoing formation:

- the passage from initial formation to the first experience of a more independent life, in which a religious must discover a new way of being faithful to God;
- the completion of about ten years of perpetual profession, when the risk of life becoming a "habit" occurs with a consequent loss of enthusiasm;
- full maturity, which often involves the danger of the development of individualism, especially among those of an active

- and vigorous temperament;
- a time of severe crisis, which can occur at any age as a result of external factors (change of work, failure, incomprehension, feelings of alienation etc.) or more directly personal factors (illness, aridity, crisis of faith etc.);
 - a time of progressive withdrawal from activity, when religious feel more profoundly within themselves the experience of moving toward the resurrection: "We are not discouraged; and even if in us the outward man is being corrupted, the inner man is being renewed day by day" (II Cor 4,16).¹²³

Without doubt, Ongoing Formation is a good investment for any religious community. Even if it will call for sacrifices in the short term, in the long term it will bear great fruit for the mission of the Congregation. That is why our Constitutions insist that: "*Through its representatives, the Community is responsible for fostering this commitment among the brothers and offering them the means and time to carry it out*" (Art. 86,2). This is a very concrete responsibility of the Provincial Governments.

Now that we have been through a fair amount of reflection in recent years, there is always the temptation to stop growing. If we do not continue to update ourselves, we will lose touch with the modern world and its needs, and we will become irrelevant. Religious life will lose its meaning for us, becoming more and more unrelated to the world in which we live - an obsolete and frustrating lifestyle that speaks to nobody.

Ongoing formation, on the contrary, can help us to

continue to recognize religious life as a great gift from God - it can motivate us, and help us see the relevance of our lives, giving us new heart. Ongoing formation can ensure that "the salt will not lose its flavor". We owe it, not only to ourselves, but also to those we serve to be able to continue to present the Gospel in a way that will bring the joy and the love of Christ into their lives.

NOTE: On the last three Chapters of the Constitutions

In the last three chapters of our Constitutions, aspects of our apostolic religious life are treated which, even if they contain many juridical norms, nevertheless are important, for they refer to aspects of our everyday life.

Thus, Chapter five expresses certain juridical norms on the service of authority. The value of these norms is that they favor the kind of participation and co-responsibility referred to earlier in this letter. Their spiritual worth comes from the fact that they enable us to organize our brotherhood for the realization of our common ss.cc. mission. In fact, they are really expressions of fraternity, a fraternity which keeps in mind our service both to the local Church and to the international dimension.

Another aspect I might mention is the accent that is placed on certain structures (Chapters, Assemblies, Councils, elections, etc.), making them true instances of discernment of God's will. One form of service worth mentioning in particular is the "visit", made by the Provincial and the General Governments to the communities and to the brothers. This is a special form of "spiritual discernment", which is lived not only by the visitors but by the whole community. It is an occasion of animation, of mutual questioning, of the construction of congregational unity, the re-inforcing of communion and joy in the service of the Lord and His people.

Perhaps a general comment might be that the life of the

Congregation requires the service of brothers who dedicate part of their time, and in some cases on a full-time basis, to the animation of our "communion in mission". It is a question of temporary functions or services, but given their nature, they can be more demanding than other tasks: in effect, they suppose a certain renunciation and disponibility, with a certain demand on these brothers to give a lead to the others (in the sense of being a team, seeking the common good, and not the honors of leadership etc.).

Chapter six deals with the "administration of temporary goods", an aspect which is sometimes difficult to speak about. This, nevertheless, has its own importance, and this is the occasion to recognize and thank so many brothers who render this service. In effect, the "administration" has a special significance today, if we wish to be faithful to the witness of poverty. "The criteria of justice, solidarity and charity" should permeate the whole administration (cf. Art. 92). The fundamental norm underlying our legislation is that the administration of the goods of the Congregation must serve its mission. This norm challenges our real belonging to the family in the sharing of our goods.

The Constitutions consecrate some articles (Chapter seven) to a point which can really indicate the quality of our brotherhood and our real respect for persons: Separation from the Congregation. This is a responsibility which should be realized in an "atmosphere of prayer and discernment". And this is not always easy, neither for the community nor for those involved. The "separation" is always a sad moment. Sometimes

it is a seeking of the will of God whose ways are not ours.

There are many other more technical articles, which are necessary because of the very nature of Constitutions. Obviously, we hope we can always interpret them with that evangelical spirit which permeates our Constitutions as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In the Church of our time there appears to be a certain crisis of credibility, which has provoked many Christians to raise questions concerning their faith.

Many seem to reject a church that is seen to be too hierarchically structured, too clerical and too identified with the powerful of society. Sometimes the Church is seen as an institution that wants to control the lives of the people rather than set them free. A real danger for the Church, as a large stable institution, is the tendency to water down the Gospel and to compromise with the consumer society, not questioning the injustice suffered by so many, and not really being sensitive to the signs of the times. Many are asking for a church which will play a more decisive role in the reconstruction of the world.

The developed countries are increasingly molded by the values of consumerism and materialism which are accompanied by a growing emptiness and a sense of meaninglessness. No one will deny that the modern world is characterized by a sense of isolation and alienation - a breakdown of genuine community. Yet the rift between society and the Church seems to be becoming broader, in that the Church has been declared irrelevant by many (especially in the west), and many young people, alienated from the Church, look for meaning elsewhere.

There is a loss of vision in western culture on the level of spirit and mystery, a level that cannot be easily analysed. It is not accidental that Victor Havel the playwright, recently President of Czechoslovakia, reflecting on our times, challenged his people - insisting on the need to deepen the life of the spirit, and to discover if they really had anything or anybody to live for.

All this might seem pessimistic - it is however based on what you hear often, what you can read in the media, and also on some sociological data - and we have to listen and reflect. Of course, for all of us who love the Church, it is a cause for concern. Nevertheless, despite these comments, I believe that we live in a more exciting world than ever before, a world that is ripe for the gospel message. For sure, in the past there was more security, when most of us lived in a society that was, if not always authentically, at least nominally Christian. Now as followers of Christ we live as a minority practically everywhere, but perhaps this leads us to more authentic belief and deeper personal convictions.

In a complex world, which sometimes worships technology, riches, power, pleasure, a real believing community can give great witness - after the model of the early Christian community - a community based on hope in Jesus Christ, and on the presence of the Spirit - hospitable, simple, loving. With all the world's sophistication, people still understand and are touched by simplicity, love, generosity, warmth.

If some have the image of a Church operating from a position of power and control, we can offer a real alternative witness - a more fraternal model of community, more consensus

oriented, more participative, placing the emphasis on our common vocation - with a deep appreciation of the lay vocation and the equality of women - a prophetic community offering to marginalized groups an alternative model where they feel more at home - a community that offers to young people a real alternative for a youthful and radical commitment - a community in which faith and prayer are related to life - a community where the evangelical counsels lead to life and freedom.

I have no doubt that our religious lives can speak to the kind of crisis of credibility referred to above. How often have people shown their great appreciation of the cordiality, the friendship, the climate they have found among us. Our charism is in some way communicated, and people find it very attractive and deeply significant. Through the language of relationships, the language of welcome, of gathering together, of community, we offer an image of a Church that, far from being restrictive or repressive, promotes love and freedom and real Christian values. Young people are hungry for all of this - even in the midst of - indeed perhaps because of a complex world, where life can become so difficult.

In our new Constitutions we have a spirituality based on personal "faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed Himself for my sake" (Gal 2:20), a very integrating spirituality enabling us "to bring everything together under Christ" (Eph 1:10). I believe it provides a vision that enables us not only to have an original experience of God ourselves, but will enable us to help others, beginning from their human experiences, to discover "the God in whom we live and move

and have our being" - a very incarnational spirituality, based on the heart of God - a new type of modern mysticism - it is a spirituality that is full of meaning and that evokes a rich response in our own hearts and in the hearts of others. In short, we have been presented with a way of living a true evangelical life according to our charism.

In La Motte d'Usseau, in the month of September 1792 Fr. Coudrin had a vision of the Congregation, which he was later to found with Mother Henriette. He saw around him a group of men and women, destined to spread the light of the Gospel everywhere. Ever since that moment, the desire to found the Congregation never left him. He was deeply touched in reading the story of St. Caprasius, and moved by the example of this legendary saint, he boldly went forth from La Motte d'Usseau on October 20th 1792, ready to defy death in order to preach the Gospel, come what may. As we have seen, ever after, his life was characterized by great courage and many initiatives to respond to the needs of the Church and the world of his time.

Our Constitutions articulate something of the founding vision which continues to unfold in the lives of the members of the Congregation. After the illuminations received in La Motte d'Usseau, the Founder came out to realize his dream. Two hundred years later, we his followers want to live with the same courage, the same spirit and charism - ready to bring the Good News and to respond to contemporary needs.

Fidelity to our Founder will inevitably demand boldness

and creative initiatives on our part. Would he recognize the Congregation now? Hopefully he would recognize that we live with the same spirit but adapted to our times and circumstances - expressed in our new Constitutions - a document not to be enshrined in the archives, but rather challenging us to fresh beginnings. They are a call to us to become new again, as we make our own this new vision of our ss.cc. vocation and mission. I am confident that it is a truly relevant document. I believe it brings the Gospel to bear on life today. I invite all our brothers to accept these Constitutions as a gift from the Holy Spirit - from Fr. Coudrin, Mother Henriette and from all who have gone before us - from all those who share our journey today - a gift which has a real value for our life - a means of sustaining us in a state of continual conversion.

Accept them as addressed to each one of us personally - let us read them not as detached observers but in the first person - words speaking to us about ourselves and our lives' experience. Familiarize yourself with their content - they can nourish our personal and community lives - they help us live in the world of today, and to respond - and indeed, they contain real seeds of life and direction for the future. They will encourage us to be bold - to take the risk of faith.

Let us reflect on them together too. In the community there is an energy generated between people. We have to be together, talk and pray together on their implications. It is extraordinary how small groups of committed religious can generate new life. That is why I ask the Provinces to do all they can to make these new Constitutions a book of life for all.

Of course, new Constitutions will not automatically lead to profound change. What we need is a profound conversion. In fact, this new legislation can be the occasion for each one of us as persons and as community to be converted to a radical following of Christ in our mission together.

Through contemplation and prayer we need somehow to come to the meaning of the person of Jesus. We need to know - who is the God of my life. We are called to a deepening identification with the life of Jesus, an intensifying of His life within us. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away. Behold the new has come" (II Cor 5:17). All of us need this profound experience of prayer, and at the same time a profound sense of being called by the poor - the experience of being deeply centered in God and also of being called by those on the margin, by those needs that are unattended by society. The example of our brother Damien, to be beatified shortly, inspires all of us to commit ourselves without reserve to this beautiful calling.

We don't really know what plans God has for religious life in the future. But we do know that God wants us to be part of that future whatever it is. We can be sure that religious life, while always seeking to be something new, something different, something more, will ever be a call to follow Jesus, to live according to the counsels, to preach the good news in the spirit of our Founders. We know too that if we are to be of real service to the Church, it will be in living out our ss.cc. vocation as authentically as possible.

In the name of all, I thank God for the gift that has been

offered to us in these new Constitutions - they will enable us to respond with ever greater fidelity and joy to our ss.cc. vocation and mission: "*to contemplate, live and announce to the world that love which was made flesh in Jesus*" (Const., Art. 2).

Affectionately, Your brother
in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary

Fr. Patrick Bradley ss.cc.
Superior General

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