

# A check-up on the health of the body of the Congregation

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**D**uring the canonical visitation to the Flemish Delegation, Jean Blaise and I went to visit one of the "elders" in the congregation. God willing, he will be 100 years old next year. He has difficulties in hearing and seeing. This did not prevent him from welcoming us warmly and showing a lively interest in what is happening in the different areas of the Congregation. In the course of the conversation, I asked him to pray to the Lord for our religious family. And as he searched within for the words to say, he opened his arms and prayed: "May all [the members of the Congregation] be convinced in the Lord and forever united to him". Listening to him and aware of the health limitations that have come to him with age, all of us who witnessed this prayer said to ourselves: "This brother is in good spiritual health". It was his way of witnessing to us. Blessed by a life lived fully, this brother exhorts us to be convinced about what we have received as gift: faith, the spirituality of the Congregation, the ministry, the brothers and sisters with whom we walk and many other gifts besides. He encourages us to live united to the one who wants to unite himself forever to our lives, the Lord Jesus. It was as if in him we were seeing the fulfilment of the words of St. Paul:

*"What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?*

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord". (Rom 8:35, 38)*

## **A time for intercession, a time to profess one's faith**

Another moment to check the health of the Congregation is when a brother decides to leave the community. No one departure is the same and each decision results from a specific discernment. In the last few weeks, I have received countless letters from brothers, sisters and laity regarding Javier Álvarez-Ossorio's decision to leave the priesthood and the congregation. In them, people have shared with me their reactions: surprise, pain, confusion, disillusionment, some their anger and a few their judgment. At the same time, many have shared with me their prayers for Javier, for the Congregation and for me as Superior General. In this I also perceive a sign that the body is in good health. These are prayers that in the first place express gratitude for what this brother has brought to the Congregation with his life and service. They are also prayers that are to be understood in the context of the mystery that is the human heart, unfathomable to us though not to God who calls each one of us by name. Prayers, too, that intercede for the body of the Congregation and which are, at the same time, a profession of faith and a renewal of confidence in the Lord who leads the Congregation and each one of us, supporting us with his providential and faithful hand. In these sentiments brought to prayer before the Lord, I can see how the whole body suffers when a member of the community leaves. This in itself tells of the strength of the bonds that we have been able to weave among ourselves by virtue of our belonging to the Congregation and the journey we have made together. And I also see a light visible in the eyes of faith and an openness to welcoming grace as we re-visit our own vocation and read it as an acceptance of the Lord who leads us and an acceptance of his irrevocable love for each one of us, for his Church and for our Congregation, his "work" as our founders loved to call it.

## **Rereading ministry as a gift**

As I write these lines Thomas and I are making a canonical visitation to the Philippines and Japan, and Derek and Jean Blaise are making a canonical visitation to the province of Brazil and the region of Paraguay. During the visit to the

Philippines we were present at the ordination of José María Dumagat ssc who was ordained a priest on 20<sup>th</sup> October in his homeland, in Sagay in Negros Occidental, in the region of Bisayas. One of the rites that accompanied his ordination was the Christian community processing with an image of Our Lady of the Rosary, patroness of the parish that bears her name. The community processed with the Virgin to the family home of José Marie. There the newly ordained, along with his family, and neighbours, joined the procession and made their way back to the parish. A small band accompanied them. As we passed through the streets of their neighbourhood, the neighbours looked out to see what was happening: "The Virgin is being carried in procession through our neighbourhood because one of our own, who has grown up among us, has been ordained a priest". The whole neighbourhood did not remain indifferent to this visit. They were happy along with his family to see José Marie ordained a priest. To rejoice with those who rejoice and to celebrate what God is doing in the midst of his people is a sign of the good health of the spirit of this community. It was also a strong message for José Marie as he walked as a priest through the streets that had seen him grow up. This was an invitation to reread the ministry he received as the story of a gift that has come to him through these people, family and friends who have helped him mature both as a person and as a believer. In addition, this rite reminds him that he also belongs to this body, that he is not to forget

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this place, nor the people who live there with their joys, their pains, struggles and hopes. Finally, it helps him see that as a shepherd he will never be alone, but that he can count on this people who will continue to accompany him. They now ask that he holds them in his prayer and ministry as he engages with the new communities that will be entrusted to him.

### **Responding to God's overwhelming love**

During this month of November in which we recall the *dies natalis* of our foundress, it is good for the health of the body for the Congregation to savour once again Henriette's way of responding to the unfathomable love of God, manifested in the Heart of his Son, Jesus. Henriette Aymer united her prayer and her service to the community in such a manner that she was able "in a special way to enter into the interior crucifixion of his Heart" ("entrer particulièrement dans le crucifiement intérieur de son Cœur" (Cf. *Billet de la Bonne Mère au Bon Père*, 3 février 1802, LEBM 63). That is to say, by conforming our lives to identify with the attitudes, feelings and choices of the Heart of Jesus it will then be Jesus who loves and acts through us. It is this that ensured – and ensures - the good health of the body of the family that the Good Mother, along with the Good Father, helped to care for.

### **Maintaining the good health of the Congregation**

It would be good for us to help each other, along with the People of God, to do what we can to ensure that the body that is the Congregation stays healthy.

- Keep the Congregation in our minds so that we may remain convinced of the gift that we have received from the Lord who is forever faithful and united to us.
- Cultivate day by day the bonds of fraternity among us through sincere affection and by praying for one another.
- Stay close to the people with whom we walk, making our own their joys, their pains, their struggles and their hopes.
- Ask the Heart of Jesus to help us enter more and more into his crucified love, a love which assumes our weaknesses, our darkness, our struggles, our falls and our desires to walk with him wherever he leads us.

Fraternally in the SSCC,

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