

Journeying together changes us

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Dear brothers,

I am writing to you following our time away as a General Government in Torricella in Sabina (27-30 September). This time coincided with the halfway point of our mandate. It was a good time to pause, to contemplate the road travelled so far, together with the Lord and with the brothers, in order to be able to look together towards where the Lord is calling us.

Our inspirational texts continue to be the two major documents of the last General Chapter: "Our inner self is being renewed day by day" and "Pastoral and missionary conversion, new roads to Emmaus". More than documents, they are guidelines for setting out on a journey, where the Lord awaits us and accompanies us, and where he makes our hearts burn with his passion for the Kingdom of his Father to come among us. We believe that the vision we formulated as a General Government at the beginning of our mandate is still valid and we continue to ask ourselves: How can we help the Congregation to discover the grace present in the confession of our weakness before the Lord? (Cfr. INFO 127, INFO 129). One way of recognising God acting through us is when we are able to recognise our weakness - personal, institutional and ecclesial - and confess it before Jesus, as we often see happen in the Gospels: "Lord, save me" (Mt 14:30), "I believe, help my little faith! (Mt 14:30), And again, when the

Christian communities, sometimes in the most adverse conditions, confess their faith by saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, praise, honour, glory and power, for ever and ever" (Rev 5:14).

A new momentum

The need for fundamental changes in our world made visible by the pandemic is giving new momentum to the process of pastoral and missionary conversion in our congregation. Moreover, the Church is now offering us a privileged time to dream and to put into practice the dreams we have for change as we enter into a synodal process. This is a process that concerns each and every one of us in our journey together as Church, at the level of personal renewal, our ways of living and acting, our structures and the dynamics of participation and decision-making.

"The ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions, in keeping with the mission she has received, depends largely on the decision to initiate processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute. At the same time, the decision to "journey together" is a prophetic sign for the human family, which needs a shared project capable of pursuing the good of all." (Preparatory document for the Synod, For a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission, 9).

In this spirit of walking together, we share with you some of the points of emphasis and concern that we have as a General Government. These are points that we need to reflect more on through mutual listening, dialogue and prayer. In any of these areas, a proposal or call from the Lord may emerge in which he extends to us an invitation to journey with him that very day.

1. Rediscover the joy of following Jesus

We are encouraged to see brothers and sisters for whom the Gospel is a source of renewal, as places of encounter with the Lord who speaks. With joy we are to say to him again: "Here I am, Lord, you can count on me". In this sense, in the meetings with the older brothers and sisters, we are encouraged when we see their attentive presence to others, their interest in the life and mission of the congregation. And it is a strength to count on their daily prayer, ever more simple and universal, for the Congregation, for the missions, for those of us in the service of authority, for the Pope. We are moved when their superiors speak to us of the testimony of the last years or days of a brother, his struggles, his dedication and, finally, his abandonment into the hands of God. In all of this they "fulfil" what they professed years before. They die as vigilant servants, ready to go to meet the Lord who comes. Just as a point of information, in these last three years, 60 brothers have professed in the Congregation, 86 have died in it, and 31 have left it.

On days of joy, such as professions or ordinations, we give thanks to God and to the brothers who accompany us. But days of discouragement also come and then some decide to leave the congregation and act as if the brothers or the community did not exist or were mainly responsible for their unhappiness or lack of personal fulfilment. This saddens us and makes us ask ourselves: How do we solidify and give consistency to our fraternal relationships so that they are a source of joy and a support in times of difficulty? Why, often, do brothers in crisis

not ask brothers for help in time? Where, among us, are the spiritual "fathers" and "mothers" who go out to meet the brother who is in difficulty and patiently offer their accompaniment?

2. Searching together

We are excited to see the creativity and initiatives of many brothers and sisters of all ages. It is beautiful to hear them speak with enthusiasm about what they do. We believe that we can do even more when we decide that what moves me is not only mine, but ours, where others can also enter and collaborate. We believe that, in general, we are improving in distributing tasks, and we do spend time trying to work together, i.e. thinking, evaluating and deciding. It is somewhat better when we form teams with lay people, where we have limited responsibilities, as is often the case in the field of education. But where a brother is the leader, especially in parishes, it can be more difficult to work as a team, both among the brothers themselves and with the laity. It would be good for us to recognise with truth and humility that we have not been trained for this. We need to develop the capacity to listen, the patience to accompany processes, the attention to awaken the gifts and charisms that are around us in order to put them at the service of the mission. The synodal process is above all a process of searching and listening together to find out where the Lord is asking us to "walk together". Such a journey can indeed reveal the skills that we lack and encourage us to ask for the necessary help to foster them. The key for entering into such a process is having a basic attitude of personal questioning - something that was mentioned in the document on Pastoral and Missionary Conversion: "That each brother be prepared to question and challenge himself in his living out of the mission of the Congregation and enter into the dynamic of conversion in the style of the Path to Emmaus." (15) What practices or dynamics in our religious and pastoral communities do we need in order to prepare ourselves for personal questioning, mutual listening and common research? Do we need to widen our listening circles to include those who "are wounded by the abuses of the Church", those who "no longer frequent the church", "those of other religions" or even "those who do not expect anything from the church"?

3. Boldly walking new paths

It is encouraging to see communities setting out with confidence and boldness to seek together the calls of the Lord. For example, the province of Germany, aware that it no longer fulfils the conditions to continue as a province has at the same time decided to open an international community in Berlin. The Andina Province, in its apostolic discernment, has explored the possibility of a new presence in the Amazons. The growing community in Indonesia (brothers and sisters) is accompanying a group of sisters and SSCC religious in Hainan as well as the faithful of that Church. Faced with the growing and irreversible phenomenon of migration in many parts of the world, we imagine, for example, a community of Mexican brothers collaborating with SSCC laity and brothers in the USA. How much we would like to see more initiatives along these lines in the congregation! What personal or institutional inertia do we need to overcome in order to dare to be closer to the suffering flesh of Christ? How do we prepare ourselves, starting with initial formation, to form part of an international body, which is increasingly called to form international and intercultural communities? Our institutional weakness or precariousness in numbers has not been and is not an obstacle to embarking on these new adventures. Missionary daring is in the DNA of our congregation.

4. Flexible structures at the service of the mission

One of the major concerns in our visits and in the dialogue with the superiors and their communities is the animation of the mission. We know that this implies renewal and conversion, leaving places and ways of being in order to open ourselves to newness. We are aware that personal and institutional changes come slowly. In order to set them in motion and to make mission possible, we ask ourselves about leadership and the most appropriate structures of government and animation. For example, former provinces such as Flanders and the Netherlands, have become delegations. Others are on the way to becoming or discerning such, such as Germany and Ireland-England. With lighter structures, energies are perhaps freed up for the mission. And recognising that we are weaker, we are more ready and willing to work with others. What new missionary initiatives can we encourage? With whom can we establish alliances to carry them forward? For example, networking in Flanders with Church or civil groups inspired by Damien. Moreover, how can one accompany old age as a stage of spiritual maturation? How does one remain in the mission as an SSCC religious until the end?

There are also communities that would like to have a stronger link with another province, such as Japan and the Philippines with the Indonesian province. This raises the question for our government about how to accompany these processes, while respecting the internal dynamics of each community. In this regard, we hope that Thomas Sukotriraharjo, on behalf of the General Government, will soon be able to go to the Philippines for a few months to accompany on the ground the maturing of this process.

At another level, we have seen that the interprovincial conferences (CEA, CIAL and CAP) need to be rethought in respect of their function of animating and being co-responsible for the mission.

In dialogue with the superiors, we need to ask ourselves if this space could not be the platform to address specific issues of mission in each of these areas, as CIAL did recently in September when it addressed the theme of youth and vocations ministry. In the CEA, to the extent that there are more delegations and also more international communities, could there not be a space for thinking about the accompaniment of international communities in the context of large, multicultural cities where religious pluralism and a growing indifference to certain institutional forms of the Catholic Church coexist? And in areas where there are brothers in initial formation, how do we seek to support each other more in the formative task among the different communities? How do we foster significant exchanges and experiences that can help brothers grow in their sense of belonging to an international SSCC body and family?

Also at General Government level, we ask ourselves how we might best accompany the life and mission of the congregation. Given the current size of the congregation and the speed and global character of certain processes, we realise that it is necessary to maintain close contact with the superiors of the provinces, regions and delegations. Such contact can be the space where we can help each other in the service of authority that the community has entrusted to us. In addition, we see the need to be able to meet at least once a year (online and/or in presence) with the major superiors (13) and delegation superiors (2) in order to have a space for spiritual formation in the service of authority and to deepen our reflections on topics such as revising the ways our economy and finances function so that they favour solidarity and the

SSCC mission, the support of new pastoral initiatives, the prevention of abuses and the promotion of safe environments in our SSCC communities and pastoral presences, etc.

In consultation with the brothers and communities, we also see the need to rethink the tasks of the General Government, how it functions and its' numbers. One of our emphases has been to be close to the brothers and communities. We see the value of having brothers who are fully available for the tasks of general service. The diversity of backgrounds enriches our exchanges and vision. Moreover, we believe that it is a contribution to have the time, skills and means to be able to offer animation material for the whole congregation. However, we also realise what a luxury it is to have a government of 5 members as if we were 1,500 brothers. We ask ourselves: could there not be a councillor who could be especially dedicated to accompanying the delegations and who would live in his community, providing the service from there and linking up with the General Government? Could not the number of general councillors be reduced from 4 to 3, and allowing one or two of these councillors to continue to live in their province of origin?

5. Finance and solidarity

At all levels of the congregation we have begun a process of reflection on our finances and economy. The congregation has fewer and fewer resources and the pandemic has impoverished us. But this "fragility" has made us see more strongly the need to be able to manage our resources better, to have the help and advice of experts, to force us to be disciplined in budgeting, monitoring and accountability. As we become less self-sufficient, we need to think of our modes of operation in more interdependent and supportive ways. We need to look for other ways of financing the mission, learning how to draw up projects that can be presented not only within the congregation, but also to other external agencies. In addition, the General Econome with his advisory committees and in dialogue with the superiors and economies is looking into the possibility of some joint investments that will help us to sustain the life and mission of the congregation. All of this rests on the basis of timely, complete and transparent information and a review of our lifestyles, which will give us a taste of the beauty of evangelical poverty and solidarity.

These are some of the themes, joys and concerns that occupy us and that we share with you. We invite you, in the next three years, to walk together as a congregation in the Church, listening to and deepening these themes. We will send you material to help you enter into this path. May we come to the next General Chapter in 2024 with some proposals and decisions already thought through on each of these points.

By situating ourselves in this perspective, we contribute as a congregation, with our spiritual richness, to the realisation of the *raison d'être* of the Church, its mission: "the Church is nothing other than the 'walking together' of God's flock along the paths of history that goes out to meet Christ the Lord" (Pope Francis, Speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015).

In these days of meeting in Torricella we shared that we are happy in this service and grateful for the support offered to us. This has also been a time for us to renew our "walking together": to accept the challenge to listen to and welcome each other in our differences and to support

each other in our life and service. As a result, we have been able to visualise some challenges for the future of the congregation. We encourage each and every one of you to enter into this journey.

Fraternally,

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Superior General

