**St. Clement Mary Hofbauer**

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1. **Introduction**

During March, we celebrate the feast of St. Clement Mary Hofbauer (1751-1820), the baker who lead a simple life, who became a hermit, then a Redemptorist. This year, 2020, we celebrate the 200th anniversary of his death. He lived in a period of social, cultural transformation (Enlightenment) and protests even within the Church and founded missions that did not succeed. He was a persistent man, sympathetic to human sufferings. He was dynamic and had in his being the same Pauline restlessness: “Because to announce the Gospel is not for me a reason for glory; it is an obligation that I have, and poor me if I do not proclaim the Gospel! (1 Cor 9:16). He and Tadeu Hübl were the first non-Italian Redemptorists. They had known each other since the seminary and developed a genuine friendship, which was the basis for helping them in difficult times.

Hofbauer’s life was marked by constant exodus and many difficulties, from those proper to the mission, to the Josephism regime and often obstacles from his superiors and confreres. Despite the hard trials he experienced he never tired of following his goal: to announce the Gospel in a new way! From failure to failure he persevered to the end, taking the Congregation beyond the walls of Rome. If St. Paul did it with his preaching to all peoples, going to “all nations”, Clement gave an innovative face to the Congregation, seeking out those who were urgently in need of hearing the Gospel. Internally, he had a strength, a divine fire that set his heart on fire and compelled him to make new decisions, leaving his known world for unknown realities. He faced unknown realities with the strength and wisdom that came from his faith in Jesus Christ and from the cultivation of a Christocentric spirituality through the Eucharist and prayer.

**2. The apostolic life of Clement**

Clement never missed an opportunity to evangelize. All the obstacles he had to face were not enough to discourage him. His burning faith always kept him going forward. “Faith gives a human being, in the midst of anguish and danger, a solid foundation. Whoever remains in faith does not easily let himself be disturbed by dangers and the threat of ruin, because faith allows him to find in God a solid foundation on which he can lean.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Hofbauer believed not only in God but also in human beings, the motive for his pastoral zeal.

Hofbauer was always concerned about the situation of the poor, and his strategy was to offer an excellent Christian education to young people. He welcomed even the Protestants, who had no opportunities to study. He created schools for the poor, orphanages, Latin school, and a technical institute for professional training, especially for young girls who were prostituting themselves because of poverty. Education was a way of changing mentality and enabling people to recognize their dignity. Certainly, Hofbauer faced many difficulties: the people who wanted to maintain the *status quo*, the scarcity of resources to support the work, and the prohibitions of the government. He had to sell furniture and beg to feed the orphans and the poor. For him, this was his mission and evangelizing meant not only offering spiritual resources, but also material ones, daily bread!

Clement always developed pastoral work very close to young people. His house was a center of evangelization and catechesis. Another aspect of the Clementine apostolate was the formation of the laity and working with them by becoming their collaborators. They were people from different levels of culture, and many played a significant role in the so-called study circles. They brought together poets, artists, diplomats, and politicians. It was not only an environment for sharing knowledge. Hofbauer took advantage of it to evangelize. He also used the press for this task. He translated the works of St. Alphonsus, books of prayers, popular piety, and popular pamphlets.

Another aspect of Hofbauer’s mission was his zeal for the liturgy, for the proclamation of the Gospel and its preaching. The celebrations were joyful and beautiful. He valued processions, the Way of the Cross, and visits to the Blessed Sacrament. He was not a good speaker, but his way of preparing sermons, his life witness, and the popular quality of his preaching reached the hearts of the little ones and doctors. With determination, he fought against Jansenism and Josephism. His fame even bothered the authorities who silenced him in 1815 by prohibiting him from preaching. The preferred themes of his preaching were the love and mercy of God, the salvation brought by Jesus Christ, the Church, conversion, and trust in God as well as the great truths of the faith.

He was a tireless missionary in the confessional, and he accompanied Jews, Protestants who converted to Christianity, and the prostitutes trying to get them out of that unworthy life. He also took in sick and weak priests, giving them lodging and spiritual support.

**3. Clement for us in the light of restructuring for mission**

In these new times that the Congregation is living, especially after the XXV General Chapter, the life and missionary action of Clement themselves speak to each one of us. We are being given an invitation to do the same as did St. Clement by reading the signs of the times and putting ourselves in an attitude of *exodus* and, at the same time, try to understand while on this journey that we are “witnesses of the Redeemer: in solidarity for the Mission in a wounded world”. How can we understand and assimilate the Spirit that speaks to us from the life of St. Clement in the spirit of the world?

St. Clement´s missionary attitude and pastoral availability is an invitation to the whole Congregation to open itself more and more to the changes and adaptations necessary to respond to the new challenges that are presented to us in our day. We cannot cling to structures and places that are far from our charismatic inspiration. It is often necessary to say goodbye to places that were important to us affectively in fidelity to the Gospel and the faithful that we serve. We must always remember the angel’s word to Elijah: “Arise and eat, for the journey is too long for you” (1Rs 19:7) and take only what is necessary (Lk 10:4-5). This is not an easy attitude, but the pastoral urgencies and the myriad of abandoned and wounded in our present society challenge us to look to other horizons, to associate ourselves with the laity and also with other Units of the Congregation and especially with the members of the Redemptorist Family to announce the Good News with greater energy.

We should not be afraid of the challenges of joint projects! We are called to row out into the deep and to cast our nets following the word of the Lord (Lk 5:4-5). We must not be afraid to look at ourselves, at our structures, and consequently, after self-criticism, to change. This attitude takes us out of a comfortable lifestyle, calls us to the conversion of heart, and the mentality of our apostolic life. “The process of restructuring and discernment is truly the work of the Spirit.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Clement was able to discern and adapt to the different contexts in which he lived. What served the reality in the mission in Warsaw did not apply in the same way for Austria. He knew how to create, according to the contexts and the people methodologies for the mission that he had to develop. Therefore, his insistence that the Gospel be proclaimed in an ever-new way.

St. Clement, wherever he arrived, put himself at the service of all, especially to respond to pastoral urgencies in a way that was very close to his interlocutors. Pastoral closeness is essential, but it is necessary to go further through an attitude of pastoral solidarity with the faithful. In this sense, solidarity, for us, Redemptorists, is putting into practice the Alphonsian *distacco* by consecrating and offering our lives steadily every day as a gift and promise from God for his Kingdom. *Distacco* is the bowing down in a compassionate way to those who have fallen along life’s paths. Moved by compassion, we offer them concrete remedies that can heal their wounds.

Solidarity is not about offering help to appease personal or group consciences. It is a deep awareness of a prophetic Christian duty that is linked through faith to the Body and Blood of Christ that awakens in us this concern to move others, not by blood, genetic or cultural bond, but by the duty of solidarity that comes from the fact that we are all brothers and sisters, made from the same clay and brought to life by the breath of the same Creator (Gen 2:7). Solidarity is the recognition of the face of the other and an act of openness and acceptance of the other through an asymmetrical relationship that recognizes him/her as the one who comes from the same root as me, so that it makes me advance in his/her direction, bringing him/her closer and helping him/her to achieve all the good, justice, dignity as I wish for myself. That is why, when the other is wounded in his being, we, moved by compassion, take up his cause (go ‘el) to restore him to his original state because he is my brother, my neighbor, and his wound is also my wound.

Indeed, this way of approaching others can make many people uncomfortable. Jesus concretely is an example. His closeness to all kinds of poor and sinful people and his fundamental proclamation of the Kingdom of God caused him so many misunderstandings, threats, and his death on the cross. Hofbauer, the saints, martyrs, blessed, and so many Redemptorists were not understood; on the contrary, they were persecuted. Our proclamation of the Gospel is not to please this world. It is a pastoral service to people, especially the poor and abandoned. We will be criticized, put aside, but we must not be afraid. We are being faithful to our conscience, mission, and redemptive charism. Our proclamation must be to awaken anesthetized consciences.

Although we have our contradictions, when we look at our Units, we can see in them the vitality of our missionary action. There is a breath of the Spirit, “who is the master of events, puts the right word on the lips and opens hearts” (Const. 10), which leads us and makes us look to the future with great hope, and this makes our hearts burn. “You have not only a glorious history to remember and to tell, but a great history to build! Keep your eyes on the future, towards which the Spirit insists on continuing to do great things with you”.[[4]](#footnote-4) We must not continue only in our weaknesses and errors. It is fundamental to look at our history positively and to recognize that the Lord has done marvels in it. And when we recognize ourselves as fragile, we must have the courage and humility to ask others for help. Solidarity reminds us that we are a missionary body (Const. 73,95) of strong faith, joyful hope, ardent charity, and burning zeal (Const. 20).

As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of Clement’s passing, we can, in the light of his life, examine our conscience not only to identify faults but to have an awareness of how to continue the redemptive mission of announcing the Gospel and overcoming weaknesses. This requires each of us to come out of ourselves, to make an *exodus,* a *kenosis*, to associate with other Units, confreres, laypeople, Redemptorist families, to learn with other religious families and to create joint projects to guarantee the quality of our mission. We cannot only wait for the future and be saddened by our difficulties. We must set out. We much share our many riches, dreams, missionary work, cultures, and the most beautiful treasure of all, the Gospel and the proclamation to the most needy. For this reason, we must not be discouraged.

Clement was able to see what others of his time did not see. For this reason, he had the audacity to go beyond the Alps and glimpse new horizons and new fields to sow the *Copiosa apud eum redemptio*. Despite the difficulties, he courageously undertook a mission, carrying in his missionary suitcase the essential foundation, Christ the Redeemer. From Him, he has been able to restructure lives and structures, just as the Wayfarer of Nazareth did, who, in the eyes of the world, was not successful but was faithful to the end of the Father’s project. From there, it is fundamental to have in our hearts and minds that “continuous restructuring is a process of conversion, renewal, and revitalization of our Apostolic Life that involves all the Units of the Congregation.”[[5]](#footnote-5) With a heart full of Gospel zeal, each confrere and Unit is urged to be a new man (Jn 3:1-8) to announce the Gospel in a new way with renewed structures.

**Conclusion**

We celebrate 200 years since Clement´s definitive encounter with the Redeemer. It is a very important occasion to celebrate a great Resurrection in our Units with renewed apostolic spirit and structures. The song by Juan A. Espinosa: “Give us a heart big enough for loving…” captures the spirit of St. Clement and what we experience.

**Chorus:** *Give us a heart big enough for loving, give us a heart strong enough for fighting.*

New people creating history, building new humanity.

New people living their existence like the risk of a long journey.

New people struggling in hope, on a journey, thirsty for truth.

New people, without restraints or chains, free people demanding the truth.

New people, loving without borders, regardless of ethnicity or place,

New people, on the side of the poor, sharing with them both shelter and bread.[[6]](#footnote-6)

May the Spirit of the Lord guide us in this bold path and “make us available for all that is hard, so as to bring to all the Abundant Redemption of Christ” (Const. 20), making us “witnesses of the Redeemer: in solidarity for the mission in a wounded world”. May the perseverance and daring of Clement make us do what the Spirit asks of us and make us, like Mary, go out to the mountains of the world and sing a great Magnificat to the Lord of History and Redeemer of Humanity.

1. http://lattes.cnpq.br/3342824164751325 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. GRUN, Anselm. Fe, esperanza y amor. Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2006, p. 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. BREHL, Michael. Preface. Final Documents – 25th General Chapter, Materdomini: Valsele Typograph, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. BREHL, Michael. Preface. Final Documents – 25th General Chapter, Materdomini: Valsele Tipograph, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ESPINOSA, Juan A. (free translation, original in Spanish), *Canciones de un Pueblo Caminante*. Vol. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)