

# A Letter to the Confreres

*Called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God (1Cor. 1,1)*

8 September 2009  
Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Prot. N° 0000 159/2009

Dear Confreres,

1. As we enter the final month of the sexennium, the eyes of the Congregation are fixed on the XXIV General Chapter. While I expect to be able to offer a report to the Chapter on the state of our Institute, I would like to say something directly to all the members of the Congregation, who entrusted the service of Superior General to an unworthy brother. I greet also the Redemptoristine Sisters and other religious and lay missionaries who share our spirit, asking that you read this reflection from the standpoint of your own vocation in the Body of Christ. Perhaps the reader may glimpse how much I love our Congregation and the hope I have for our future.
2. Over the last twelve years, I have been asked many times how I came to receive this ministry. I have been tempted to respond with three “c’s” pronounced by our holy Founder: *capitolo...cavallo...cieco* – the Chapter is a blind horse! However, I suspect that in 1997 God judged that I did not love the Congregation enough, so I have been given twelve years of intense schooling in the magnificence of our vocation.
3. This letter intends to continue an invitation that was formally posed to Redemptorists two years ago: that we look at our commitment as vowed men who intend to follow in the footsteps of the redeeming Christ by preaching the Gospel to the poor. I hope that you will agree that an honest look at the meaning of our religious profession is not only a natural outcome of the work of the last General Chapters but also a particularly pressing task in the light of the present situation of the Congregation.
4. In the first section of this letter, I will highlight some circumstances that urge us to take a fearless and thorough look at our way of following Jesus Christ. You will want to complete this description with experiences from your own social and ecclesial situation. In the second section, I will try to evaluate this reality in the light of the Gospel and our spiritual patrimony. Rather than attempting to propose all the criteria that should guide us today, I hope to point to an element that is particularly critical for creative fidelity to our vocation. Finally, I will propose some common lines of action with the goal of encouraging our unity on essential elements while respecting the existential diversity within the Congregation.

**I. SEE**

*But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming. (Jn. 16,13)*

5. What might the Holy Spirit teach us about our particular way of discipleship, the *vita apostolica*, a life that is “at one and the same time specially dedicated to God and a life of missionary work” (Con. 1)? What could the Spirit be saying to Redemptorists today? How do we listen to the Spirit of truth, who declares to us the things that are coming (Jn. 16,13)?
6. Where can we begin? Redemptorist apostolic life is, first and foremost, *life*. So, a useful point of departure for looking at our way of discipleship is to search for signs of vitality among Redemptorist missionaries today. This search is particularly critical for Redemptorists since, from the very beginning, our Congregation has had a particular insight into the abundance of life that is found with Jesus Christ; hence, our motto *Copiosa apud Eum Redemptio*. The search for vitality in our apostolic life cannot be an exercise in fantasy or wishful thinking. Although we do not yet see clearly what the Spirit is bringing to birth in the world, the Church and therefore, our Congregation, we still can identify signs of new vitality.

**THE FASCINATION EXERTED OVER REDEMPTORISTS TODAY BY THE PERSON OF JESUS**

7. I am convinced that most Redemptorists love Jesus Christ and express that love through generosity, self-sacrifice and perseverance. When Redemptorists preach, they speak about Jesus as a person whom we know intimately, a person who displays the fullness of the beauty and love of God from the cross<sup>1</sup>, and in whose Gospel we discover the way to true liberation and solidarity.
8. In the visitations of the Units of the Congregation, the members of the General Council have a privileged opportunity to see the sort of power that Redemptorists discover in the Redeemer. These visits demonstrate that the profile of Redemptorists contained in Constitution 20 is not an idyllic fantasy. The general consultors and I have witnessed firsthand the sort of heroism that characterizes the Congregation: confreres who “denying themselves, are always ready to undertake what is demanding”, whether the task at hand is a particularly difficult mission or simply persevering in their vocation when, like Abraham, they must “hope against hope” (Rom. 4,18).
9. The source of this audacious love is the Redeemer, whom Redemptorists continue to “follow with hearts full of joy” (Con. 20). The first and most important sign of vitality in our apostolic life is the constant rediscovery and recommitment of Redemptorists to Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn. 14,6).

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<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, (25 March 1996), n. 24.

### **THE DESIRE TO BE *BORN ANEW***

10. Far from being some sort of unchanging bastion that pretends to exist outside of history, the Congregation struggles to continue its pilgrimage with creative fidelity to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The Second Vatican Council challenged religious to begin a process of renewal guided by essential criteria: a return to the Word of God, especially the Gospels, a return to the spirit of the founder and the fundamental values of the origins, and the need to give a concrete response to the signs of the times.<sup>2</sup> The principles of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* and the doctrine of the magisterium in the wake of the Council were embraced with enthusiasm by the Congregation and, to date, the renewal has produced concrete results.
11. Our *Constitutions and Statutes* offer norms that are clearly rooted in the spiritual insight of Alphonsus yet flexible enough to permit the necessary inculturation of our apostolic life in the vast panoply of cultures in which the Congregation carries out its mission. Some confreres have dedicated decades of their lives to the painstaking research of our history and spiritual patrimony and have produced a wealth of new resources for understanding our apostolic life. In the last forty years, we have deepened our appreciation for the life and original inspiration of Saint Alphonsus as well as his missionary methods and spirituality. We know much more about the lives of our other saints and *beati* as well as the adventure of grace that has been the history of the Congregation over the last two hundred and seventy-six years.
12. The fruit of such research does not gather dust in community libraries. Many confreres participate in courses on our spirituality and history in Roma as well as at the provincial and regional levels. Regular meetings of major superiors work hard to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the efforts of their Units and a number of provincial superiors are willing to take initiatives to respond to new pastoral urgencies. And I thank God for a commendable degree of dissatisfaction within the Congregation! We tell each other that we can be better than the *status quo* and refuse to be seduced by mediocrity. Many of us hope to be more coherent in our decisions and more prophetic in our lifestyle. Far from useless carping, such discontent can be a sign of vitality and indicate openness to conversion.

### **THE FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF MISSION**

13. The renewed Constitutions insist that apostolic charity, “through which the members share in the mission of Christ the Redeemer” (Con. 52), gives unity to Redemptorist life, a life which finds its full expression in the *vita apostolica*. Successive General Chapters reminded the Congregation that not every pastoral activity or lifestyle can be justified as a coherent expression of our charism. In 1985, the XX General Chapter challenged the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. VATICAN II, Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 2

Congregation to an explicit, prophetic and liberating proclamation of the Gospel to the poor while, at the same time, allowing ourselves also to be evangelized by them<sup>3</sup>. The XXI General Chapter reminded us that our community life constitutes the first sign of our being preachers of the Gospel; moreover, our community is an effective presence of the Reign of God in the midst of men and women.<sup>4</sup>

14. On the one hand, the reflection of the last years has led many Redemptorists to glimpse a mission that excites our imagination and invites us to undertake bold and prophetic initiatives, going beyond traditional frontiers to proclaim Jesus Christ through inculturation, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue as well as new forms of communications media, while maintaining a preference for the poor and excluded ones in society. While parish missions and other forms of itinerant preaching still enjoy pride of place among us, we have discovered new possibilities through ministry in shrines, parishes, retreat centers, mission stations, media, spiritual direction and catechesis.
15. On the other hand, the debate on the essential features of our mission – an argument that has grown sharper because of the process of restructuring – reminds us that we are not exempt from making choices and must struggle to anchor our decisions in criteria that are proposed by the Gospel and our understanding of the Redemptorist charism. Like Alphonsus, Clement and all of our fathers in faith, we must decide to whom we are called, how we are to live and what pastoral methods are appropriate in carrying out the mission we have been given. A new appreciation for the fundamental importance of mission naturally challenges any tendency towards passivity or a tendency to “settle down in surroundings and structures in which [our] work would no longer be missionary” (Con. 15). At the same time, by underscoring the importance of community life and spirituality, the reflection of the last General Chapters has cautioned Redemptorists against simply reducing mission to pastoral work.

#### **FAITHFULNESS TO THE ABANDONED POOR**

16. The General Council has seen many examples of the fundamental faithfulness of Redemptorists to the abandoned poor. Some of these choices put at risk the very lives of confreres. I am thinking of the Redemptorists who have stayed close to the suffering people of Iraq or the confreres in Côte d'Ivoire, who remained in a region torn by civil war and deserted by most of the clergy, including the diocesan bishop. There are Redemptorists who proclaim the Gospel in a foreign land where the apparent results of their labor are much more modest than could be expected in their Province of origin,

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<sup>3</sup> C.Ss.R., *Acta Integra Capituli Generalis XX*, Offset, Romae 1985, 217.

<sup>4</sup> C.Ss.R., *Acta Integra Capituli Generalis XXI*, Tipografia Poliglotta della Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Romae 1992, 313.

like the Brazilian confreres in Surinam or Polish missionaries in Siberia. Some Provinces have opened communities in new cultural situations, like ministry among Afro-Colombians in Buenaventura (Colombia) or the first efforts to establish a missionary presence in Laos. Such commitments demonstrate the special attention the Congregation continues to show for the poor, the deprived and the oppressed (Con. 4), reminding us that it is more important to be where there is pastoral neglect than to remain in well established Churches with an impressive number of participants.

#### **THE SEARCH FOR COMMUNION**

17. From its very beginning, the Congregation has been very close to the people it serves and has tried in different ways to involve lay people in its missionary efforts. This tradition received fresh impetus in recent decades, beginning with the XXI General Chapter, which recognized a need for openness to cooperation with the laity and expressed support for fresh initiatives, including the establishment of a new figure in the Congregation, the “Lay Missionary of the Most Holy Redeemer”.<sup>5</sup>
18. Although there is still much to be done towards an effective integration of laity in our mission, there appears to be a growing consensus in the Congregation regarding the value of shared initiatives involving Redemptorists and lay people. It is also clear that both lay people and Redemptorists need theological, pastoral and spiritual formation to ensure that this association gives testimony to our essential equality before the Lord, while respecting the particular vocation of everyone. The Congregation will not retreat from the search for the communion that makes possible a shared mission in service of the Church and humanity.

#### **THE NEED FOR A RENEWED SPIRITUALITY**

19. Finally, Redemptorists are striving to apply the spiritual patrimony of the Congregation to the new circumstances in which we live and minister today. There is a sense among us that the spiritual journey of confreres who have gone before us, beginning with Alphonsus but not restricted to him, gives us precious insights into our way of following Christ today. In this search, we need to have clear and trustworthy points of reference that define the orientation of our missionary spirituality. Our vision must be rooted in the Gospels, in the spirit of Alphonsus and in the actual experience of Redemptorists across the centuries. Of course, this spiritual search cannot be mired in the past or, what would be more harmful, seek to transport uncritically the past into the present.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 339-340.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Félix CATALÁ, C.Ss.R., “Dimensions of Redemptorist Spirituality”, published at [www.redemptoristspirituality.net](http://www.redemptoristspirituality.net).

20. The General Council is encouraged to see the revival of common retreats in many Provinces as well as the interest in publications, workshops and courses on the essential elements of Redemptorist spirituality. A good number of (Vice-)Provinces programmed special events during the year of reflection on Redemptorist apostolic life. Often the attraction of lay people to our spiritual patrimony has goaded Redemptorists to greater study and appreciation for our heritage.
21. While I see many examples of vitality in our apostolic life today our Congregation, like the Church, passes through different stages in the long pilgrimage of history. We are not extraterrestrials who are exempt from the same forces that are profoundly changing individual societies and their institutions as well as the world as a whole. Some of these forces may serve to obscure signs of vitality in our apostolic life or even lead us to wrench the mission of the Congregation from its divine origin and reduce it simply to statistics, demographics and cultural trends. Let me try to introduce some of the more worrisome features of this problem.

#### **THE CONSEQUENCES OF A PRECIPITOUS FALL IN NUMBERS IN THE WEST**

22. There is ample evidence to test the optimism of Redemptorists today. Over the last five decades, like most major Orders and Congregations of male religious, our Congregation has suffered a drastic decline in numbers, especially in Western Europe, North America and Oceania. The reasons behind this phenomenon are many and complex. For the purposes of this reflection, I propose to highlight some of the results of this decline, rather than explore its possible causes.
23. The Units most affected by this decline have played a long and remarkably fruitful role in the mission of the Congregation. They not only exercised great influence in the history of the local Church of their particular region, but also implanted the Congregation throughout the southern hemisphere. A small number of these Provinces continue to bear the lion's share of financing common projects of the Congregation, such as the Solidarity Fund, the Alphoncian Academy and the General Government, while discreetly providing direct support to needy units throughout the world. The decreased number of confreres and their elevated age cannot help but reduce the scope of possibilities of these Units and the rising cost of medical care for the elderly has shrunk the amount of financial support these Units can offer to the Congregation. What is more, these Units have gained valuable insights regarding the complicated relationship among faith, religion and a secularized society. The decline of the Congregation in these regions impoverishes the life of the Church.
24. Beyond such immediate consequences, however, the apparent unattractiveness of our way of life among young people in the West has produced serious doubts among some bishops, laity and even Redemptorists regarding the future of both the Congregation and consecrated life itself. In their day-to-day governance as well as planning for the fu-

ture, many Units feel obliged to favor maintenance over mission and a vocabulary of retrenchment and diminishment has replaced a language of abundance that traditionally was associated with the consecrated life<sup>7</sup>.

25. Coming to terms with a much narrower horizon of possibilities, confreres often express a wistful resignation, even sadness, as they recall the “golden age” of their Unit. It is not an exaggeration to observe that the Congregation in the West may be a victim of our past success, as confreres recall a historical period when an unusually high number of candidates presented themselves, thereby unleashing the energy that made possible a dramatic expansion of ministry.

### **PASSAGE FROM LEGALISM TO ???**

26. The Congregation is still living the consequences of the passage from the Rule to the revised Constitutions and Statutes. From the beginning, Redemptorists have codified certain norms aimed at safeguarding the most cherished values of our way of following Christ. These norms served to guide the Congregation in its most important decisions, while transmitting to successive generations the spiritual experience of the apostolic life. For the major part of our history, the goal of Redemptorists was to live the prescriptions of the Rule as a way to holiness and so carry out the work of the Congregation. Observance was the key value. The Rule governed our ministry and community life to such a degree that it is said that one could go to any house we had throughout the world and find great similarities in the style of life, down to the furnishing of each confrere's room.
27. In the light of the renewal begun by the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, observance of the prescriptions of the Rule was seen as an exaggerated emphasis on law and timeworn ascetical practices, even a preference for the letter of the law over its spirit.
28. In contrast, the revised Constitutions and Statutes offer rich theological content as well as a real flexibility that permits their “adjustment to the different character of each particular mission, always, of course, in fidelity to the charism of the Congregation” (Con. 96). If one examines the Constitutions and Statutes in the light of the criteria mandated by n. 2 of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, there is little doubt that they “connect us with the original spirit of the Institute” and provide for “the adaptation of that spirit to the changed conditions of our time”. However, it must be asked whether in reality the Constitutions are proving capable of passing on Redemptorist life? I refer, of course, to the apparently minor role the Constitutions play in the reflection, decisions and daily life of many Units of the Congregation.

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<sup>7</sup> David COUTURIER, OFM Cap., “Religious Life at a Crossroads”, in *Origins* 36, n. 12 (2006) 181-188.

29. Over the last decades, as traditions and norms have lost their significance, a critical value has been assigned to personal experience and the capacity of each individual to encounter God. When filtered by subjective criteria, older practices and formulas no longer mediate a personally valid experience of God.<sup>8</sup> This may help to explain the struggle local communities have in establishing a regular life of common prayer. Eighteen years ago the XXI General Chapter noted a challenge that continues even today: “when we left behind the practices considered unauthentic or unsuited to the present day, there did not arise new ones capable of filling the vacuum produced”.<sup>9</sup>
30. The unfamiliarity of the Constitutions and their apparently inconsequential role in much of the life of the Congregation deprives Redemptorists of a common language as well as principles with which we can measure our lives and base our decisions.
31. When a Province has to make choices regarding pastoral methods, develop expectations for community life or consider establishing or abandoning foundations, the debate is governed by beliefs, attitudes or opinions that may or may not have much of a connection with the values expressed in the Constitutions. Unhelpful dichotomies continue to appear, albeit in new forms. One hears less about “Carthusians at home and apostles abroad” and more about “being” versus “doing”, “activism” versus “contemplation”, “missions” versus “parishes”. It seems to me that these and similar examples of juxtaposition reflect a fundamental disconnection with the spirituality of the Constitutions and Statutes.

### **CLERICALISM**

32. We should ask ourselves whether or not there is a rise in the Congregation of a type of clericalism that distances us from the truth of Constitution 54, which reminds us that religious profession (and not ordination) is the definitive act of the whole missionary life of Redemptorists. Clericalism is rooted in the idea that in whatever pertains to religion, it is the right and the responsibility of clerics to make the decisions and give the orders, and the job of lay people to carry them out. This sort of clericalism is not growing in the Congregation. However, there may be a subtle but real increase of a clericalist culture, that is, an environment in which the Redemptorist vocation is reduced to the ordained priesthood and our mission is thought of in terms of cultic ministries that are reserved to priests. Two phenomena point to this deeper possibility.
33. First, the number of Redemptorist Brothers continues to diminish in practically every Unit of the Congregation. There are many reasons behind this fact, but what concerns me are the Units that no longer promote the vocation of Brothers. This is particularly worrisome in Prov-

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. CATALÁ, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *Acta Integra Capituli Generalis XXI*, 327.

inces or Vice-Provinces that have a healthy number of clerical students, but argue that cultural reasons account for the absence of Brothers. It is said that people consider a Brother to be “less” than a priest – a sort of incomplete cleric! If people really believe this, then the Congregation has an opportunity to challenge such a serious misconception with an example of brotherhood in which all are missionaries by virtue of their profession (Con. 55) and all the members are equal, each in his own way playing his part in living the life and carrying out the mission to which they have dedicated themselves (Con. 35).

34. Another worrisome sign is the apparent ease with which ordained members abandon the Congregation to be incardinated in a diocese. This passage often occurs early in the life of a Redemptorist priest, who sees incardination as an attractive solution to a personal crisis. Sadly, there are bishops who seem eager to welcome a religious priest, especially if the cleric is young or has specialized formation. The diocesan priesthood is a worthy vocation but one that is fundamentally distinct from our way of discipleship. When a confrere is incardinated into a diocese, I have often heard it said “At least his priesthood is saved!” What is meant by prizing priesthood and making less important the life in which it is exercised, that is, the Congregation or a diocese?
35. Beyond clericalism, there may be other castes that divide the Congregation. An exaggerated value of “professionalism,” with an accompanying dress code and manner of speaking, or a partition along ideological lines that features a confrontation between opposing opinions on a theological or political question, weaken the corporate witness of a Province. Ethnic, national or regional differences create troublesome barriers among confreres. Like clericalism, these sources of fragmentation suggest that for a number of confreres, there are more powerful points of identification than our common profession as Redemptorists.

#### **THE QUESTION OF THE PROPHECTIC DIMENSION**

36. Today many confreres speak about the diminished testimony of our way of life – that the prophetic dimension of our vocation is weak, even absent. This concern emerged strongly this year in several regional meetings, especially in Latin America. Although confreres in other regions may not express the concern as emphatically, I wonder if there is not a widespread unease among Redemptorists, an anxious feeling that we have allowed the radical nature of our vocation to be compromised by a more bourgeois lifestyle in which corporate witness is neutered by personal preference. We sense that Redemptorist life was never meant to be a well-balanced career with regular hours, clear job descriptions and all sorts of guarantees. Yet, often we are uncertain what sort of witness to offer: what do we proclaim...what do we denounce?
37. In the first section of this letter, I invited you to think about what the Holy Spirit might be saying to us about our particular way of discipleship, the *vita apostolica*. By examining some features of the Congregation today, I tried to indicate both signs of vitality as

well as reasons for us to be concerned for our way of discipleship. From your own experience, you have probably thought of other examples of vigor and decline. I would like to illuminate the reality of Congregation by turning to what I consider to be the vow that can make a crucial contribution to the apostolic life of Redemptorists today: the vow of obedience. Before anyone gets too nervous and begins to see specters of authoritarianism and centralization, let me try to explain.

## II. JUDGE

*Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus... (Phil. 2,5)*

### THE VOWS TODAY

38. Religious profession is the definitive act of the missionary life of a Redemptorist (Con. 54). The force of this profession is not simply a pledge to live the consequences of the three vows, together with the vow and oath of perseverance. More than the assumption of obligations, religious profession represents a movement of the Holy Spirit, which leads Redemptorists to spare no effort to arrive at the *total* gift of themselves as a response to the Lord who first loved them (Con. 56). The vows are certainly of great consequence in the life-long process of self-giving, but so is a commitment to a “life of brotherly love” and “apostolic charity”, as our formula for profession makes clear.
39. For Redemptorists, the vows are to be lived in the light of the mission received by the Congregation and have as much to do with the community as the individual members. Individually, the vows might be seen as determining how Redemptorists deal with the social order, sexuality and property. Together they represent a freely assumed and public commitment to a life of self-giving that is modeled after the pattern of Christ's love for His Church. Like His, our gift is total and irreversible.<sup>10</sup>
40. Can it be helpful, then, to single out one vow as having a unique value for the *vita apostolica* in the first decade of the twenty-first century? If so, which one? When one considers the evangelical testimony of the vows against the background of current events, one could make a case that religious chastity offers a unique witness in the face of the public scandals caused by the sexual misconduct of clerics and religious as well as the reduction of sexual expression to a necessary biological urge. On the other hand, given our preference for the abandoned and among them, the poor, we certainly want to understand better and live more coherently the evangelical counsel of poverty. However, I will argue that obedience plays a particularly decisive role in the apostolic life today.

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<sup>10</sup> PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio* (29 June 1971), n. 7.

41. It is practically a cliché to say that we live in midst of a rapidly changing world, Church and Congregation. Our age is called a transition time that is marked by “great advances in science and technology as well as powerful means of communication that sometimes colonize the spirit”.<sup>11</sup> There is the ambiguous experience of globalization that makes us interdependent at the same time as it undermines particular cultural identities. But our day also presents “*kairos* moments in which we are surprised and realize that the God who speaks is the Lord of history”. We experience a “thirst for and crisis of meaning that holds out to us a thousand proposals and promises”.<sup>12</sup>
42. Even in the “in-between time” of the present moment, the Congregation must make choices. It is not free to be capricious nor can it determine the criteria for its options by its own lights alone. Amid a cacophony of voices that seek to “colonize” its spirit, the Congregation needs to distinguish the voice of Him who has called us to be His “helpers, companions and ministers in the great work of Redemption by preaching the Word of salvation to the poor” (Con. 2). Because Redemptorists are called to respond to situations of real pastoral urgency (Con. 5), our choices should be evaluated regularly, lest we allow ourselves to “to settle down in surroundings and structures in which [our] work would no longer be missionary” (Con. 15).
43. The tumultuous experience of change in our Institute over the last five decades as well as the flux of the world today demand that Redemptorists have listening and discerning hearts that are free to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit. So, I propose we give particular attention to the vow of obedience as a commitment to a co-responsible search for the will of God according to the charism of the Congregation.
44. While a complete consideration of the vow must include the role of authority in the apostolic life as well as the obligation of the members to obey the legitimate demands of their superiors, in this reflection I would like to think about our vow in the radical context described by Paul VI: “Even more than a purely formal and legalistic obeisance to Church law or submission to ecclesiastical authority, [obedience] is a penetration and acceptance of the mystery of Christ, who, through obedience, saved us. It is a continuation of His fundamental gesture: saying Yes to the will of the Father.”<sup>13</sup> Obedience in this fundamental sense is consonant with the Word of God and the rich spiritual patrimony of the Congregation and will help us distinguish the voice of our Master and recognize the *kairos* within the chaos of our times.

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<sup>11</sup> International Congress on Consecrated Life, Final Document *What the Spirit is saying to the Consecrated Life?* (Roma, November, 2004), n. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> PAUL VI, *Discorsi al Popolo di Dio 1966-1967* (Roma 1968) 119.

### A QUESTION AND A RESPONSE

45. The Gospels present a number of “vocation stories,” accounts that relate Jesus extending a call that is accepted or rejected by the His listeners. My favorite “story” is the entire Gospel of John, which begins with a question and concludes with an invitation. The first words of Jesus are “What are you looking for?” (Jn 1,38); the Gospel closes with his words to Peter “You follow me” (Jn 21,22). Unlike the call of the apostles in the Synoptics, the first words of Jesus to Andrew and the other disciple is an appeal to their desire, their dreams, and their ideals: “What are you looking for?” The Gospel is the story of the astounding encounter between the God, who “so loved the world,” and the deepest hungers of the human heart. The call to follow comes after the revelation of the paschal mystery in which the saving plan of the Father is fully disclosed.
46. The search for God has always been the quest of every being thirsting for the Absolute and the Eternal.<sup>14</sup> The great religious traditions mirror this search, as do secularized societies, where men and women seek some kind of meaning in life, death, love and suffering without reference to a revealed faith. Like Paul in the Areopagus, if we are attentive to the “shrines” that these societies construct, we can discern many altars to the *Agnostos Theos* (cf. Acts 17,23).
47. For Redemptorists, the quest for ultimate meaning finds the definitive answer in Jesus Christ. Together with our brothers and sisters in faith, we confess “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn. 6,68-69). Yet, even when we come to the joyful recognition that we have found what we were looking for (cf. Jn. 1,41), the search continues.
48. Our profession is the “definitive act of our missionary life” (Con. 54), yet it is also the continuation of the quest. I think of the image of Jesus in the chapel of General Curia, which presents him in three-quarters profile. There remains always the hidden side of the Master, so our prayer continues to be “Your face, o Lord, I seek” (Ps. 27,8).

### OBEDIENCE IS OWED TO GOD ALONE

49. The necessary point of departure for considering obedience is faith, our response to the most fundamental vocation that we received at baptism. In its theological sense, obedience is owed to God alone. Any other manifestation of religious obedience is a mediation, a means to an end, directed towards the only genuinely important and decisive will in the life of a Christian and, therefore, a Redemptorist.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *The Service of Authority and Obedience: Faciem tuam, Domine, Requiram*, (Vatican City 2008), n. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. José ROVIRA, CMF, *Autorità-Obbedienza e la Ricerca della Volontà di Dio*, Conference given to the 71<sup>st</sup> assembly of the Union of Superiors General (29 May 2008).

50. Obedience acknowledges the primacy of God over everything and everyone.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in their most fundamental identities, the Congregation and the Church are not structured into two classes, those who command and those who obey. To all His disciples, Jesus says “You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers” (Mt. 23,8). Everyone in the Church must search for the will of God and all are called to be obedient, since he who does the will of the Father is “brother, sister and mother” to Jesus Christ (Mt. 12,50).

### **CHRIST IS THE MODEL OF OBEDIENCE**

51. The Constitutions recognize that Redemptorists have been given a visible model of how we should seek and live out the will of God in history. The first constitution on the vow of obedience begins “Following the example of Christ, who came to do the will of his Father, and give his life as redemption for many...” (Con. 71). Obedience to the will of God was not something added to Christ’s personality but rather its full expression: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me” (Jn. 4,34).<sup>17</sup> As His “helpers, companions and ministers in the great work of Redemption”, we too are called to an obedience that continues the mission given to Christ by the Father.

52. Thus, when Redemptorists speak about the “mission” of the Congregation, we are talking about obedience, not tired slogans or prefabricated answers. By this vow, we are “seeking the Kingdom of God and sharing intimately in the paschal mystery of Christ, which is the mystery of obedience” (Con. 71).

53. The point of reference is Christ and the mystery of His *kenosis*. The concrete expression of the mission in history is not always self-evident; hence we search for God’s will in a spirit of faith and love. Saint Alphonsus urges us to continue this quest, teaching that our true realization comes from loving God, who is so deserving of our love, but the perfection of the love of God consists in uniting our will with His.<sup>18</sup>

### **WHAT IS THIS «WILL OF GOD»?**

54. What is this “will” of the Father that we must seek and – like Christ – strive to carry out within the framework of the time and the circumstances in which the Congregation finds itself? The answer can be found in the first words of the prayer Jesus gave us: to act in such a way that the Father is recognized as the only Holy One, that His historical and eschatological Kingdom come and that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven (cf. Mt. 6,9-10)<sup>19</sup>. The Divine Will begins to be done when we believe in the Son sent by the Father

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<sup>16</sup> *The Service of Authority*, 3b.

<sup>17</sup> *The Service of Authority*, 23a.

<sup>18</sup> Sant’Alfonso de LIGUORI, *Uniformità alla volontà di Dio*, Città Nuova, Roma 1999, 55.

<sup>19</sup> ROVIRA, *op cit.*, 4.

out of love for the world (Jn. 3,16ff) so that no one will perish (cf. Jn. 6,40). The invisible point of reference for the will of God is the Father's extravagant love (Mt. 5,42-48); its point of visible reference is Christ's behavior towards those He loved (cf. Jn. 15,9-17).<sup>20</sup>

55. St. Paul lists apparently exemplary actions that finally are worthless, if they are done without love (1Cor. 13,1-3). Likewise, Saint Alphonsus teaches that it is not enough to do praiseworthy things, if the behavior is not done in conformity to will of God.<sup>21</sup> So, too, not every pastoral option assumed by a confrere, a local community or a Province can be judged as consonant with the charism of the Congregation, if the choice is not made in harmony with God's will. Saint Augustine succinctly observed *Martyres non facit poena sed causa* – it is not pain that makes martyrs but rather their cause.<sup>22</sup>
56. Yet the authentic experience of God always remains the experience of otherness<sup>23</sup> As Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his second encyclical, "However great the similarity that may be established between Creator and creature, the dissimilarity between them is always greater."<sup>24</sup> The prophet invites us to "seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near" (Is. 55,6) and immediately warns against any false intimacy or facile familiarity: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts" (Is. 55,8-9).
57. The sublime "otherness" of God means that we must seek His will through paths which are consonant with His revelation. First and foremost, the real obedience of any disciple is "adhering to the Word with which God reveals and communicates himself".<sup>25</sup> The following of Christ as presented in the Gospel is the fundamental norm of religious life and must be considered as the supreme rule in the Congregation.<sup>26</sup>
58. Another mediation of God's will is the teaching office of the Church, which has the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, teaching authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ. However, this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant<sup>27</sup>. It may teach only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Uniformità alla volontà di Dio*, 76.

<sup>22</sup> S. AUGUSTINUS, *Sermo 328*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> *The Service of Authority*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi* (2007), n. 43.

<sup>25</sup> *The Service of Authority*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Constitutions and Statutes C.SsR.*, n. 74; *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 2a.

<sup>27</sup> VATICAN II, Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 10.

and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards the deposit of faith with dedication and expounds it faithfully.<sup>28</sup>

59. There are other mediations of God's will that are specific to one's vocation in life. Religious men and women are called to follow the obedient Christ within an "evangelical project or a charismatic one, inspired by the Spirit and authenticated by the Church."<sup>29</sup> In his apostolic exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II indicated a pressing need today for every Institute to return to the Rule, "since the Rule and Constitutions provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship, in accordance with a specific charism confirmed by the Church."<sup>30</sup>
60. The force of the our proper norms is clearly stated in Constitution 74: "Superiors and members then, united in community by the Holy Spirit, must observe Constitutions, statutes and decrees legitimately promulgated, looking on them as the authentic means whereby individual confreres and communities show their constant fidelity to God's will. In this way they carry out the mission of Christ who said of Himself: 'I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me' (Jn. 6,38)." Ignorance of the Constitutions and Statutes or their relegation to the periphery of the life of a province or of the entire Congregation clearly jeopardizes the fidelity of its members.
61. Finally, a specific mediation of the will of God for the Congregation is the voice of the abandoned poor. We think of the decisive encounter of Alphonsus with the shepherds and goat herders in the heights above Scala. What he "heard" there led him to understand and accept the will of God: that he leave behind the poor of the back alleys of Naples and spend the rest of his life among the abandoned people of the countryside.
62. We remember that whenever Alphonsus intended to describe his Institute to ecclesiastical or civil authorities, he emphasized as an essential characteristic the fact that his communities would be located in the midst of the abandoned poor of the countryside. This feature distinguished the Redemptorists from the *Pii Operai* and other missionary groups that continued to live in the cities while making an occasional foray into the world of the abandoned.
63. In my opinion, Alphonsus insisted on this feature not simply for pastoral reasons, that is, to give the abandoned greater access to our houses and afford the missionaries an easier entry to different dioceses. Knowing the decisive role that the voice of the abandoned poor played in his own discernment, I believe that Alphonsus wanted his companions always close to the type of people for whom Jesus himself showed a clear preference.

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<sup>28</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 85-86.

<sup>29</sup> *The Service of Authority*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, 37.

Thus, their voice would continue to reveal for Redemptorists the originality of their vocation. As he wrote to the communities in Scifelli and Frosinone in 1778:

“Assist souls, but specially the poor, the peasants and the most abandoned. Remember that God *evangelizare pauperibus misit nos* in these our days. Engrave this firmly on your hearts and look only for God among the abandoned poor if you wish to please Jesus Christ.”<sup>31</sup>

64. Our Constitutions invite us to discover the Lord in the people who have a special claim on us: the “abandoned” (Con. 3), with special attention for “the poor, the deprived and the oppressed” (Con. 4) and a preference for “situations of pastoral need” (Con. 5). We look for God in the concrete circumstances of life, striving to “encounter the Lord where He is already present and at work in his own mysterious way” (Con. 7) and letting the specific circumstances of a pastoral situation teach us what sort of response we should make (Con. 8). The gift of the Holy Spirit allows us to perceive God at work in the ordinary circumstances of life (Con. 24) but especially in the “anxious questionings” of the men and women of our day (Con. 19).

65. In summary, obedience is a fundamental attitude of every believer, not the exclusive prerogative of a small group of people who profess it as an evangelical counsel. Redemptorists, like everyone else in the Church are called to obey, following the example of Jesus, who came not to do His own will but the will of the Father (Jn. 6,38). The difference is that each of us within the Church lives out this obedience to God according to his charism and vocation. The will of God does not exist prior to the vocation; it is through the specific vocation that God makes known His will for the individual.<sup>32</sup> So, by our vow we have committed ourselves to obey in a *Redemptorist style*: searching for the will of God that is mediated by His Word, the norms of our charismatic project and the voice of the abandoned poor.

### III. ACT

*See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*  
(Is. 43,19)

66. I repeat the assertion made earlier in this letter: that obedience is the axial vow for Redemptorists in an age of change. In the past, this vow was seen principally in personal and legalistic terms. While our Constitutions still understand the vow as obliging the members to obey the legitimate commands of superiors (Con. 71), there is an urgent need to see the vow as a call to create “obedient communities” at every level of the Congregation.

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Antonio M. TANNIOIA, *Della vita ed istituto del Venerabile Servo di Dio Alfonso M<sup>o</sup> Liguori, Vescovo di S. Agata de’ Goti e Fondatore della Congregazione de’ preti missionari del SS. Redentore*, 4 vol., Napoli 1798-1802, vol. IV, cap. 9, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. ROVIRA, *op. cit.*, 8.

The vows are always of individuals and of the community. It would be a serious mistake to separate these two dimensions and reduce them simply to individual obligations.

67. Without a community that is committed to searching obediently for the will of God, it is difficult, if not impossible for individuals to remain obedient. It is clear that none of us can live fully and joyfully the freedom of the vow of obedience without the force of an obedient community, since the obedience of each individual to the Father takes place within the framework of the ecclesial community. It is not just the fundamental and personal relationship between one's conscience and God that is significant; the relationship with our brothers is equally important. In fact, the vitality of a community is closely linked with the quality of its obedience as a community.<sup>33</sup>

68. How can we assure that our communities, whether local, provincial or the Congregation itself,<sup>34</sup> remain obedient? I believe we need to distinguish among the many voices that seek to colonize our spirit by intensifying our attention to the Word of God, the charismatic project of the Congregation and the voice of the abandoned poor.

#### **A LAMP FOR OUR FEET... A LIGHT FOR OUR PATH**

69. The Word of God is the source of our vocation, our daily sustenance and the content of our missionary work. We need to proclaim, meditate on, share, and pray in obedience to the Word and strive to make the Word our "first book of spirituality"<sup>35</sup>. Because of the absolutely vital role the Word plays for disciples, the Congregation must give greater value to listening, which is not, first and foremost, a technique of group dynamics but rather a continual quest for what the Father wants.

70. As a pious Jew, Jesus would have begun his daily prayer by repeating the words of Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Dt. 6,4-5). He tells His disciples, "Whoever is of God listens to the words of God" (Jn. 8,47). How can our communities demonstrate this daily attentiveness to the Word of God?

71. The rhythm of community life should help the members to listen attentively to the Word. Daily reading of Scripture and periods of common meditation will help us hear the Word as a community and ask the light of the Holy Spirit in order to understand it. Many local communities have a weekly time of sharing in preparation for Sunday

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<sup>33</sup> Sabatino MAIORANO, C.Ss.R., "Autorità e vita fraterna: dialogo, discernimento ed obbedienza", in *Il Servizio dell'Autorità e l'Obbedienza*, Roma 2009, 88.

<sup>34</sup> Constitution 22 reminds us that "community" can refer to the whole Congregation, to the (vice)province, or to a local or personal community.

<sup>35</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, 94.

preaching or other moments of extraordinary proclamation. We should encourage each other to let the Word change our hearts and give greater value to the reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and spiritual direction.

72. If we agree with Saint Jerome that “ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ,”<sup>36</sup> then the difficulty in discovering the prophetic dimension of our vocation might be rooted in unfamiliarity with God’s Word. After all, Jesus commissions His apostles by saying “you shall be *my* witnesses” (Acts 1,8); it is to Him and His Kingdom that we give testimony. Saint John Chrysostom observed that the apostles came down from the mount in Galilee, where they had met the risen Lord, without any written stone tablets as Moses had: their lives would become the living gospel, from that moment on.<sup>37</sup>

**AT THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY... IS THE REDEEMER HIMSELF AND HIS SPIRIT OF LOVE**

73. It seems to me that we need to agree that whether we follow Christ in one way or another is not arbitrary. In the matter of vocation there is nothing arbitrary. Each Christian must seek out his vocation, that is, God’s will in his individual case and, once he has found it, like the merchant in the parable of Jesus, “rejoice and sell all he has” to live in fidelity with the call of the Lord (Mt. 13,44). For my Mom and Dad, their vocation as spouses and parents is superior to all others because it is *their* vocation, that is, the one to which they were called. For me, to be a Redemptorist is the best possible way of life because it is the one to which God has invited me.
74. By our profession, we have responded to the Lord with the total gift of ourselves and have committed ourselves to seeking the will of God within a concrete ecclesial community, the Congregation. Our obedience to God, something invisible, takes place within the framework of our visible community.
75. Just as we cannot affirm that we love the God we cannot see, if we despise the brother we do see (cf. 1Jn. 4,20-21), Redemptorists cannot state that they are seeking the will of God unless this search takes place within the visible community of the Congregation. So, the norms to guide discernment and decision-making are of crucial importance to avoid the danger of reducing the mission of the Congregation to a job or a career that is done principally for one’s own self-aggrandizement and thus to be managed more or less by each individual.<sup>38</sup> Our Constitutions propose that the search for God’s will is a task for which every member of the Congregation is co-responsible.

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<sup>36</sup> ST. JEROME, *Commentary on Isaiah* (nn. 1.2: CCL 73, 1-3).

<sup>37</sup> Cited in BENEDICT XVI, *Message to the People of God of the XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (2008), 10.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *The Service of Authority*, 23.

76. No Redemptorist can disqualify himself from helping to create an obedient community, since to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the sake of the common good (Con. 92; cf. 1Cor. 12,7; Con. 72). Thus, a crucial service for those in authority is to encourage the community in its effort to listen to, discern and carry out the will of God, “leading the members in such a way that they will co-operate with an active and responsible obedience in applying themselves to their duties and to the activities they undertake” (Con. 72).
77. An important instrument in the exercise of co-responsible obedience is dialogue, termed by Paul VI as a new name for charity<sup>39</sup> and for which the consecrated life has to offer a privileged experience.<sup>40</sup> While community discernment is not a substitute for the service of authority in the community, those in authority must always keep in mind that the community is the best place in which to recognize and accept the will of God.<sup>41</sup>
78. Our Constitutions and Statutes, as well as the decrees of recent General Chapters, propose a number of ways in which the community seeks the will of God. Provincial assemblies and chapters are privileged moments for listening, discerning the will of God and making an effective response. All the members of a (Vice-)Province should have an opportunity to contribute generously to the reflection of the chapter, either through participation in a well-conceived process of preparation or as elected members. To this end, the members of a Unit should be well informed regarding the questions that will be examined by a chapter and have the opportunity to express their opinion.
79. The principle of co-responsibility does not mean that everyone has to be physically present at a chapter. In fact, the General Council has serious questions about the effectiveness of massive chapters, especially as an ordinary expression of government in larger Units. Among the many problems of this form of government, we have seen that such bodies produce determinations that are often so vague and expressed in language so general that a provincial government receives little effective guidance for the exercise of its mandate. The lack of a clear direction for a Province is an invitation to the sort of exaggerated individualism that hampers a number of Units today. Lacking an obedient and collegial discernment of its priorities, the members of a Unit are encouraged to “find something to do”, thereby accelerating the fragmentation of the community.
80. In our Congregation, elections are not simply a matter of casting ballots and counting them; much less a search for someone who would leave the members undisturbed in the pursuit of their individual projects. Rather, elections should be an important exercise of the vow of obedience by the provincial community that is characterized by a humble

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<sup>39</sup> PAUL VI, Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), n. 64.

<sup>40</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, 74.

<sup>41</sup> *The Service of Authority*, 20e.

and co-responsible search for the will of God. Since the electoral process should be conducted in a prayerful atmosphere and hopefully lead to a convergence of insight, the Congregation should examine with a critical eye some roughly democratic yet privatized processes, such as balloting by mail. It is hard to see how such a system favors dialogue and discernment by the members of the Unit. The apostolic purpose of the Congregation should penetrate and inspire the discernment and selection of leaders.

81. The XXII General Chapter (1997) recommended to the Congregation the use of the plan of community life. Some Provinces make regular use of this instrument and have found in it a powerful means for the search for God's will in the concrete situation of the local community. The preparation of the plan provokes a fruitful dialogue aimed at inserting the personal gifts of each member into a common project. A regular evaluation of the plan can provide for a profitable review of life by the members and open the door to on-going conversion.
82. Finally, given the particular role of the local superior in the discernment of the community (cf. for example Cons. 72, 136; Gen. Stat. 037), an important structure to promote co-responsibility are regular meetings of superiors, aimed at their continuing formation in what is expected of them according to the charismatic project of the Congregation.

**THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME...**

83. Together with obedience to the Word of God and adherence to the Constitutions and Statutes, our obedient attention to the voice of the abandoned poor helps to ensure our fidelity to the will of God. Over the years I have meditated often on the encounter of the deacon Philip with the court official of Candace, queen of Ethiopia, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8,27ss). As he traveled from Jerusalem, the eunuch was making a well intentioned reading of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah but, try as he might, he simply could not understand the text. When Philip climbed into his carriage and explained the Word, the official not only understood but was converted to the Lord. His life took a new direction and he asked to be baptized.
84. Is there a lesson for us in that passage from Acts? Redemptorists have a "page" before our eyes, be it the very Word of God or the present moment of history, and, despite our efforts, we cannot "read" it – its meaning escapes us. Just as the Spirit led Philip to help the eunuch understand what he was reading, so the Spirit has given the abandoned poor to the Congregation as our tutors. If we do not listen to their voice, the written page of Scripture, the Constitutions and Statutes and the world around us will remain largely indecipherable to us.
85. We listen to the abandoned poor, first and foremost, because of Jesus Christ, who began his public ministry with a proclamation of hope for the poor, the deprived and the oppressed of the earth: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he anointed me to bring glad

tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Lk. 4,18-19). Alphonsus linked the mission of the Congregation with the mission of Jesus Christ and used that passage from Luke to help us understand why we exist in the Church.

86. We are not introducing people to a distant and diffident God but rather helping people see that God has taken the first step and is already among them. We listen to the abandoned poor in order to discover the Lord "where he is already present and working in his own mysterious way" (Con. 7) especially among those marginalized by Church or society. God has entrusted us with the mission of witnessing to His own kenosis that takes Him to the depths of our world and back to heaven, of telling that story to others who otherwise will have little chance of hearing it and offering to them full participation in divine life.
87. Listening to the voice of the abandoned poor not only convinces us of their claim upon us, we also realize that they offer their own gifts to the Congregation. Through them, we experience the mystery of God's power that is made manifest in weakness (2Cor. 4,7-9), not only among the people we serve but also in the fragility of our own resources. The poor teach us that strength is found in community and relationships, and so encourage us to search for new structures of cooperation that will bolster our missionary work. Finally, the abandoned poor invite us to a mission that is always a gratuitous response to the abundant love of God: "Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give" (Mt. 10,8). It is our own experience of the gracious compassion of God that compels us to make the total gift of ourselves.
88. The poor do not need us. If we choose not to go to them, God will find someone else, since God hears the cry of the poor. My brothers, the point is that we need the poor, if we are to be true to the mission that has been given to us. Obedience to their voice is not simply "doing things" for them but rather to enter a process of conversion that leads us to empty ourselves and offer our lives as a gift. To do this, we must recognize that abandoned poor really exist; they are not simply theories or statistics but have names and faces. We go where the Church cannot or will not go and listen to the people we find there. If we listen to their voice, together with the Word of God and our Constitutions and Statutes, we will learn what we should do.

## Conclusion

*But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"... Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the LORD. May it be done to me according to your word." (Lk. 1,34.38)*

89. The International Congress on the Consecrated Life, an unprecedented gathering in 2004 of over 800 participants – mostly Superiors General of Congregations of men and women,

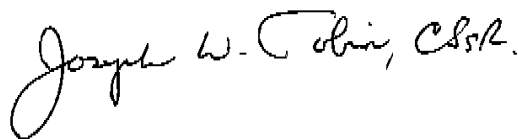
together with presidents of practically all the national conferences of religious and a number of theologians – produced a Final Document with a number of audacious pronouncements. Among the most intriguing is the following:

“For some time now something new has been coming into being among us beyond other realities of death (obsolete traditions and styles, dying institutions). The agony of what is dying and trust in what is being born affects us. Although we do not yet see clearly what the Spirit is bringing to birth in consecrated life, still we identify... sprouts of newness...”<sup>42</sup>

90. After eighteen years of listening to Redemptorists and the brothers and sisters who accompany us as well as members of other institutes of the consecrated life, I am more convinced than ever that something new is being born in our Congregation. Our exercise of the vow of obedience will help us to glimpse what the Spirit is bringing to birth and give us hearts that are free enough to do our part in the great work of Redemption.

91. We must be like Mary at the annunciation: she questions (Lk. 1,34), she reflects, she meditates. She trusts and abandons herself to God. Her obedience is “believing but questioning;”<sup>43</sup> at the same time, “quick to obey”.<sup>44</sup> She “treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2,19), thereby “finding the profound knot that unites apparently distinct events, acts and things in the great divine plan.”<sup>45</sup> We recognize in her our Mother, ready at every moment to help us, but also our model in the ways of faith.<sup>46</sup> May she help us to listen to the Lord and recognize the grandeur of our vocation. May she lead us always to a more profound love for her Son, the Redeemer of the world.

Faternally in Christ the Redeemer,



JOSEPH W. TOBIN, C.Ss.R.  
Superior General

*The original language of this document is English.*

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<sup>42</sup> *What is the Spirit saying*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> *The Service of Authority*, 31a.

<sup>44</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, 112c.

<sup>45</sup> *Message to the People of God*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> VATICAN II, Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 65.