



CONGREGAZIONE DELLA PASSIONE DI GESÙ CRISTO

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The Superior General

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WHERE ARE WE IN THE PROCESS OF RESTRUCTURING?

My dear brothers of the Congregation and sisters and brothers of the Passionist Family,

Introduction

In proximity to the feast of St. Paul of the Cross, our Father and Founder, I want to share some reflections and plans with you concerning our life and mission and also concerning the process of the revitalization of the Congregation. These are also the fruit of the dialog which has been taking place in the General Council.

The figure of St. Paul of the Cross, and his way of understanding “*the evils of the world*” that he believed originated “*in forgetting the Passion of Jesus*” and which he strove to resolve, can serve to enlighten our discernment. For our Founder, not remembering the Passion of Jesus was not a “pious” issue or reflection; rather, it was a profound and total involvement of God with us through the loving gift of his Son who died on the Cross. Jesus, through his death and resurrection has brought us to new life and has achieved unity among all people as children of the one, same Father. Forgetfulness and therefore, not living by means of this leavening of salvation -- i.e. Jesus who entered into our history by his Incarnation and his fruitful Passion -- causes people to reason with the logic of the world – precisely what Jesus in the Gospel prayed would not happen.

1. Remembering – in the sense of “recalling” the Passion of Jesus – is an efficacious remedy for the evils that afflict, exhaust and divide humanity because “recalling” in an authentic sense, means living by it and allowing oneself to be inspired by its logic of love and of self-giving in the choices that are made and in interpersonal and social relationships. In this sense, “recalling” is a true revolution that is not only spiritual, but also cultural. It has the capacity of producing relevant social changes and changes in our relationships with others because it is characterized by the gift of love. This is different from what frequently motivates change -- egotism, suppression, violence, war and taking advantage of entire nations, even to the extent of allowing them to die of hunger: and this in a real sense and not merely rhetorical or figurative.

The Passion of Jesus and its meaning can transform the world! We don't know if this is a dream for us; but it is certainly what we believe.

2. We should, we want to re-center our life around the charism of the Passion because we are born from it and for it we live and similarly, we want the world to be re-born and to live. The current process of Restructuring is about not forgetting; it is about being present and successful in the fight against “the evils” about which St. Paul of the Cross spoke.

3. In fact, we are living during difficult times in which society and the Church are in the midst of great changes and, consequently, we cannot remain passive. However, this is something that we already know and are convinced about and, beginning with the General Synod of 2004, we have begun the process of Restructuring. This was reconfirmed by further discernment and specific decisions were made by the General Chapter of 2006 and the General Synod in Cuernavaca, Mexico in 2008. The next objective and verification of the road already traveled will be the General Synod of 2010 which will take place in Rome, in our retreat of Sts. John and Paul from Tuesday, 21 October to Sunday, 31 October. It will be a challenge for us to accomplish what was mandated by the Synod of Cuernavaca because it entails proceeding with a change of mind-set, of points of reference and perspective in addressing problems. It involves a change of heart, of mind and of will. “My” must be changed into “we”; autonomy must be changed into relationship and profound and fruitful collaboration so as to bring about structural changes. The sense of being a “Province, Vice-Province and Vicariate” must change into a sense of being a “Configuration and a Congregation”; gifts need to be shared and talents made available for the good of all; not hoarding in order to feel secure by possessions, but offering them as gift.

4. In the Gospel passage of this Sunday, 11 October (Mk.10: 17-30) a rich young man asks Jesus what he has to do to gain eternal life. “*You know the commandments...*,” Jesus tells him. “*Master...I have observed them from my youth*”, the young man responds. If Jesus poses the same question to us today, perhaps we would respond as did the rich young man: “I observe the Constitutions and the commandments of God, and I have kept them since I was a novice, as a student, as a young priest or brother...I am a good Passionist.” “*Then Jesus, looking intently at him, loved him and said: “You are still missing one thing: go, sell what you have and give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.”*” Jesus looked at the young man in the eye and he also looks directly into our eyes and hearts. It is not enough to be observant of the commandments and the prescriptions; something more is required. Perhaps the young man thought that Jesus was going to tell him to do some other religious practice, another religious devotion. No! Jesus does not invite him to add something else, but to free himself from something. He invites him to abandon the human security that his “many possessions” had afforded him and to share them with the poor. But the young man lowered his eyes and he went away sad because he was incapable of sharing the many goods that he possessed. This incapacity of separating ourselves from our goods and sharing them may also be an obstacle for us as we try to fulfill what is requested of us during this present phase of Restructuring.

5. But I am convinced that our first choice for vitality and for the development of the Congregation will give us the strength to overcome the difficulties. In fact, we want to be faithful to our vocation, witnessing to our charism that stems directly from the Cross and from the Crucified One, whose death, as a gift from the Father, is a plan of life and total solidarity for us. It is the light of Calvary that enlightens our planning, our preparation for the future and the way in which we will be Passionists today and tomorrow.

6. The word Solidarity, that had its maximum expression on the Cross, is also the key word for us in the current phase of the process of Restructuring. But so that it doesn't remain only a “word” our conversion should make us capable of achieving a new way of being together as Passionists in mission. It should deepen the conviction in us that life is a gift that should be shared among the various regions of the Congregation. Solidarity that is concrete and is evident in formation, in personnel, and in finances will verify whether our capacity for sharing

is authentic or if it is merely a word that is pleasing to hear, but is void of content. It was not an empty word on the Cross, nor was it an empty word in the early Christian communities who *“held everything in common.”*

7. It is in concrete situations that we evaluate our conversion and the possibility that brings about new life for the Congregation. The capacity of being in solidarity and sharing goods, understood in the wide sense and not only in economic terms which can be reductive, will be the measure of our charity, our hope and our faith.

8. During the two years since of the General Synod of 2008 and until the next General Synod of 2010 we have before us the essential task of planning and experimenting with possible ways of achieving Solidarity in the three areas of formation, of personnel and finances. This task is taking place on two levels.

9. The first level concerns the Congregation as an entire entity: the General Council, according to the recommendations of the Synod of 2008, is working to study and create structures for the three areas of solidarity for the Congregation.

The second level concerns the Configurations. These are planning and experimenting with achieving solidarity in formation, in personnel and in finances within the Configuration itself.

To achieve this goal they are using the Discernment Instrument for the three areas of solidarity that facilitates the choices of initiatives and actions.

10. To assist the General Council in its tasks of encouraging and guiding the process of Restructuring, seven Coordinators were named for the six Configurations who, in addition to being a liaison with the General Council, have the task of directing the process within their own Configuration. Additionally, each Configuration with its relative Coordinator has a General Consultor as a contact person.

11. The Discernment Instrument, referred to above at number 8, stems from the meeting of the General Council with the Coordinators that took place in Rome at Sts. John and Paul during 19-20 November 2008. A subsequent meeting that took place during 18 to 20 June, 2009 verified the decisions that were made. This validation will continue until the next meeting that is scheduled to take place next December 2-4 again at Sts. John and Paul.

12. Currently the Configurations are proceeding with analyzing and experimentation as was requested by the Executive Committee of the Configurations (Provincials, Vice-Provincials, Regional Vicars, Coordinators and the General Consultors-liaisons) and with the work of the Study Groups or Commissions of the Configurations. The study Groups, using a discernment instrument for each of the three areas of Solidarity, are working at achieving this goal by offering suggestions to the Executive Committee.

13. Successive phases:

a) By the end of 2009 the General Council will receive a report concerning the progress of the work of each Configuration during the first twelve months since the Synod of 2008.

b) The constitution of the Study Groups or commissions concerning the development of structures for greater solidarity should be completed.

c) At the General Synod of 2010 the results of the two years of work of the six Configurations will be presented together with their directives for the structures designed for Solidarity in Formation, Personnel and Finances for each Configuration;

d) The General Council will similarly present its work for the structures elaborated for the three areas of Solidarity in the entire Congregation;

e) The Synod will do its discernment in reference to the new structures for the three areas of Solidarity proposed for the entire Congregation and for the individual Configurations and will make its own decisions or will give suggestions about how to proceed with this process. Therefore, this will be the moment of trial by fire in the process of Restructuring;

f) The final phase envisioned for our process will be the period from 2010 to 2012. During this time we should accomplish what was specified by the Synod of 2010 in order to arrive at the General Chapter with the ability to make structural decisions that will be capable of giving new vitality to the life and mission of the Congregation.

g) The General Chapter of 2012 will take make appropriate decisions for accomplishing the objective of the process of Restructuring and conclude it.

14. Questions. The most common questions posed by the religious are of two types:

a) the first concerns the process and the legitimate request to know where we are going and where we will arrive;

b) the other concerns some juridical aspects during this phase of transition – of the co-existence of the current juridical entities, i.e. the Provinces, Vice-provinces and Vicariates, together with the new experimental realities of the Configurations.

15. In reference to questions of the first kind, it is normal that these queries arise and that there is concern about the final results of the process. However we are still living in the phase of study and experimentation and therefore definitive responses are not available.

A figurative response can be given using the following analogy: we are scaling a mountain not yet knowing with certainty what we will see when we arrive at the summit: we are climbing with great hope and faith that the view of the valley beyond will be magnificent. We can imagine what the panorama will be and we can anticipate it because it is a response to the reality of the present intercultural and secularized world and to the reality of the Congregation with its difficulties. The two realities direct us toward possible solutions that we need to discover and they lead us to provide responses to the question about where we want to go and what will be the specific objective of the process of Restructuring.

16. The difficulties, that are frequently voiced in many parts of the Congregation, concerning community life and prayer life, ministry, formation and finances, whether they are new realities that are growing, or historical realities that are diminishing. These have brought us to the word *Solidarity* in order to overcome dysfunctional situations and current problems and to empower resources. In fact, we are convinced that the gift and sharing are an investment, like the outpouring of the love of the Father for our sins in the Passion of Jesus. In the passage of the gospel of Mark of the rich, young man of the 28th Sunday of Ordinary Time (11 October 2009), which I cited at the beginning of this letter, Jesus, observing the young man going away sad, says to his disciples that it is difficult “*for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God*”. Peter then says to him: “*We have given up everything and followed you.*” And Jesus responds: “*Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or*

father...for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more...” (Mk.10:24-30). Yes, truly the gift is an investment for the Reign of God and sharing and solidarity can bear fruit for our life and mission “a hundred times more” than what we give and share.

17. Therefore, in the light of the Gospel and discerning the signs of the times, by means of the process of Restructuring we have arrived at the conclusion that Solidarity can be an efficacious instrument for revitalizing the Congregation; it can be the “pearl of great price” for which we spend our energies and life.

And we are further convinced that Solidarity can no longer be left up to the good will and generosity of the Provinces, Vice-provinces, Regional Vicariates and communities, as is presently the case – even if we have seen some examples of significant collaboration. It needs to be made essential, and in the three areas of Solidarity, formation, personnel and finances, it should involve our entire life.

In order to not hinder the process of Restructuring we need to overcome the temptation to consider the new Configurations in the context of the Regional Conferences as prescribed by the General Regulations (GR 94, 95, 96). These were very useful and were very successful in fostering “*communication and cooperation within our Congregation, and to coordinate common interests and initiatives.*” (GR, No.94) However, over time and because of various difficulties the function of the Conferences to promote initiatives and to make shared decisions generally became ineffective.

18. In order for the Configurations to be effective and to have the capacity, beyond that of discernment, to also make decisions in the three areas, Solidarity should be instituted and formalized. At the present time we do not know the kind of juridical form that the Configurations will assume nor within them, the Provinces, Vice-provinces and Vicariates. These forms will emerge as the process continues.

19. However, it is clear that, if we do not want to obstruct the process of Restructuring, we need to discern the best institutional form to enable us to make Solidarity a stable and concrete reality, something that we cannot neglect if we want to make the new vitality of the Congregation a reality which is the objective of the process. This also demands that we study new models of governance, both on a general level for the Congregation as well as on the level of the Configurations – levels that should be interactive and possessing a capacity for planning for the entire Congregation and for implementation in the various Configurations.

20. In this context, we envision that the local Superior will play a very important role in the life of the community as he motivates and guides it within a local area, among the people, in order to fulfill the charism and mission of the Congregation. The Constitutions affirm that the community is the fundamental entity of the Congregation and therefore, if the individual entities are strong and healthy, then the entire body of the Congregation that is composed of these will also be healthy and strong in its endeavors and, consequently also in its witness to fraternal life and the efficacy of its mission.

21. To arrive at the objective of forming strong communities that witness by their lives and their ability to evangelize, we are challenged to diminish the number of individual communities and our presence in a particular geographic region. The Solidarity that was proposed to us by the Synod and which was also established by last the General Chapter cannot be realized if we do not courageously review with a willingness to make decisions, the number of

the communities and their fragmentation, as well as the “excessive number” of services and ministries.

But we should not be discouraged: the process itself will present us with criteria and will help us to confront this formidable challenge.

Surely there will always be attempts to act with great sensitivity and respect for the feelings and the concerns of the religious. In fact, there may be religious who feel tired and isolated from the process because of age or the context in which they are living. But this is a temptation to be overcome because they are still an important part of the Congregation. Everyone, in a context of faith and prayer, and by encouraging the young in the process itself, we will be able to feel that we are a living part of it, even if our active participation is limited.

22. Perhaps some Provinces feel that they do not need Restructuring or at least they believe that it is not urgent. I on the contrary, as well as many in the Congregation, am convinced that it is vital for everyone to enter into this new dynamic of life. Even if it was so and a Province still had a certain vivacious spirit and mission, it cannot selfishly withdraw into itself for self-preservation. Perhaps the province doesn't need anyone else, but certainly others have need of it. It cannot be concerned only with its self-preservation, but it must evangelically open itself to giving and sharing.

Also, in Jesus' parable, the Good Samaritan (Lk.10:30-37) didn't have any problems, and neither did the priest or the Levite; but there was “*a man who fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho*” who stripped and beat him and went off leaving him “half-dead”. He had very serious problems. The priest and the Levite who saw him wounded passed him by. The Samaritan stopped and took care of him, attending to his wounds by pouring wine and oil on them and bandaging them. At the end of the parable Jesus asks: “*Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?*” The doctor of the law responded: “*The one who treated him with mercy.*” Jesus then said to him: “*Go and do likewise.*”

And he also says this to us with regard to the process of Restructuring.

23. In reference to the questions of the second type or of a juridical nature, I wish to point out the following.

We are living in a very unique moment in our history and in the history of the Provinces, Vice-provinces and Vicariates. The simultaneous new reality of the Configurations may give rise to some questions of juridical nature. But these doubts may be resolved by using life experience and therefore remembering that the structures, be they present ones as well as those of the future, are at the service of the mission.

Currently the Configurations have no juridical identity; rather they function based on the mandate of the General Chapter and the last General Synod as Work groups, in order to discern and experiment with Solidarity in the three areas of formation, personnel and finances and their objective of establishing the same. The Configurations works together, examine strategies and undertake collaborative efforts in order to give new vitality to the Congregation.

The basic structure of the Configuration on a juridical level is still the Province and therefore any juridical decisions and permissions must be granted by the respective Provincials or the Major Superiors of the Provinces, Vice-provinces and Vicariates, according to the rights and obligations prescribed by the Constitutions and the General Regulations. All canonical permissions are still within the jurisdiction of the Provincial or the competent Major Superior with his

Council, even if the religious, for example, is making his novitiate in a community of the Configuration which is apart from his Province. It is the same for religious in formation or for religious who need any kind of juridical decision.

24. The relationship of the Provinces with the Regional Vicariates. Even if the Regional Conferences were suppressed until the General Chapter of 2012 in order to allow the Configurations to develop and experiment with their reality, the Synod of 2008 decided that the juridical and financial relationship between the Provinces and the Vicariates would continue status quo until 2012; the Vicariates still belong to the Provinces. During the current phase of experimentation there may be the case of a Province and one of its Vicariates belonging to a different Configuration and that there would be a conflict of interest; but this should not impede the existing juridical and financial relationships with the Province and at the same time, allow for participation in the process of Restructuring with the Configuration.

25. Conclusion. The person and the decisions of our holy Founder, whose feast we celebrate during this month of October, should offer us encouragement during this process of Restructuring. Despite his efforts to change things that he had meditated and reflected on during long periods of prayer, he was open to accept whatever the Spirit suggested through human mediation. Numerous times he revised the primitive Rule until its final approbation, while he was still alive, in 1775, the year of his death. This is an example and a paradigm for us.

We should also feel reassured by the certainty that the Restructuring which we are undertaking will take place in the spirit of the Constitutions in order to confirm them and make their values more effective.

However, beyond reasonable doubts and perplexities, the religious are interested and want to understand and participate in this process. The Configurations together with the major Superiors, the Provincial councils and the work of the Study Groups are proceeding well along the road indicated by the last General Synod.

The initiatives with which we are experimenting are generating hope and they are opening new horizons and presenting new possibilities. The recent Provincial Chapters in Spain (CORI, FAM, SANG) which recently took place, were occasions for prayer, sharing, reflection and planning of common projects having the specific objective of solidarity in formation, personnel and finances. With regard to planning, the schema followed in the three Chapters was the same; but each Province then addressed its own reality and its own difficulties. The same took place at the Chapter last September of the CALV Province, at which were also present the four regional vicars of Brazil. Here too, the Chapter was celebrated from a particular viewpoint and was focused on the future with openness to the process that is underway.

Also the canonical visitations that took place in preparation for the various Chapters, including the visit that I personally did in Latin America, in Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile and Brazil, were characterized by open and candid dialog. The information given, helped, where possible, to overcome doubts and increase willingness to proceed with the process that we are undertaking.

A particular aspect of the recent canonical visitations: they were done by a member of the General Council and by one or more of the Major Superiors of the Configuration to which the Province and the relative Vicariates or Delegations belonged. This allowed the General Council to directly understand the entity that was being visited by means of a component in the Canonical Visitation. It also allowed for greater integration and understanding within the Configura-

tion, by means of the presence of a Major Superior of another Province of the same Configuration.

Dear brothers and sisters, there are many initiatives that are being undertaken by the General Council, the Coordinators and the Configurations in order to accomplish what the Holy Spirit and the reading of the signs of the times have indicated to the Congregation beginning with the General Chapter of 2000 in Brazil, where it was stated that: “*A renewal of the structures of the Congregation is necessary*”; “*Solidarity is the word chosen to describe a new way of being together as Passionists for the life of the world...in order to give new responses to new realities and to understand that life is a gift to be shared.*” The General Synod of 2004 recognized “*Restructuring as a call of God to conversion for a new creative fidelity. Restructuring is for revitalization, so that all the parts of the Congregation may have life.*” The General Chapter of 2006 decreed that “*all the Provinces, Vice-provinces and Vicariates develop a plan for the future of its life and mission, seeking dialog and collaboration with other regions, keeping in mind the ten priorities that were indicated by the Chapter itself.*”

The General Synod of 2008, beginning with the responses obtained from the Questionnaire (sent to all the entities of the Congregation and to which all replied) reflected on two words: *Charism and Solidarity*. Charism is a gift of God and cannot change. It enlightens the solidarity that the Synod decreed should be accomplished in the three areas of formation, personnel and finances.

In light of the criteria elaborated by the General Council and the Coordinators at Las Presas, Spain and re-worked by the Synod, the Configurations were formed. In the meeting of November, 2008, the General Council together with the Coordinators and the moderator of the Synod, worked on the discernment Instrument that we are currently using for planning and experimentation in the three areas of solidarity.

Dear brothers, we are steadily moving along and we are ever more aware of the need to develop common perspectives for shared objectives and goals. This can occur if we have a heart that is free and an open mind to accept change. The poet Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Nothing is so much to be feared as fear,” because fear can impede life.

Fear can generate doubt: “This will never work!” and there is a “certain cynicism” that can be an obstacle to the work of the Spirit. Inertia can create an illusory sense of security for the present moment; but it is death. It is about going to Jerusalem “with fixed gaze”, like Jesus, and choosing to pass through, like a river of suffering, the Week of the Passion. This is about the Resurrection and the open tomb for new life. In fact, it is the risen Jesus that will give the mandate of the mission to the Apostles, to the Church and to us. Without the Cross there would be no resurrection, nor a mission.

This conversion that is required of us is in this direction.

At this decisive moment, may St. Paul of the Cross grant us courage and wisdom of heart for the vitality of the Congregation and may he guide us with his mystical and prophetic charism.

Retreat of St. John and Paul
Rome, Sunday, 11 October 2009

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