



CONGREGAZIONE DELLA PASSIONE DI GESÙ CRISTO

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Il Superiore Generale

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Letter of Convocation of the 46th General Chapter

My dear brothers,

This New Year of 2012 is now well under way and, gazing at the icon of love, Mary the Mother of God holding the Infant Jesus in her arms, I joyfully greet the Religious of the Congregation, our cloistered Nuns, the various Congregations sharing in the charism of St. Paul of the Cross and all the lay men and women of our Passionist Family.

The choirs of angels singing the glory of God to the shepherds below have not deterred us from sensing the reality of the Mystery that was manifested in Bethlehem through clear and unmistakable signs, a message showing the love God has for us all. The "sign" given the shepherds that they may recognize Him is a Child in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. The newborn king, the Son of David, the longed-awaited Messiah, is born in a place of abject poverty, an animal shelter, accompanied solely by Mary his mother and St. Joseph. The first to hear of his birth are that group of shepherds guarding their flock, people who, as we are told by exegetes and historians, were in those days looked upon as the lowest and most despised of society. The high priest and those who purport to "know" all about God and the political powers are nowhere to be seen.

Jesus is born in all simplicity and, within the context of his time, in Bethlehem. The historical occasion allowing the fulfillment of Micah's prophesy (Mi 5:1) was Caesar Augustus' decree ordering a census, at the time when Palestine, a Roman province, was under the governor of the region, Quirinius.

In order to comply with the order of the census, belonging as he did to the house and family of David, Joseph, who lived in Nazareth, set out for Bethlehem in the company of Mary who was about to give birth. That moment arrived once they reached their destination, and Mary gave birth to her firstborn son (Lk. 2: 6-7).

"And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us (Jn. 1: 14): this is the moment when Jesus is rooted, grafted into the history of his people, "born of a woman, under the law" (Gal 4: 4), sent by the Father with a precise mission: "For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord" (Lk 2: 11) the angel informs the shepherds. His mission is to save humanity and it is for this he has become incarnate, it is for this that he is born, and he'll fulfill this mission even at the price of shedding his blood and laying down his life.

Mary for her part not only carries him in her womb and feeds the Son of God at her breast, but she also shares in his mission as was prophesied by old Simeon when

Jesus was presented in the temple: "*and you yourself a sword will pierce*" (Lk 2:35). If Jesus is to be a "sign of contradiction," as will be apparent in the angry questioning, his rejection by the very people he has come to save, then Mary is also to share in her son's painful mission. Here too Mary appears to us as a mother, but above all as the "believer" who "listens to the Word of God and then puts it into practice," to whom is reserved a road in darkness, marked by suffering and sorrow.

Whoever believes in and loves God becomes part of his Mission, and if God looks for him, he allows himself to be found and accepts him even though he may not know the details, like Mary.

And we Passionists too, religious and laity alike, each one according to his/her proper condition, are challenged and called to participate in the mission awaiting the Church, which carries on Jesus' mission in the midst of history and the realities of our world. (Cf Acts 1: 10-11).

In this year 2012 which has only just started, among its various events, our Congregation will be celebrating another General Chapter. This will be for us a special "day" of God's which won't simply designate a mere chronological happening but an opportunity offered to us, if we live it with faith, with a special salvific presence of Jesus.

During this time God will manifest in a special way his will, he'll let his voice be heard, he'll show us the road we're to follow and, if we're capable of undertaking an "exodus" like that of the people of Israel as they fled Egypt, he will fulfill his promise of salvation.

Therefore in this context of faith and rooted in the realities of the world and the historical moment in which we are living as a Congregation, I hereby, convoke on this 6th day of January 2012 with great hope and in accordance with #76 of our General Regulations, the 46th General Chapter of our Congregation. This will be celebrated in Rome, at the Retreat of Saints John and Paul, and will start on Sunday September 9th and close on Sunday October 7th.

I would remind you of what our Constitutions stipulate: "*The General Chapter is the supreme authority in the Congregation...*" (#126), and #127 adds: "*The General Chapter meets to carry out the task of making laws and holding elections. It has to promote the faithfulness of the Congregation to the ideals of community and service to the Church. Its primary responsibilities, therefore, are as follows:*

a) *to discern the workings of the Holy Spirit in the events of life, and thus to be a powerful force in the task of continual adaptation and renewal;*

b) *to nourish the growth and development of the authentic Passionist spirit, so that it will be manifestly embodied in every member of the Congregation, no matter where he lives;*

c) *to consider closely the state of the Congregation, and to clarify its common goals of community life and apostolic activity;*

d) *to foster solidarity, and to maintain unity without insisting on uniformity;*

e) *to evaluate how the General Government has operated, and the extent to which the planning of the previous Chapter and of the General Synods has been implemented. It will avoid, however, specifying administrative procedures that depend on the Superior General and his staff;*

f) to elect the Superior General and his Council.

The Congregation, through those religious who take part in the Chapter, must carry out the tasks mentioned above in the Constitutions at #127 as "primary responsibilities": a) *discern the signs of the times and live dynamically the task of continual adaptation and renewal*; then there are those adjectives: "*powerful*" and "*continual*"; everything is illuminated as we recognize it as a manifestation of the Spirit, as a request on God's part which demands we carry out his will through what he has communicated to us through the language of the "signs of the time."

In the Gospel Jesus reprimands his contemporaries calling them in no uncertain terms "hypocrites," since they were incapable of or refused to read the signs of the times which clearly revealed the presence of the Kingdom of God in their midst. Recognizing the signs of the times is an act of faith. Jesus accuses them of being blind, and he likewise rebukes all those who live closed-up in their own certitudes and expectations, failing to realize that in the time in which they live something hugely important is happening. Don't you realize, says Jesus, that it's now the time to change your life, to make some firm decisions; a time for conversion, changing the way we see the things? You are capable of predicting tomorrow's weather, so why can't you understand what is happening this day? (Cf Lk 12: 56).

Another task requested of the Chapter, again in #127 letters b) and c) is that of promoting the "authentic" Passionist spirit so it can be manifest and made evident in one's personal behavior, in our community life and in mission. The Constitutions speak of promoting our "authentic character" which makes us recognizable as consecrated persons who maintain at the center of our lives and mission the Passion of Jesus and have hearts and eyes which allow us to read, as did St. Paul of the Cross, the name of Jesus written on the foreheads of the poor.

The Paschal Mystery is the fulfillment of the mission of Jesus, his unlimited gift; anyone who is enclosed in his own selfishness has no heart that can feel for the suffering of others, nor eyes to see their poverty, nor ears to hear their lamentations.

Yet another task set for the Chapter is to verify the state of the Congregation and plan common goals and the means to carry out what is necessary to improve community life, and the apostolic activity which will be its fruit.

To attain to this objective and acquire a new vitality and a second youth for our religious Family, we placed at the center of the project for the present life of the Congregation now and during the years to come, what is stipulated in #127 of our Constitutions under d): *to foster solidarity, and to maintain unity without insisting on uniformity.*

This point d) of our Constitutions is at the heart of the moment in history we are living today as a Congregation, with the Restructuring Process which began at the 2004 Synod.

This long road of eight years which has seen the involvement of religious both at a personal and a community level, as well as Provincial Councils and the celebration of various events of the Congregation, such as three General Synods (2004, 2008 and

2010) and the 2006 General Chapter, prompt us to look ahead with faith and trust to the coming General Chapter of 2012.

With faith, because we have agreed to carry out a restructuring process as a response to God's call; with trust because the instrument which, through careful discernment we had decided upon in order to revitalize the Congregation, both in our community lives as well as in our Mission, is none other than "Solidarity" which we must promote not only as a good idea or as a promise, as praiseworthy as it may be, but by effectively carrying it out at a structural level in order to make it possible and concrete, especially in the three areas of Formation, Personnel and financial resources. Without institutional instruments, effectively carrying out solidarity would continue to be a matter of wishful thinking or devout exhortations.

I am certain that putting solidarity into practice will solidify the unity among the various parts of the Congregation within each of the Configurations and within the Congregation as a whole. This decision will allow us to overcome the present excessive fragmentation into Provinces, Vice-Provinces and Vicariates which is giving rise to significant problems, be it at the level of local government or of community life and ministry, caused by the paucity of religious in the historical areas of the Congregation or by problems connected with growth and a limited capacity for autonomy and formation in the newer zones of the Congregation. Sharing one's own gifts and differences enhances the vitality and operational capacity of the entire organism.

However, the process even at the level of structural reform that endeavors to make the Configurations into a single entity, in accordance with what is envisioned in #104 of our Constitutions permitting the union and the modification of the Provinces, cannot be carried out in a uniform way, but will be done following a criterion of flexibility, always respecting diverse realities, cultures and languages, something which requires a longer time frame in order to mature or a slower process.

Letter d) of #127 of our Constitutions which was formulated at the 1982 General Chapter more than 25 years ago, states: "*to foster solidarity, and to maintain unity without insisting on uniformity*" is truly a crucial and prophetic point for the objectives which the Congregation has set for itself through the Restructuring Process that was started at the Synod of 2004!

Letters e) and f) of #127, apart from requiring the Chapter to evaluate the work of the General Government and to elect a new Superior General and his Council, confirm the tasks mentioned above.

In fact, they require the Chapter to verify the implementation of the programs approved by the preceding General Chapter and previous synods which were centered on the objective of carrying out the Restructuring of the Congregation. And this is a task to which we are called and which we can neither elude nor lay aside for another day.

Therefore, in total harmony with our Constitutions and the tasks that were entrusted to us by the last General Chapter (2006) and the two Synods of 2008 and 2010, our coming General Chapter will have as its core theme the Restructuring of the Congregation.

During the course of the Chapter we shall evaluate the road we have traveled in the various Configurations, the situation in each of them and the objectives we shall aim to attain, so as to be able to make concrete decisions, indicating the modalities and the suitable stages in which they should be carried out.

During our preparations for the General Chapter and throughout its celebration we should be comforted by the happy coincidence with events the Church will be celebrating during this year of 2012, and we should read this not as mere happenstance but as a "sign of the times" and as an "inspiration".

October 11th 2012 will mark the beginning of the "Year of Faith" established by Benedict XVI in his Apostolic Letter (Motu Proprio) titled "Porta Fidei"; also October 7th 2012, the very day our Chapter closes, will be the one on which the Synod of Bishops will start its sessions (October 7th - 28th), having as its theme "The New Evangelization for the transmission of the Christian faith."

Here we have two themes with which to be inspired, two poles which should be points of reference on our journey as a Congregation, even during the General Chapter; these may be taken as the luminous cloud which went ahead of the people of Israel in the desert as they made their way to the Promised Land. These are two events which accompany us and which assure us we're not alone on the road but are rather part of the flow of life and grace of the Church. These call us to a greater faith and to live our duty to evangelize with a renewed spirit, and they are an assurance for us that the presence of God in our midst is constant, notwithstanding our poverty and sin.

In "Porta Fidei" (The Door of Faith) we are reminded of the need to rediscover the road of faith so as to make ever more evident the joy and enthusiasm to be found in an encounter with Christ. In this perspective there's an invitation to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one and only Savior of the world. And a rediscovery of faith should not be understood in a generic or exclusively personal way but also with a community dimension, leading us to discover it anew in the choices and events we are living through in the Congregation.

Faith which becomes effective through charity (Cf Gal. 5: 6) becomes a new criterion for action which changes a person's life. Looked at this way, the solidarity we are trying to bring about within the Congregation becomes a new way of relating with each other in faith so as to give greater vitality to our mission.

The theme of the coming Synod of Bishops, "New Evangelization," is an occasion for the Church to reflect on itself and it is an invitation to open our hearts and eyes to the present realities in the world of today and to the capacity to animate others in the present mode of evangelizing. And even though this New Evangelization is principally directed toward those who have distanced themselves from the Church in the historically Christian countries, this phenomenon unfortunately also exists to a greater or lesser degree where the Good News was first proclaimed in more recent centuries yet has not so far been heeded to the point of transforming the personal, family and social lives of Christians.

Hence the universal Church is faced with a challenge which involves us all, and in every country where we are present. The historical moment we are living through as a

Congregation and the proximity of the General Chapter constitute a fit occasion to inject something "new" into our mission and to our way of relating to each other which can thus become a vehicle and an instrument to achieve new modalities and expressions of our consecrated life. We may well discover a new enthusiasm and new ideas in forming new families and entities, in the conviction that life is a gift to be shared.

This is a challenge, like that faced by the scribe in the Gospel who became a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven, to take out new and old things from the precious treasure of Tradition and the various situations found in the contemporary history of our Congregation, in consecrated life in general, in the Church and in the world itself. This is an invitation to live the time that lies before us as we await the Chapter and prepare for it in spiritual and emotional harmony, in line with the words of a poet: "There's something new under the sun today, as well as something old."

And Jesus is the one *"who is and who was and who is to come"*! (Rev 4: 8)

Dear brothers and sisters of the Passionist Family, in preparation for the General Chapter of the Congregation I would like to call upon you to offer special prayers for a successful outcome of the same, starting 6 months before it convenes, that is on April 9th . The Liturgical Commission will soon send out the proper prayer to you all.

On an enclosed sheet, which forms part of this letter, by way of a memorandum, you will find those numbers in our Constitutions and General Regulations which refer to the General Chapter and the preparation for the same. Likewise you will find there the norms regarding participation in the Chapter which were approved by our last General Chapter in Rome in 2006.

The names of the delegates elected in accordance with the new norms and with what I wrote in my letter of September 24th last must be sent in to the General Secretariat as soon as possible and certainly not later than March 11th next, in order that we may send them all the necessary documentation and information.

I might also add that apart from the above-mentioned Liturgical Commission, a number of other commissions have been formed which will be able to help us in our work in preparation for the Chapter and others for carrying out the activities of the Chapter itself. These are: The Chapter Preparatory Commission; the Logistics Commission; the Commission for Communications; the Commission to study certain juridical aspects; the Formation Commission, and the Trilateral Commission which will study the issues that may arise between Vicariates and their mother Provinces.

So brothers, let's prepare ourselves and await the Chapter in a spirit of trust. Let us put the Congregation and the Passionist Family under the protection of Mary and Joseph, who, as the Holy Family, lived with Jesus in Nazareth. *"Nothing is impossible to God!"* the archangel Gabriel said to Mary at the Annunciation, and we firmly believe this. And we are also certain that God will be with us on our life's journey and in the course of our preparation for and celebration of the 2012 General Chapter.

My fraternal greetings to all our religious, especially those who are sick, and also those experiencing difficulties or perhaps feel themselves marginalized; a hearty en-

couragement to our younger men with an invitation to have high aspirations and preserve the ideals of their consecrated lives as a mission, avoiding being impeded by a worldly mentality or by whatever they may experience as contradictory around them. Let them be faithful in their love for their vocation: it really is worthwhile to offer one's life to God and for one's brethren. A special greeting for the Nuns and religious Sisters as well as the lay men and women of our Passionist Family: may the good Lord sustain them and grant them a good future, a blessed life, employment and peace within every family.

May St. Paul of the Cross, our Father, bless us all and give us light and courage as we seek the right decisions and orientation in order to improve the efficacy of our mission as religious and laity in the world.

Rome, January 6th January, 2012
Feast of the Epiphany.
Retreat of Saints John and Paul.

Fr. Ottaviano D'Egidio
Superior General CP