

# Opening Address 47<sup>th</sup> General Chapter: “Renewing our mission- Gratitude, Prophecy and Hope” Chris Monaghan CP

## Introduction

Thank you, my brothers, for this unexpected honour of being invited to deliver the opening address for this Chapter. Like Peter in Acts 3:6 I can say to you: “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you.”

Look around you, what do you see? You see your brothers, between us there are hundreds of years of lived experience of Passionist life and our communities. Each of your brothers comes with hopes and dreams, fears and expectations, joys and sorrows, as we gather for this General Chapter - a moment that invites us to live in gratitude, prophecy and hope.

Paul of the Cross could never have imagined that his small group of companions would one day be at home in the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin and North-America, even my own island continent Australia.

You are all here because you are trusted by your Province, configuration, and your communities, trusted to represent them in the challenges of the present moment, to gently carry and honour what is precious from our past, and to be open to the future that beckons us, as it always does, to have faith, hope and love, courage and trust.

In the book of Deuteronomy 30:19 Moses challenges his contemporaries saying to them: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

After forty years of desert wandering they had learned much along the way about God, and about themselves. They had learned not only about God’s faithfulness, but the consequences of their not responding with courage and faith when faced with the opportunity to set a course for the future by entering the land of promise. Every Chapter has this unique opportunity and responsibility to choose life for ourselves and those we serve, to set our course as a congregation for the next six years.

*One ship sails East,  
And another West,  
By the self-same winds that blow,  
'Tis the set of the sails  
And not the gales,  
That tells the way we go.*

*Like the winds of the sea  
Are the waves of time,  
As we journey along through life,  
'Tis the set of the soul,*

*That determines the goal,  
And not the calm or the strife.*

*Ella Wheeler Wilcox*

The life of St Paul of the Cross was accompanied by many challenges and on a number of occasions he gave voice to his unshakeable confidence in the Crucified one who was the source of his hope and courage, the one who set the course and sails for his life and for our Congregation. He wrote to Fr Erasmus Tuccinardi 7 Sept 1729

*What does it matter if your soul is afflicted or that everything is in a storm? Your ship will never be wrecked. Do not lose confidence in the Great Pilot, who is guiding it into port. May our rest be in great suffering. He who is transformed into Jesus through love does not find a place to rest except on the precious cross. O dear Cross, dear Cross, Holy Cross! when will I glory in nothing but you, most Holy Cross? "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

As we reflect on nearly three hundred years as a Congregation, and take up the challenge of setting goals and discerning the course that lies ahead of us, we can take heart as long as we plot our course and set our sails with our focus on the Great Pilot – the Crucified one.

#### **a) The Gospel of Matthew as a source of wisdom**

I was fascinated that the Chapter preparatory committee chose the uniquely Matthean parable of the Treasure Hidden in the Field as an orientation for the work of the Chapter. The more I pondered on this text the more it seemed appropriate to draw on the riches of this Gospel as a means of beginning our labours together.

*The Matthean context – a community in time of transition like ourselves*

Like ourselves Matthew's community found itself in a time of transition - with all the debates, fears and expectations and excitement that accompany such times. It was a time where they sought to be faithful to their Christian identity and mission embedded in Judaism with its practices and traditions. On the other hand, they knew that the message they had been gifted with could not be constrained by the Jewish tradition that had shaped them. A larger world beckoned and the Risen Lord called them to enter into this new world as disciples of the Kingdom.

Matthew's community were invited to hold diverse ecclesiologies, spiritualities, cultures and religious perspectives in a dynamic and creative tension.

- The earliest stage of the development of the community was that of a group of Christian Jews in Syria before the 66-70 CE war very much at ease with their Jewish tradition lived in the context of the synagogue.
- Before the war missionary-prophets of the Q tradition came to this community preaching a radical version of Jesus' teaching proclaiming Jesus as the Son of Man and him as God's last and definitive word before the coming of the final judgement. These two streams of tradition enriched each other.

- These two groups who believed Jesus to be the Messiah were gradually excluded after disputes with other Jews about whether Jesus could be the Messiah and Matthew's community became increasingly isolated.
- After the war Judaism reformed and tensions increased so that Matthew's community experienced increasing degrees of tension with other Jews.
- Sometime after 70CE Mark's Gospel written for Gentile Christians makes its way to Antioch and Matthew's community incorporate it and soften its Gentile focus and harsh judgements about Judaism.
- Mark's emphases on Jesus as the miracle worker, the crucified and risen one, and his preaching in Gentile territory now becomes part of Matthew's community and their telling the story of Jesus.

Matthew's genius lay in bringing together these different and sometimes competing voices in such a way that no one voice was lost so that new and vibrant harmonies were created.

Like Jesus' own genealogy Matthew's community, consistent with the Church in any age, was made up of saints and sinners, weeds and wheat (Matt 13:24-30) capable of courage and deceit, faith and failure, whose love can run cold (Matt 24:12) but who can rejoice because they have been invited to share in the unfolding mystery of the Kingdom (Matt 13:11). They have found the pearl of great price (Matt 13:46) but will they use the talents they have been given (Matt 25:24-25), or will they be seduced by arguing about who is the greatest (Matt 18:4), will they build three tents on Tabor (Matt 17:4) or accept the invitation to follow Jesus to Calvary and beyond?

It is not difficult to draw the parallels between our situation and that of Matthew's community. As we come to this Chapter we acknowledge that we come with interests and points of view that sometimes will converge, and sometimes compete. Are we prepared to listen to the invitations of the Spirit that come to us from our brothers in the midst of our human frailty and diverse points of view? Are we prepared to let all the voices among us be heard, to freely acknowledge our own agendas and interests, and yet be open to those of our brothers and sisters in our wider Passionist family? The success of the Chapter relies on our individual and collective capacity to listen, to learn, and to grow together.

#### *Matthew's parables as a source of challenge and orientation for the work of the Chapter*

The Chapter Preparatory committee used the parable of the Treasure in the Field taken from Matthew's Gospel as an invitation into the work of the chapter. Upon reflection it struck me that it would be useful to look more closely to Matthew's parables, and particularly those of Chapter 13 as an orientation into some of the challenges that lie before us as our Chapter begins.

#### *Challenge One: New wine needs new wineskins*

*Matt 9:16 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made.*

*Matt 9:17 Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."*

This particular parable of Jesus painfully highlights the difficulty and danger of trying to hold the old and new together without due consideration. The parable begins with a garment in need of repair. What becomes clear is that a new patch should not be joined to an old garment - it will simply make matters worse. New wine is best suited to fresh wineskins, in this way both the new wine and the new wineskins will be preserved. While this parable is often interpreted as being an indicator that Matthew is pleading with his community to try and hold together both old and new forms of Christian life this particular parable issues us a challenge that is clear. New cloth on old damaged garments is a formula for disaster, and new wine in old wineskins will fare no better.

How can we apply such a parable in the present moment of our history? To my mind it is a powerful reminder that sometimes, as much as we value our traditions, you must let new initiatives and ventures be tried without stifling them by forcing them to do what we have always done, in ways that we have always done them, thereby unwittingly compromising them. We know that the first five years of ordination are a time of particular risk and we grieve when we lose young men we have mentored, educated and welcomed into our communities. But have we treated them like new patches to repair the old garments of established communities, structures and provinces? Have we just expected them to fill the gaps, to mend our old garments and ministries without letting them use their gifts in the ways that only they can do? Have we allowed them to be new wine giving them the possibility and encouragement to be different, to try new ways, or old ministries in new ways? There is a clear invitation to let the new wine be what it is without forcing it to become what it is not and can never be.

*Challenge Two: Matt 13:1-9 Living with mixed results - The parable of the sower*

This parable is so familiar to us that we run the danger of not really listening to it with fresh ears and open hearts. It is a parable of extraordinary and luminous hope in the rich harvest that must come when we allow the word of the kingdom to be planted in our hearts bringing forth a hundredfold, sixtyfold or thirtyfold. At the same time, it is a parable that is fully aware of all that endangers the growth of the kingdom in our midst when it is sown on the path, on rocky ground, or among thorns. We know all too well about the ways in which the growth of the seed can be hampered and frustrated in our lives as individuals and in our communities. The first danger is not understanding. The Greek verb **συνίημι** describes having an intelligent grasp of something that challenges our thinking or practice. Are we open to being challenged in this way by our modern world, the challenges of this moment, of our various cultures and context - entering deeply into its joys and sorrows, its concerns and challenges, or will we retreat into what we know and are familiar with, not seeing the opportunity to go deeper? There have been repeated calls for a new Evangelisation but that does not simply mean repeating what has been said before without listening deeply to the present moment and understanding its opportunities and its dangers.

The world in which the message of the cross is to be preached today is a globalized world, that promises so much, and yet gives so little.

*Const 3 3. We are aware that the Passion of Christ continues in this world until He comes in glory; therefore, we share in the joys and sorrows of our contemporaries as*

*we journey through life toward our Father. We wish to share in the distress of all, especially those who are poor and neglected; we seek to offer them comfort and to relieve the burden of their sorrow. The power of the Cross, which is the wisdom of God, gives us strength to discern and remove the causes of human suffering.*

*Challenge Three: Being honest about who we are - The Parable of the weeds and the wheat*

This parable is unique to the Gospel of Matthew and it reveals how much this community of Christians in the mid-eighties had learned about the persistence of hope and about dealing with imperfection and struggle. The Matthean community listened again to this powerful parable of Jesus informed by their experience of the co-existence of good and evil, and the challenge that poses for the individual and the community. In this subtle parable weeds and wheat must co-exist and grow side by side until the harvest. How true is this of each one of us, our communities, provinces and configurations? When we look into our hearts and our Christian lives with honesty we know that for all our dreams of giving ourselves totally as disciples and apostolic communities the realities of human frailty must be acknowledged and confronted. The Dominican Master General Timothy Radcliffe wrote of a young Dominican who entered the novitiate with such high hopes and ideals only to be bitterly disappointed by the all too evident frailty and human weakness of his confreres and the senior community members. When he spoke to his Novice Master about this his Novice Master smiled and replied: "Now that you know us, you must learn to love us!"

Whatever plans we make in this General Chapter, whatever directions we set, this parable reminds us we cannot eliminate human frailty in ourselves and others. This should not discourage us so much as invite us to recognize our limitations so as to live with them creatively, knowing that it has always been this way and always will.

*Constitutions 2 We come together therefore in apostolic communities so that we can fulfill this mission of ours by working for the coming of God's Kingdom.*

*Confident that God will help us to overcome our human limitations, we are determined to remain faithful to the patrimony and evangelical spirit of our Founder.*

There is also a subtle reminder about how easily confused weeds and wheat can be since they look similar and can be intertwined. When applied to a moment such as a General Chapter it provides a word of caution. What sounds like wise advice in the process of discernment may be fear to try something new, what looks like prudence may really be simply be resistance when we are not willing to change our opinion or risk something new. What looks like a weed that bothers us may be wheat that God is inviting us to nurture and tend carefully. Sometimes our attitudes and prejudices can falsely identify weeds into wheat and God's wheat that is struggling to grow into weeds because we did not see, judge and act as we are called to. Sometimes we have left our ships in the safety of the harbor when they were called to put out into the deep.

As we look back over nearly three hundred years we know that weeds and wheat are both part of our Passionist history – there have been stories of extraordinary faith, devotion and holiness, and there have been stories of sinful failure, selfishness and abuse where our limitations are painfully obvious. There have been opportunities bravely taken, and other that have sadly that passed us by. As we begin this Chapter this parable provides a profound challenge to journey in hope in the

midst of all that we are. To deeply listen and discern the call of the Spirit in these precious days together.

*Challenge Four: Being prepared to start by planting seeds- Parable of the mustard seed*

It is no accident that Matthew follows the parable of the weeds and the wheat with the parable of the mustard seed. Knowing that his community of disciples were likely to be discouraged by the exercise of looking at themselves in the mirror they are called to hope, as we are, As every General chapter must. The seeds we plant might be small but they must be planted nonetheless. We have no guarantee that what we plant will grow as we desire.

*Const 8*

*Together we share the same hope: that we shall contact in our lives the living God who draws us to Himself. We want our journey through life to proclaim that hope to all.*

There is a prayer attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero that expresses it well:

That is what we are about.  
We plant a seed that will one day grow.  
We water seeds already planted,  
knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations  
that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces effects  
far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,  
and there is a sense of liberation  
in realising that.  
This enables us to do something,  
and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete,  
but it is a beginning,  
a step along the way,  
an opportunity for the Lord's grace  
to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,  
but that is the difference  
between the master builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders,  
ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

*Challenge Five: Living in hope - The Parable of the Leaven*

*Matt 13:33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."*

This parable is as short as it is powerful. It too is an invitation to hope, courage and the work of Evangelisation. It is the nature of leaven that it must be worked into the dough and it must be given time to do its work, in hidden ways, having an impact in ways we do not always understand and expect.

An example of the first mission of Passionists to the indigenous people of Australia from 1843-1847 provides but one example. Archbishop Polding and one Swiss Passionist, Fr Joseph Snell, arrived on Stradbroke island on May 18, 1843, quickly followed by Passionist priests Fr Raimondo Vaccari of Rome, Fr Luigi Pesciaroli of Canepina, and Maurizio Lencioni of Lucca. Three of the four priests spent around three years on the island trying to convert the Aboriginal people to Christianity by way of Catechesis. They even tried taking the children away from the parents – with the Aboriginal people’s consent – and sent them to Sydney to receive an education from a convent of nuns. By 1846, the priests had no success at all in converting any members of the Aboriginal tribes, so three of the priests left the mission. Fr Vaccari remained on the island, but eventually left in 1847. The failure of the mission was not the end of our Passionist presence but its beginning.

While Church historians claim the mission was an absolute failure, 175 years later, the Passionist’s landing on Stradbroke Island is, incredibly, still celebrated by the remaining Aboriginal people who did not forget the love and faith of our brothers whose story was woven into theirs. The leaven did its work in ways that the original missionaries could never have imagined.

*Const 6 “Then, as we relive the memory of the Passion of Christ today, our communities become a leaven of salvation in the Church and in the world.”*

#### *Challenge Six: Recognising treasures when you see them – The Parables of the Pearl of Great Price and the Treasure in the Field*

The Chapter Preparatory commission has already attended to these parables and they are reminders of the call to be attentive and discerning in order to discover what is precious and having the courage and faith to give all that we have as disciples.

*Const 20 As followers of Christ we too accept our roles in this plan. Alert to hear the Father's voice and to do His will, we try daily to ascertain His loving purpose in an attentive and loving search. Day by day, we confront our lives with the Gospel values and the example of Christ, ponder the events of life so as to discern "the signs of the times," and endeavor to fulfill our mission by living these constitutions under lawful authority.*

#### *Challenge Seven: The ability to discern what we need to let go of – The Parable of the Dragnet*

Matt 13:47 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind;

Matt 13:48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

Matt 13:49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous

The Parable of the weeds and the wheat invite us to reflect on ourselves as both saints and sinners and acknowledge that reality but Matthew's Gospel has more to offer us and that is that discernment and decision making belongs to the present moment too. It is true that the angels will separate the good from the righteous but the fishermen have already done their part and so must we. What to hold on to and what to let go of? These are the challenges that lie before us in this and every General Chapter.

*Challenge Eight: Holding old and new together - Parable of the Christian Scribe*

Matt 13:52 And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

As much as the Matthean community wanted to honor their rich Jewish tradition and practices they knew that could not stay as they had been. A new mission and a bigger world beckoned them to put out into the deep in trust and engage in the work of bringing the message of Jesus to new cultures in new ways. Gentile Christians could not be expected to take on all that Judaism demanded, and they were surprised by the gifts and treasures that these new members brought to the community.

Our rich Passionist tradition has treasures to offer us in the present moment, but there are treasures that the present moment offers that are yet to be embedded and woven into our story as we listen to each other's stories, struggles, cultures and experience. If the passing of the years has taught us anything it is that there is not one way of being faithful to our Passionist tradition, but many.

#### **b) The call to be Chapter to be prophetic**

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the nature of prophecy as it was experienced in Israel. The ministry of prophecy within Israel was a rich and varied one and that provides an initial warning to us in terms of not presuming that we will all be focussed on the same elements and dimensions if we describe our mission as Passionists as prophetic.

The very themes of the Chapter called to being prophetic and concerned with hope point to a tension within the prophetic experience within the Judeo-Christian tradition. There were two enduring prophetic modes. The first mode was that of the voice that challenges and calls us to account, a voice of lament and judgment that is particularly concerned to unveil hypocrisy, self-seeking and complacency. It is the voice that holds a mirror up to us and discomforts us confronting us with our sinfulness, reminding us of our unfaithfulness, forgetfulness and lack of love for God and others.

The second mode, just as important, is the voice of comfort that comes when everything has fallen to pieces, when disasters and destruction have broken our spirits and robbed us of hope, when all

seems lost, and God seems distant and uncaring. In those moments of exile and discouragement the prophet calls out – no, you are not lost, you are not alone, you are not forgotten.

Within our own Passionist tradition both these elements are to be found as complementary elements of our charism that both challenges and comforts at the same time.

### *Prophets in the Old Testament*

Two essential characteristics of prophecy in Israel were the experience of being called by God, and the necessity of proclaiming that word to one's contemporaries in order to reimagine the world.

As Walter Brueggemann describes it:

*“The prophets are immersed in public crises but are not primarily political agents or social activists. The poetic language of the prophet is intended to disrupt, destabilize and invite to alternative perceptions. Most often the language of the prophet is calling the people outside of the administered theology of royal policy and royal imagination.”*

There is an uneasy, creative and sometime dangerous tension between prophets and the institutions they challenged, comforted, encouraged, and sometimes condemned. Jeremiah will delight in the religious reform of the young king Josiah, but Amos will be clearly warned that his life is in danger when he speaks an unwelcome word in the King's sanctuary and dares to challenge the King's authority.

The vulnerable position of the prophet requires patience, courage, persistence, gentleness and profound trust. The only power is God's word, the prophet has no guarantee that the word they proclaim will be heard, that they will be safe, that the people will respond, that the world will change, or that disaster's they predict will be avoided.

The prophet is no bystander - they must experience from the inside the consequences of proclaiming the word of God. They were always vulnerable in calling behaviours, patterns of thought or institutions to account. Elijah will flee for his life from the hatred of Queen Jezebel; Ezekiel and Isaiah will have to share in the experience of exile and in the hope of return and the task of rebuilding; Jeremiah will be thrown into a cistern up to his neck in mud and be taken as a hostage towards Egypt after a political assassination. Sometimes the prophet knows the meaning of the dangerous and unsettling acts God has asked them to perform. At other times the meaning is only made clear afterwards and they, like us are called to patient endurance.

### *Prophecy in the New Testament*

The ministry of the prophet is one that is vulnerable and it is a mission that is linked to the possibility, and indeed likelihood, of rejection and suffering because of the radical and unsettling nature of the message that is preached. It is not only Jesus who is rejected by his own country and own people (Mark 6:4), who travels to Jerusalem to die as a prophet (Luke 13:33). Those who preach the message of the kingdom as Christian prophets also risk being killed, crucified, flogged and pursued (Matt 5:12; 23:34).

In the New Testament prophecy is always exercised within a community context. It is a gift among other gifts and it is a ministry within a community (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11), and it is not given to all (1 Cor 12:29). While the word of the prophet is valued it needs to be tested, weighed and considered by other prophets within the community (1 Cor 14:29). The New Testament communities were aware, as were their Old Testament counterparts and forebears, that there was always the danger of a prophecy that is false and accommodating (2 Pet 2:1), or when the prophet claims wrongly to know more about the unfolding of God's plan and Jesus' return than they do (Matt 24:23-4). Ultimately, and most importantly, it is Paul who reminds us that prophecy that is not based on love is worthless, and no more than a cymbal clashing or a gong booming (1 Cor 13:2).

### **c) A charism-based plan for the future**

It is not my task to tell you what you already know or remind you of the many reports that you have all read and pondered as you have prepared for the Chapter. Nor is it for me to take you through our Constitutions – you know these fundamental and beautifully powerful texts better than I do. What I would like to reflect with you on is what a Congregational plan might look like if it based on our Charism.

At the heart of our charism is the call to keep alive the memory of the Passion.

*In Const 6: "we bind ourselves to keep alive the memory of the Passion of Christ. By word and deed, we strive to foster awareness of its meaning and value for each person and for the life of the world."*

*Const 2 "to preach the Gospel of the Passion by our life and apostolate."*

A charism-based plan has to my mind a number of characteristics that are self-evident in many ways but need to be stated nonetheless. At the heart of our charism is a message of vulnerable love, a love prepared to suffer for the sake of others, a love that gives life and exercises power through loving service. Michael Gorman has written extensively on the letters of the Apostle Paul and it is his contention that the hymn of Philippians 2:6-11, such a foundational part of our daily prayer as Passionists, brings us to the heart of the Pauline message, one that he calls "Cruciformity."

Conformed to the Crucified one how can we not share in the joys and sorrows of our contemporaries, or not hear their cries and share in their longing for justice, peace and dignity? As Archbishop Romero so beautifully expressed it: "There are many things that can only be seen through the eyes that have cried." Put in the words of our Constitutions 9: "If the message of the Cross has not first penetrated our own lives, we ought not presume to proclaim it to others."

As Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium* 24.

*"An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others."*

Etty Hillesum was a young Jewish woman who lived in Nazi occupied Amsterdam in the 1940s and died in the Auschwitz Concentration camp in 1943. In the midst of the horror of those dark days she wrote:

*"At night, as I lie in the camp on my plank bed, surrounded by women and girls...dreaming aloud, quietly sobbing and tossing and turning, I am sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness. And I lie awake for hours, letting the impressions of a much-too-long day wash over me. And I pray, "Let me, oh Lord, be the thinking heart of these barracks." That's what I want to be.... The thinking heart of a whole concentration camp."*

Those who encountered her in those years described her comforting presence as 'luminous' and it seems to me that as we begin the work of this chapter begins we are all invited to be "thinking hearts" and so that whatever our plans and projects will be in the coming years they will be a source of gentle, healing and compassionate light for ourselves, the Church and the world.

#### **d) Conclusion**

Before us we have first century Roman lamp that has been my companion since my studies in Jerusalem in 1984. This lamp bears the signs of having been seared by the fires that were part of the brutality and horrors of Jerusalem's destruction in the year 70. It has not been used as a source of light since that time when it was covered by blood, rubble, stone and ash. It is time for its light to shine again. As Jesus said in Luke 11:33 "No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light."

May the Crucified one shine in our hearts providing us the light we need, so that we can be the light the world needs.