

OPENING OF THE VICARIATE CHAPTER

Martillac, 10 – 25 November 2014

Dear Sisters,

At the beginning of this Vicariate Chapter, I come to you with a mixture of feelings. On the one hand, I am deeply grateful to be here with you and to enter more fully into what is essential to your particular Vocation/Mission; on the other hand I feel a certain awe as I walk on “your holy ground” and I am wondering, “What can I say to this Assembly? Would it not be better to ask you what you yourselves would like to say?” Anyway, I want to assure you that I feel that I am a sister among sisters with a mind and heart that are open, above all, to listen and to welcome what the Lord wants to say to the whole Institute through you and especially what he wants to say to you today as Contemplative Sisters.

The aims of a Vicariate Chapter are very well expressed in your Particular Rules¹ and I think it is appropriate that we listen to them together at the beginning of this Chapter since the article also speaks of the climate (of discernment) that we should have. In article 226 we read: *THE VICARIATE CHAPTER is a collegial assembly of faith, communion and prayer. It discerns and makes decisions based on the Constitutions, the orientations of the General Chapter, the life of the communities and the directives of the Church, with a view to deepening the contemplative life and giving it a new impetus. It broadens the participation of the Sisters in the government of the Vicariate and strengthens their sense of belonging.*

I would like to comment on some of the points in this article:

It is a collegial assembly: that means that it is a space where you are all co-responsible for the Vicariate. Even though you have been elected by a community, nobody here represents her community. Each delegate has the responsibility of feeling and acting **in** and **for** the Vicariate as a whole. I suggest that you adopt the method which the Pope recommended to the participants of the Synod on the Family: “Speak clearly and frankly and listen with humility.” An assembly is collegial when all present can express themselves with complete freedom.

I also want to pause at this point: “*It ...makes decisions based on the Constitutions, the orientations of the General Chapter, the life of the communities and the directives of the Church*” so as to be able to put them into practice.² This is one of the functions of the Vicariate Chapter.

The Orientations of the General Chapter are for the whole Institute, and the calls and challenges are the same for both Vocations. This Chapter will have to discern how to put them into practice according to your own specific Vocation.

¹ Constitutions, arts. 226 and 228

² Idem, art. 228

Taking your inspiration from the Chapter documents, ask yourselves what are the key questions that you need to look at and what action you need to undertake in order to give an inspiring direction to the Vicariate for the next six years.

The Contemplative Group of the Holy Family is the depository of a rich tradition nourished and sustained up to the present day by people who have given of the best of themselves in order to live it and to transmit it faithfully. You are the permanent memory of the Miraculous Benediction for the Family of P. B. Noailles, and **in** and **on behalf of** the Family you constantly give thanks for this gift; you also assure intercessory prayer for the whole Family and for the world³. You are a group that points towards the unchangeable, the essential, the permanent... I thank you all for this.

However, your insistence on these permanent values cannot be an obstacle to or paralyse the constant discernment of your Vocation and the customs and forms that shape it. You must review these with great freedom of spirit in order to discern if they respond to the present time. The world of today presents us with a new reality and expects new responses in an understandable language. In this regard, we are all called to make a great effort to re-read the inheritance which we have received and to re-interpret it creatively so that it will have meaning in the new context of present-day society. This holds true for the reformulation of the texts of the Constitutions with their particular way of looking at the Charism, the mission, the vows, community, etc. I wonder if you have been doing this over the past few years? Starting from a process of reflection and from a new vision of an evolving universe, we have begun to take steps to translate the Charism, our mission, the vows, formation, leadership, the administration of goods, community life etc. into a new language so that they are more in keeping with contemporary culture and so that we are able to live and bear witness to the Charism we have received with more radicality and transparency.

I make my own the questions of a theologian who is also a Religious when he speaks about “The innovation and mission of consecrated life”. He says, *“The big question that we have to ask ourselves is: Do we prefer a consecrated life that is disconnected from the world, or one that is sent to this world and is desirous of being incarnated in it as Jesus was? In the transmission of our faith and in the witness that we give, do we want to use the language of the cultural and intellectual world of the people of today or do we want others to adapt to our language, to learn our way of looking at things and to enter into our conceptual world? Do we choose to go against the flow, to protest against things, to condemn and let nothing pass, afraid of any invention or innovation – or do we feel called to be inclusive, to facilitate the innovative trends of society and give them meaning?”*⁴

Permanent values never go out of date but we have to find appropriate ways of living them and transmitting them. When we hold on to tradition, to the way we always did things and do not discern what we are doing, we run the risk of becoming irrelevant and incapable of changing and of dialoguing with the men and women of today. We distance and separate ourselves from others and become incapable of discerning where the Spirit is at work and of announcing the God of Life.

³ Rules of the Solitary Sisters, 1854 no. 13

⁴ José Cristo Rey García Paredes, CMF. *“Innovation in the Religious Life: overcoming fear.* August 2014

There need not be a rupture between continuity and newness. In fact, it seems that such a rupture does not actually exist. Rather, what happens is that a continuity which is open to newness is set up between the two, or a newness appears which is in deep continuity with Tradition.⁵

The Pope said recently in an interview, “For me, the big revolution is to go the roots, to recognise them and to see what these roots have to say today [...] I can never move on in life if I don’t know where I have come from, if I do not know what cultural or religious name I have.”

The call of the Chapter to revitalise our roots – the Spirit of God Alone – encourages us to go in this direction and the “History of Holy Family Contemplative Life” which is about to be published is also a help to us to move forward in depth towards what we are called to be. Nevertheless, you will have to be careful that your insistence on your own specific identity does not create walls of separation between you and the other Vocations in the Family. We cannot be a real Family and respond to the common Mission without one another.

Our reason for being in the world and in the Church is to be A FAMILY on Mission where communion in the diversity of our Vocations is the specific GIFT which we have to offer by living it and sharing it. This is what makes our presence meaningful wherever we are and what can attract other people to live this dream of communion which has been with us since the very beginning of our Foundation.

In the exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (EG) and in our Corporate Commitment, we are called to live in a “a state of exodus” to go forth, to look outwards, in order to welcome others and offer them the gift of Communion with the urgency demanded by the present times. It will be by listening to the Spirit who speaks to us in the realities of today that we will hear the urgent calls to personal, community and Institute conversion. Let us not be afraid to listen because fear paralyses us and takes away our vitality. Let us, rather, contemplate the signs of the times “with a gaze of faith” and reflect on them, filtering them through our heart and taking the action that they call for.⁶

Is living “in a state of exodus” incompatible with your option for the contemplative life which refers you continually to Nazareth where they lived a life of silence and solitude hidden in God?⁷ How can you live this “going forth” without being distracted or superficial? “It does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world”.⁸ Nobody is in a better position than you to answer these questions that I am asking you today.

The spirituality of Nazareth refers us continually to everyday life, to the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. They were a family, among many, who lived for God Alone every day and in all circumstances loving God, seeking God and desiring God above all things.⁹

It is in the circumstances of everyday life that our human/spiritual journey as Sisters of the Holy Family will be tested. It will not be tested in our wonderful discourses or in our proclamations of faith but in everyday life, especially in our relationships and our goodness and compassion towards

⁵ Víctor Codina, “There was a Significant Vatican Council 50 Years Ago”. *Cristianisme i Justícia*. No. 182, p. 24

⁶ EG, 71

⁷ Constitutions, art. 161

⁸ EG, 46

⁹ The Spirit Proper to the Associates of the Holy Family.

others. Therefore, community is the place where we test our following of Jesus in the *Holy Family* and the giving of our lives.

“Let us not pay attention to words but to deeds...Let your tongue be quiet for a moment and look at life...for me it is not what is said that counts but how people live. It is deeds that speak. Why then do you look for words?”¹⁰

Speaking along the same lines, Pope Francis in a homily on the gospel of the day on October 14, asked, “Is our Christian life cosmetic and just for show or is it a life that is Christian because it acts in charity as a result of faith?”¹¹

We do not become a gospel community by our own efforts. It is our meeting with God (listening, silence, contemplation, interiority) that enables us to meet our Sisters just as they are and to welcome them as gift.¹²

I will end by looking again at the articles of the Constitutions with which I began. They state that the Vicariate Chapter also has the aim of promoting the deepening of the contemplative life, giving it a new impetus and taking decisions to ensure an always greater authenticity of life.¹³

If the calls of the Chapter and the Church touch you, it is certainly because the Spirit is stimulating the Church, the Institute, communities and people to move in that direction. We are invited to cooperate with the Spirit in the Spirit’s transforming action and to live this “going forth”, this “exodus” in the company of Jesus.¹⁴ If we are with him and in him we can expect life in abundance.

During these days especially, let us remain in a state of listening and be very attentive to his inspirations. Let us look more at the possibilities we have within our vulnerability than at our survival; then the Spirit will show us possible paths that will encourage contemplative life and give it a new impetus. If you do not dare now, then when? If you do not do it, then who will?

Let us be aware that we are accompanied by the members of the other Vocations and by the intercessory gaze of all those who have gone before us in the Family. Let us not be afraid!

¹⁰ St. Augustine – Commentary on the 1st Letter of St. John, III, 7-8

¹¹ Lk 11, 37-41

¹² EG, 130, 131

¹³ Constitutions arts. 226 and 228

¹⁴ EG, 23