

CONSTITUTIONS: Identity, memory and prophecy

Theological, historical and
charismatic comments

Claretian Missionary Sisters

What happens with us is an extraordinary thing that God wants....

(Letter of St. Anthony M. Claret to M. A. Paris 1/30/1862)

Our Lord is not asking for anything new in His Church, we are all only asked to fulfill our promises

(M. Antonia Paris PR.12)

General Presentation

The Constitutions enlighten and guide us in
Understanding what the Lord wants from us...
We must read them and reflect about them with a live faith,
Consoling hope and burning charity...
We will carefully keep them
To be faithful to the commitment
We made the day of our profession...

(Epilogue of the Constitutions.)

It is with great joy that I present you with the work *CONSTITUTIONS, Theological, Historical and Charismatic Commentary* that has been compiled with great attention, effort and love by some of our sisters. I am sure that its reading, study and prayer, personally as well as in community, will be a source of enrichment and renewal of our life and mission.

In *Prefectae Caritatis* the Church teaches us that **the ultimate rule in religious life is to follow Christ**. Canon 662 emphasizes that *this following must be exactly as proposed in the Scriptures and exactly as it is expressed in the constitutions of our Institute*. The Constitutions are a way of re-reading of the Scriptures carried out by the Founders as an answer to the enlightenment by the Holy Spirit. Our Foundress clearly expresses this particular awareness of obedience to the Holy Spirit in her letters: *Our Rules and Constitutions are the work of God, not a human invention, and as such we owe it respect... I have put nothing of my head; I have only been the meager and useless tool that the Lord has used...*

The Constitutions are a *written law*, but not in a rigid or absolute way in a piece of paper, but in the heart... The written rules represent the laws carved in the founders' heart first, and then in the heart of those that, having received the same God gift, are attracted to the *same charisma*.

The Constitutions are a permanent call to return to **the specific way of following Christ** that we must observe as Claretians and also a call to a permanent renewal, because the world changes and every generation has to match up their pathway to the Constitutions, embracing the spirit of the Founders in a new, original way.

This insightful work is the answer to the petition made to the Leadership Team, on the occasion of the Triennium of preparation for the 150th Anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation. The participation in this project of sisters from various parts of the world has made the timing longer, but the results were certainly worth waiting for. In the section,

“What are you going to find?” you’ll find the general content of *what* and *how* of the reflection made.

Taking into account the enormous significance that living the Constitutions has for each one of us, I hope that this book will be welcomed with the same enthusiasm, spirit of service and of help, as it has been put into it.

May Mary, the first and most faithful disciple of Christ, teach and accompany us in this following of Christ, and that the mystery of the Immaculate may drive us to fight evil in any of its manifestations and render us open to joy and hope.

Rome.

December 8, 2006

What are you going to find?

- A commentary regarding points of our Constitutions, from the Fundamental Constitution to the Apostolic Mission, applying them to Formation and relating them to other components of the Constitutions.
- A brief RENOVATED THEOLOGICAL, BIBLICAL, HISTORICAL, CONGREGATIONAL AND CHARISMATIC FOUNDATION of each one of the above mentioned aspects of our life.
- There are many BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES so, according to the interest or the needs of each particular moment, we may deepen our knowledge through CONTEMPORARY AUTHORS, BIBLICAL, ECCLESIAL AND CHARISMATIC SOURCES. Mostly, we have refrained from exact quotes to make the texts more dynamic.
- We have TRANSCRIBED THE POINTS OF THE CONSTITUTIONS to facilitate its study, and we have made comments regarding the most important footnotes, like the principles contained in the Canon Law or some other texts hard to have access to.
- We have included a brief HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION regarding the process of elaboration which our Constitutions have gone through, since the times of our Foundress to this day, not only for its historical value, but to be able to put into context the process and to understand the central points that were carried on until the present.
- This is a reflection that has been made with all of us in mind, regardless of age and circumstances of our lives. It might be especially helpful for both the SISTERS IN CHARGE OF FORMATION as well as that IN THE PROCESS OF FORMATION. The Constitutions help us to think again about our vocation and might encourage us to come up with new ways of being a Claretian. You will see that, although keeping a common outline, each section has a different style because it has been written by DIFFERENT SISTERS. This unity in diversity is the mirror image of who we are.

* *Historical Introduction and Fundamental Constitution*, Regina Tutzó

* *Consecration and Vows*, Jolanta Hernik

* *Prayer life* – Rosa Ruiz

* *Life in Communion*, Ma. Rita Lovecchio

* *Apostolic Mission*, Hortensia Muñoz

Many other sisters from different cultures have read and weighed the work, offering their suggestions. Rosa Ruiz, Regina Tutzó and Encarnación Velasco were the coordinators of this work.

Therefore, these pages can be useful:

- As a tool to reflect PERSONALLY AND AS A COMMUNITY about our Constitutions.
- As a means to DEEPEN THE STUDY in a detailed way of our Constitutions.
- As a selection to ENCOURAGE MOMENTS OF PRAYER OR SHARING, through the manuscripts of our Founders, biblical quotations.
- As a point of view from which we can read and live our Constitutions in a way that, instead of becoming dead word, they will always be *light and guide to understand God's will upon us (Constitutions Epilogue, Page 91)*.

In summary, we hope this work will help you to pray and to live the Constitutions in communion with the Church and with the entire Congregation, knowing that it will never override your personal way of reading them. In this way, the gift that God wanted to offer to the world through your life, will grow and will continue to spread out the great and simple gift that He intended to give us through our Founders and through each one of the sisters that have preceded us.

The Process of Composition of the Constitutions Historical Introduction

The path followed by the Congregation until the final approval of the Constitutions has been extraordinarily long and painful, as we can see in the history of the Congregation. It was a time marked up by light and darkness, like in any human group, like in the history of the Church.

We will describe the main steps, from the first notes of Maria Antonia Paris at the moment of receiving God's invitation to establish a New Order, until the approval of the current Constitutions on February 2, 1984:

- I. During the life of Maria Antonia Paris 1813-1885.
- II. From Maria Antonia Paris' death until the unification of the Institute 1885-1922.
- III. Time of renewal and adaptation 1969-1984.
- IV. Time of revision and consolidation 1984-2006.

During the life of Maria Antonia Paris

Everything starts with the Initial Experience; that profound and transforming experience that changed the life of our Foundress and shaped it according to the Scriptures. She, herself, tells us: *it was here that Our Lord gave me the design of the entire Order* (Aut. MP 7).

God's works are always like that – His word is efficient. On pronouncing it, creation starts and it stays active through time and space, sustained by that first Word. And when he wanted

to form his Church, his community, he said: “Go...and make disciples of all nations...baptizing them...teaching them...I am with you always (Mt 28:16-20). And so it was (John 14:26). In the beginning, God gives his light, but it is only little by little, along the path of life, that he makes clear the whole meaning of the mission. Such has also been the case in our history.

Maria Antonia could never see fulfilled one of her most cherished dreams – the approval of the Constitutions. On February 2, 1848, a century before the approval of the current Constitutions, she starts writing the rules of the New Order. In them she tried to summarize her feelings during that Initial Experience and her daily prayer/contemplation afterwards. She finished them on December 8 of that same year (*Diary 32a*). Probably she gave them to her confessor José Caixal, her confessor. Most likely he gave them to his friend Claret, who probably had read them prior to his first meeting with Maria Antonia, at the Tarragona convent, on January 1850.

After her profession, in Santiago de Cuba (1855), Padre Claret asked Maria Antonia to write the *Original Points of the Order* (*Aut. MP 228*) that she had written in Tarragona in 1848. Through a letter from Curríus to Caixal, we know that she used those same points and she added some others.¹ Caixal had a copy himself. Reading her notes, we can also infer that she was writing, at the same time, the *Plan for the Renewal of the Church* (*Aut. MP 229*).

Three months later, advised by Dionisio Gonzalez, vicar general of the Archdiocese of Santiago, Claret asks Curríus to rewrite, in canonic style, the Constitutions written by our Foundress². Curríus organized them into chapters but he respected her style and her expression, particularly as to her personal view of poverty.

The Constitutions were handed to Dionisio Gonzalez on April 1857. Possibly, he extracted from the text what we nowadays know as the *Fundamental Rules* (edited in *Writings*³), to be able to present them in Rome and ask for them to be approved. Those writings contain the most essential points of our way of life. They were finally presented in Rome by Curríus on February 1860. They were not approved.

That is why on April 1860, María Antonia writes to Claret asking for permission to extract from the Constitutions the main points regarding daily and community life, so the sisters could have a sort of practical guide. She did it herself. These rules are different from the *Fundamental Rules* (*Reg.Fun*) presented, to Rome, by Curríus on February 1860. If we compare them we can see that the *Fundamental Rules* (extracted by Dionisio Gonzalez) are shorter, more legal. The *Rules of 1862*⁴(*Reg.1862*), that our Foundress prepared, have the flavor and warmth of her heart. They were

Published by Pablo Riera’s Printing Office on March 1862. They contain 24 chapters with the Aim and Goal at the beginning. Claret himself paid for the costs of this little edition.⁵ After the recognition of Italy’s Sovereignty (1865)⁶, our Founder travels to Rome. Curríus urges him to present again the Constitutions that had not been approved in 1860. He sends them to him, but, by the time Claret goes back to Spain on November 27, the Constitutions

¹ H. MUNOZ., *Unpublished Notes given at the Encounter of the sisters in charge of formation*, Barcelona 2002. It applies to all this section.

² J. ALVAREZ, *History of the RS of Mary Immaculate Claretian Missionaries I*, Rome 1980, 870-73.

³ M. ANTONIA PARIS, *Writings*, Barcelona 1985, 621-642.

⁴ M. ANTONIA PARIS, *Writings*, Barcelona 1985, 645-713.

⁵ J. ALVAREZ, *History of the RR ...I*, 891; H. MUNOZ, *Unpublished Notes...*

⁶ This recognition meant the loss of most of the Vatican State territories. Claret traveled to meet with the Pope and discuss his role as Royal Confessor.

had not still arrived. It was Fray Pablo Serrat, a Trinitarian Spanish monk, known by Caixal, who took charge of them.

On January 1868, Serrat writes to Caixal regarding the monetary costs of the translations. Everything was going extremely slow. At Claret's return to Rome as an exile, on April 2, 1869, and even though he had told Maria Antonia that, from the moment he arrived, he had taken personal interest in the issue, there was no response to the matter⁷.

On June 12 of that same year the *Decretum Laudis or Commendation Decree is released* requesting that some essential corrections be made in order for the Constitutions to be approved. The problem was that the data contained in this Decree has nothing to do with our Institute. It was only a few years later that they realized that our Constitutions were mistaken for others of another Institute founded by Caixal, in Urgel, in 1854⁸. Such incidence is an inexplicable mystery. No documents are found in the Archives of the Congregation for Religious at the Vatican.

Our Founder and Dr. Caixal tried to undo the mistake with the Holy See and asked our Foundress to send the *Rules* of 1862. In the mean time, Maria Antonia was working with Curríus on a new edition, taking into account the recommendations from Rome, most of them regarding poverty⁹. In the new edition they made very clear the name of the Congregation, the place of foundation – Santiago, Cuba, not Urgel; the canonic character of the sisters, since back then sisters were only those with solemn vows, and in the Decree it is stated that they were considered to have simple vows. As registered in the archives of Congregations for Religious, Claret and Caixal chose the following title from the ones sent by Maria Antonia and Curríus:

*Constitutions and Rules of the RR. of the Institute of the Immaculate Conception of Mary Most Holy, Mother of God; founded in Santiago of Cuba, by His Excellency, Most Rev. Antonio Maria Claret and Clará, on August 1855, by virtue of the apostolic brief of April 27 of the same year mentioned above; under the rule of the great Father Saint Benedict*¹⁰.

From the research of the Vatican archives, it is inferred that in 1870 this new edition was presented, but there is no information about being sent to any consultant, most likely because they were all immersed in the works of the Council Vatican I.

A few months later Claret dies. He had done everything in his hands to get them approved, but without results. María Antonia kept working on them. By then her estrangement from Caixal¹¹, due to their far-reaching disagreements, was great, and she looks for help in the person of Most Reverend Orberá, bishop of Almería. They work together in the Constitutions, and join forces to get them approved, but there is no evidence of this in the Vatican Archives. We only know of this through their letters.

It was during this time of waiting that our Foundress re-thinks about our Congregation in order to get more easily the approval and probably, because she saw in these difficulties a manifestation of the will of God's, who wanted her to go deeper into the meaning of the Initial Experience.

⁷ EC, to Maria Antonia Paris (Rome 7/21/1869) II, 1409-1410.

⁸ J. ALVAREZ, *History of the RS...I*, 1892.

⁹ J. ALVAREZ, *Hist. ...I*, 903-904.

¹⁰ *Ib.* 907.

¹¹ AAVV, *To Hope against all hope*, Rome 2004, 75-77.

Among the changes she is willing to introduce which she communicates to Mr. Silvestre Rongier¹², are the following:

- Take out the chapters regarding the sisters giving spiritual exercises and to present them at a later time.
- Take out the chapter regarding the sisters of the third order.
- That the vows could be simple for a given amount of time and then solemn.
- That the cloister would be Episcopal and not papal, so the First Mother could visit the convents and freely transfer the sisters from one community to another, without constantly having to ask permission from the Papal Nuncio.

Our Foundress died without having seen the approval of the Constitutions, and although we have looked in different archives, we have never found the Constitutions she mentions in her *Testament (Writings, 717)*. Maybe they were lost during the Spanish Civil War, but we do not know.

II. From Maria Antonia Paris' death until the unification of the Institute 1885 - 1922

After the death of our Foundress, on January 17, 1885, Maria Gertrudis Barril, her secretary and counselor, takes the leadership of the Institute and tries to carry through the approval of the Constitutions. She writes to the bishop in Tarragona explaining the process followed up to that point; and obtains letters from the bishops of Valencia, Tarragona and Santiago de Cuba, to be sent to Rome along the Constitutions, but she dies in Reus (1890), without receiving the ardently desired approval¹³.

Mother Florentina Capdevila who follows her in the leadership of the Institute, convokes the General Chapter to be held in Carcagente, with the sole purpose of electing the Superior General who could unify the life of all the communities as the Founders wanted. Along with the letter of invitation, she sends a draft of the Constitutions based on the Decretum Laudis. Many of the chaplains, as well as many of our sisters, were against this centralization of the Institute, since they had made their solemn vows in self-determining convents, and they did not know all the process Claret and Maria Antonia had gone through in order to clarify the mistakes in the Decree: Have solemn vows but at the same time be a centralized Institute and not independent convents.

Mother Florentina suffered this stern opposition and the effort of many convents to crack any attempt towards the union of the communities. Her frail health could not take it and she died a few days before the beginning of the General Chapter, on May 25, 1896. Maybe prior to the chapter, all the participants would have needed a gradual sensitization to be able to understand what Mother Florentina could clearly see, and knew was the wish of the Founders.

¹² D. Silvestre Rongier was the Agent that Bishop. Orberá had in Rome in order to take care of his business in Rome.

¹³ J. ALVAREZ, *History of the RR...I*, 913-14.

The Constitutions approved by the Chapter, exception made of some sisters from Tremp, were written by the chaplains, who entrusted the composition to Dr. Pío Navarro. Afterwards each convent sent a copy to their own bishop who approved them immediately. Once this process was over, the work of presenting the Constitutions to Rome could begin. To this effect, the Chapter had commissioned the Prioress of Tremp¹⁴. The Constitutions were approved by Leon XIII in March 22, 1901. Later, the remaining five convents began sending their copies to the Holy See to be also approved.

Those Constitutions did not reflect the spirit our Founders wanted for the Institute. It was a mortal blow to all the hopes and dreams of becoming one family and one heart, as a new Order in practice. We went back to a monastic life and the *new wine* was lost because we wanted to hold it in *old wineskins* (*Mark 2:18-22*).

As time was passing by, the independence started hurting the financial as well as vocational strength of some convents, particularly in Cuba. They were the first to ask for help from the Claretians (*The Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*) in Mexico. The Spanish convents did the same they had started a fraternal relationship with the Claretians. These concerns, little by little, turned into a profound desire for unity, which Father Felipe Maroto gladly welcomed, since he was interested in our Congregation because it was Claret's work¹⁵. With his help, from 1914 until 1920, the long road of unifying the convents started.

After many visits, consultations, and initiatives to break the resistance by some sisters the General Chapter of Reus was celebrated in 1920. During the Chapter new Constitutions were approved in which the Congregation became, once again, *one family*¹⁶, recapturing the desire of unity of our Founders. The Institute was unified under one Superior General and became an Institute of simple vows. The Constitutions were adjusted to the new Code of Canon Law, approved in 1917, as it was done by all the other Congregations in the Church. All the Constitutions of the different Institutes became very much alike, due to the great amount of citations from the Code of Canon Law, to the point that the charismatic differences of each Institute were barely noticeable. The Decree of Approval of our Constitutions was granted on July 4, 1922¹⁷. Later on, during the General Chapters of 1948 and 1964, some modification where made, but it was only after the renewal asked by Vatican Council II, that the process of composition of new Constitutions began. Constitutions that would reflect with faithfulness our original being.

III. Time of Renewal and Adaptation 1969 - 1984

The *motu proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae (ES)* ordered the celebration of a special General Chapter to start the renewal that Council Vatican II had asked for. The time frame that each Congregation had was of three General Chapters including the special one.

Responding to the suggestions from Pope Paul VI in the *motu proprio*, our Constitutions underwent a period of experimentation beginning with the Special Chapter in 1969, until the General Chapter in 1981. In other words, 12 years¹⁸.

¹⁴ Ib. 930-941.

¹⁵ Ib. 997-99.

¹⁶ Ib. 1047 on.

¹⁷ *Constitutions of the Religious of Mary Immaculate Claretian Missionary Sisters*, 1988, 93-94.

¹⁸ J. ALVAREZ, *History of ...II*, 184-86.

Ecclesia Sanctae insisted in asking for a review of, not only the evangelical and theological principles, that are the foundations and guide of the religious life, (their union with the Church, the concrete expressions of their founders, healthy traditions of each Institutes),... but also the juridical norms necessary to clearly determine the essential character, the purpose and means of each Congregation. (*ES 12-14*).

The draft of the *Decrees of the General Chapter (DDCC 1969)* was presented at the Chapter of 1969¹⁹. These documents are a theological reflection on our spiritual inheritance and its adaptation to the changing conditions of our time. The intention was to recover, through that reflection, the most genuine tradition of the Institute and to open up to the *aggiornamento* referred by John XXIII which was the greatest message contained in the Council Vatican II.²⁰ The whole Church was on the same road she was inviting the religious communities to walk.

It is surprising though, that from such rich documents the chapter wrote Constitutions so limited and poor in content. They were the copy of those in use (approved in 1922 and modified in 1948 and 1964) adding to them some quotations from Vatican II and from the Bible.

The Congregation did not like these Constitutions. During the next six years (1969-1975) The Leadership Team sent questionnaires to all communities based on the documents of the chapter 1969 to help the sisters to study them. It was a time of renovation, much study and effort in order to be faithful to the invitation of the Church. Moreover, we started a process of deeper discovery and knowledge of our Foundress, process still going on today.

Close to the celebration of General Chapter X in 1975, the Leadership Team prepared new Constitutions, with the help of experts and some sisters that were presented in the Chapter. These were the result of the hard work done by the Congregation along the previous six years. They were the answer to the desire of having Constitutions more in tune with the renewal asked by Council Vatican II. Once it was decided by balloting to discard the Constitutions from 1969, the path was free for the members of the Chapter to study, to make the necessary modifications and to approve the new constitutions that had been presented. Even though these Constitutions did not completely reflect either our Claretian spirit or the innovations of our Founders, there were much better composed than the previous ones, and with a deeper theological and biblical content. In them we can perceive the return to the origins, the addition of specific quotes of the First Constitutions as well as the incorporation of the Aim and Goal that had not been present since 1896²¹. The Aim and Goal is divided into two numbers 2 and 9²².

These Constitutions were the basis of the renewal of the Institute from 1975 to 1981. The result of this study was the creation of the Constitutions that would be presented to the Holy See for their approval. In them, a lot more of the spirit of the Institute, of the Founders and of the traditions of the Congregation was present. They were composed by a commission of sisters from different places and presented to the XI General Chapter.

¹⁹ This project was wrought up by various commissions of different sisters advised by some theologians and jurists.

²⁰ AAVV, *General Chapters*, Rome 2004, 79 on.

²¹ J. ALVAREZ, *History...I*, 970.

²² J. ALVAREZ, *History ...II*, 187. It can also be seen in the Constitutions from 1975 that can normally be found in the Provincial Archives.

These Constitutions were studied, modified and approved in the General Chapter of 1981, the last one of the period planned for the renewal of the congregation. They contain words and concepts never considered before. Father Jesus Alvarez points out, in the II volume of our History, how noticeable these concepts are by merely looking at the index of the renewed constitutions: Friendship, Apostolate, Apostles, Assemblies, Charisma, Communion, and Configuration with Christ, Conversion, Discernment, Scripture, Evangelization, and Word of God²³.

In its composition they took into consideration the recommendations made by the Holy See, who requested that, the following elements are present:

- Charismatic elements of our Institute, or in other words, what makes us to be what we are within the church, the reason why we were born in it. It includes everything that comes from our Founders. These are constitutional elements that are not easily changeable.
- Biblical-Evangelical elements, since these are the foundations of the life of the Church. Maybe this is why the Constitutions have been called *the gospel of the Founders* – they are the concrete way they have accepted and embodied the Good News of Jesus.
- Canonical elements, that is, legislative norms given by the community of the Church.

This creation process was long, difficult and it required a lot of study, prayer and discernment. We had to distinguish between what is essential and therefore non-changeable, from what could be changed and therefore was not part of the Constitutions but of the Directory.

On the other hand, we can point to some concrete changes introduced in these Constitutions that, far from being accidental, are the reflection of our charisma – our own being within the Church:

- The Fundamental Constitution. It is at the beginning of the Constitutions and is like a summary of the entire constitutional text, which will be developed chapter by chapter.
- Number 2 in this Fundamental Constitution is a completely new number in reference to the former constitutions. This number expresses the *raison d'être* of our Congregation.
- Number 3 constitutes the complete Aim and Goal as written by our Foundress.
- Before presenting each one of the vows in particular, there are some points on the baptismal consecration and on the religious consecration, not as two different things but as the same and unique reality. That is, theologically, our consecration is understood as the deepening in the understanding of our baptism, giving to the vows a unity which goes well beyond the sum of them.
- The order of vows follows the thought of our Founders, since poverty is the foundation of the new Apostles we are called to be. According to the guidelines given by the Holy See, this was a possibility, so each Institute could reflect in its Book of Life, which is the Constitutions, its real self.
- Our life style is described as *life in communion* and not community life, since communion is a much deeper concept than common. It better mirrors the spirit of our Founders who wanted for us to be *one family and one heart*, not only that we lived together.

²³ Ib. 189.

- Right after, the chapters regarding prayer and mission follow, since we live these dimensions from our life in communion and not as something apart or different.
- The formation process is seen as a continuum all along our life, from the first steps in the discernment of our vocation until the Lord will call us to rejoice in His presence.
- Our old formula of profession was re-written by a group of sisters, gathering the genuine elements of our charisma.
- Number 93, regarding the religious habit was put in the Directory as a changing, and non constitutional element, since along our congregational life, it has changed several times.
- In the section about leadership there is a noteworthy change. First of all, there are series of basic concepts which are at the base of what we call leadership. Then come the chapters on how to implement them at different levels. Here we discover the newness that presents our life as a family. Leadership of the general community. In other words, the entire Institute is seen as a large community spread all over the world. And within this community, the government functions are articulated at two different levels – the Leadership Team, and the General Chapter. This little, but significant change of expressing what the leadership of the Congregation is, has also a profound pastoral sense. Benedict XVI, in the homily of the beginning of his papal ministry²⁴, called every Christian to become shepherds, so we could also help him be a good shepherd in the Church. In the end, it is the same way of understanding authority – with humbleness and from the community.

Once the Constitutions were finished, they were presented to the 1981 General Chapter, which, after thoroughly studying them and making some minor modifications, approved them. Since in the Universal Church, the new Code of Canon Law was being finished, the Chapter passed onto the Leadership Team the mission of adapting our Constitutions, according to the legal changes coming from it, particularly those regarding the religious Institutes.

The new Code of Canon Law (CCL) was not approved by John Paul II until January 23, 1983. Regardless, and since the approved parts of the new Canon Law were passed around, our Congregation was able to study them progressively and make the necessary changes to the Constitutions. That is why there were presented to the Religious Congregation for their approval immediately after the new Code of Canon Law was approved.

In the General Chapter of 1981 the Constitutions were presented together with the Directory. Although the Directory did not need the approval of the Apostolic See, it was also presented since its knowledge helped to have a more complete knowledge of our legislation. It was also necessary to present a rough draft of the Decree of approval in which each congregation wrote what was unique of their charisma and the Holy See would add anything relating to the law. It was in this document, after approving our Constitutions, in which some changes were made, and therefore it is necessary to point out that such changes did not come from the Congregation, but from the legal norms of the Vatican at that time:

n. 43 this number speaks about what we previously knew as *closure*. The new Constitutions spoke of this with flexibility, since in reality our communities, particularly

²⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Holy Mass homily at the Solemn beginning of Peter's Ministry of the Bishop of Rome*, San Peter's Square, April 24, 2005.

the smallest ones, could not have more clausure than that of their bedrooms. People were allowed in other common areas, according to the time and the occasion. But we were asked to add what we are written in bold ... a place **always** reserved **only** ...

n. 51 We had to add ***we receive the Body of Christ.***

n. 63 The last paragraph in its entirety had to be added: ***to preach to the religious...***

n. 69 The original text only said '*teach the Gospel to every creature.*' When it was revised they asked us to specify the concrete actions, saying ***we express it through Christian education, missions, residencies and other pastoral activities.***

n. 93 It was asked that the number about the ***habit*** be removed from the Directory and added to the Constitutions.

On February 2, 1984²⁵, with great joy, our Constitutions were finally approved. It was, at last, the end of a long process initiated in 1842, while our Foundress was still alive. After so many difficulties and sufferings, we could finally have, in our hands, Constitutions that truly reflected the dreams of our Founders. This long and difficult path was not in vain. Maybe it has helped us to discover in depth and with more clarity what the Lord had already shown us in Maria Antonia Paris' Initial Experience.

V. Time of evaluation and consolidation. 1984 - 2006

In the General Chapters celebrated after the approval of the Constitutions, some necessary modifications have been made. These are the following:

- **XIII General Chapter, 1993.** Changes:

n. 15 *Not being allowed to accumulate the profit to the capital* was erased from the second paragraph.

n. 95 The words *after five or six years, even prolonging it to nine years* were added.

n. 144 The frequency of provincial Chapters was changed from *every six years*, to *with the frequency determined by our legislation*. This accord was reached to follow the agreement that the leadership team of the provinces would be elected or appointed for three or six years.

n. 150 The first paragraph was left as it was, erasing the last sentence and adding the following: *It can also be elected in the Provincial or Vice-provincial Chapter according to our legislation. In such case, it has to be confirmed by the general superior with the consent of her council. The length of service will be determined by our legislation.*

Once these modifications were approved by the Apostolic See they were sent to the Congregation by the Leadership Team with the following note: *The XIII General Chapter made some changes in numbers 15, 95, 138, 144 and 150. We present them here today with the new wording as approved by the Apostolic See on February 16 of this year (1994)*²⁶.

- **XIV General Chapter, 1999. Modifications:**

²⁵ Internal Bulletin n. 110, 265, 270 – 71.

²⁶ XIII Gen. Chap. Modification to the text of the Constitutions, Rome, March 7, 1994.

n. 93 The second paragraph was changed for this new one: *wherever the apostolic circumstances so requires, we can wear a simple but decent dress, with a crucifix, so our consecration may be recognized. The permission will be given by the Major Superior.*

n. 163 This paragraph was worded this way: *The superior of the independent delegation will have two or four consultants of which one will be the secretary and another one the treasurer. They will be appointed in the same manner as the delegate.*

The note sent by the Leadership Team on April 9, 2000 reads as follows: *The XIV General Chapter made changes to the following articles of our Constitutions: 93 and 163. We present them today with the new wording as it was approved by the Apostolic See on February 16 of this year (2000)*²⁷.

- **XV General Chapter, 2005. Modifications:**

Significant changes were made to the Directory to answer the needs experienced by the Congregation in different places. Therefore, the following points to the Constitutions were affected:

n. 45 This point had two small but interesting changes. In the second paragraph the end is eliminated since it would be worthless in a time where multiple means of communication are in place. It would end up like this: *Correspondence is one of the communications media that helps us to maintain fraternity and the apostolate. Our correspondence will be free.*

And in the third paragraph it says that the permit to publish is given by the Major Superior. It reads like this: *In order to publish writings referring to question of religion or mores we need the permission l of the **respective Major Superior.***

n. 52 Night prayer can be said individually at the end of each one's day. The second part of this point was worded as follows: *We celebrate morning and evening prayers in community. **Compline can be said individually.***

n. 53 Daily prayer is a personal responsibility. Therefore each one must mark this time in her schedule. The last paragraph therefore, ended up like this: *To this end we make one hour of personal prayer each day.*

n. 138 It has a very subtle change and it could have easily been overlooked. It is stressed once gain (since it had been changed in the previous chapter) that seniority of profession goes over age at the time of elections, as it should be in religious life. So it reads like this: *...If at the fourth round there is a match between the two sisters, the **senior one as to profession** will be elected. If they are equal, then the oldest one...*

n. 151 The mandatory canonic visit of the Superior is changed to once every three years. Since the superior general visits are also necessary it was obvious that more visits would be impossible. In the 8th hyphen it reads like this: *To make the canonic visit at least **twice** during the period of six years.*

n. 166 The feeling, previously and repeatedly expressed in former Chapters, that the local leadership team could be elected either by the community or appointed by the province, is

²⁷ XIV Gen. Chap. Modifications to the text of the Constitutions, Rome, April 9, 2000.

accepted. The provincial chapters will discuss it and weigh if such thing is convenient for the respective province. Nevertheless, the communities can ask for either form of designation. The point ends up like this: *The local superior can be appointed by the immediate Major Superior with the deliberative vote of her council and after prior consultation with the sisters, or she can be elected by the community and confirmed by the Major Superior from which she depends. Her term of office will last for three years, and she can be re-elected for another three-year term. For a third period of three years more in the same house, it will be done according to our Directory. The Leadership team of the major entity may reserve the right to make the appointments for the major organism headquarters and houses of formation.*

n. 168 As a consequence of the above, this one changes to: To help her in government, **the Superior will have two councilors. The first is the vicar. They will be designated in the same way as the Superior. They will last in their office the same time as the superior, and will cease with her.**

This changes became effective on October 28, 2005 with a note from the Leadership Team stating that *the changes made by the XV General Chapter have been approved by the Congregation for the Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life on October 25, 2005*²⁸.

Sometimes we speak of our current Constitutions as definitive. When we do so, we do not mean that they cannot be modified, since we know that such thing cannot be affirmed. Instead, what we mean is that any change made will not affect the deepest core of our charisma as Claretians, and that they cannot take effect without the approval of the Holy See, after having been approved by two thirds of the members of the General Chapter.

One of the most valuable things that the Catholic Church learned from Vatican II is that only God does not change and eternal. All of us forming the Church, walk, following Christ, immersed in the world, along with our brothers and sisters and affected by the same changes they go through. If we really want the Gospel to reach every creature, we must adapt our message and our lives to times and places, without ever changing the Gospel, the only guideline to our Christian and Claretian life.

CHRONOLOGY: THE PATH TO THE APPROVAL OF THE CONSTITUTIONS
1848 - Maria Antonia Paris writes the RULES FOR THE NEW ORDER , while still in the novitiate of the Company of Mary, expression of the Initial Experience. From February 2, to December 8.
1855 – She expands the 1848 Rules on the request of Claret, already in Cuba , THE ORIGINAL POINTS TO THE ORDER .
1857 – Currius , urged by Claret and advised by Dionisio Gonzalez, re-writes them in canonic wording.
1859 – Dionisio Gonzalez writes an extract of these last ones to send them to Rome. We

²⁸ Gen. Chap. XV, Modifications to the text of the Constitutions, Rome, October 28, 2005.

know them as FUNDAMENTAL RULES .
1860 – Curríus presents them in Rome (along with the <i>Plan for the Renewal of the Church</i>). They are not approved.
1862 – Maria Antonia Paris writes an extract (in 1861) so each sister can have them in their daily lives. Claret publishes them. We know them as RULES OF 1862 .
1865 – Again, the Constitutions that were not approved are sent to Rome.
1869 – Rome gives the <i>Decretum Laudis</i> but with corrections that had to be made. They mixed the data from two different Institutes. It was wrong.
1870 – Maria Antonia Paris and Curríus make the corrections and sent them to Rome, where Claret and Caixal are still working to get them approved. Probably due to the work for the Council Vatican I, they were only filed, but no other proceeding took place. Claret dies without the approval.
1885 – M. Paris dies without having seen the Constitutions approved. Since 1870 she had continued working on them helped by Bishop Obrerá.
1885 – 1890 – M. Gertrudis Barril keeps working on the Constitutions without success.
1890 – 1896 – M. Florentina Capdevila prepares new Constitutions based on the <i>Decretum Laudis</i> in order to achieve the Union of all the houses. She convenes the General Chapter in Carcagente, but dies a few days before.
1896 – Carcagente Chapter (or Chapter of Division). The Constitutions are re-written leaving the houses as independent convents.
1901 – The Holy See approves the Constitutions of 1896.
1920 – The Reus Chapter (or Chapter of the Union). The Constitutions are written, with the help of F. Maroto cmf, going back to the missionary unity wanted by our founders.
July 4, 1922 – The Holy See gives the approval.
1948 – 1964 – in these two Chapters some changes were made, but always within the legal uniformity that affected all the Congregations.
1969 – Especial Chapter to achieve the renewal asked to the Church by Council Vatican II. The Institute begins a process of deepening into the theological, biblical and charismatic aspects of the Constitutions. The fruit will be the first renewed Constitutions approved in the X General Chapter (1975) . This process continues until the XI General Chapter (1981) , in which the Constitutions, that we now have, were approved.
1984 - The Holy See approves the Constitutions . In 1988 OUR CURRENT CONSTITUTIONS were printed.

FUNDAMENTAL CONSTITUTION

COMMENTARY TO POINTS 1-10

The Fundamental Constitution includes the first ten numbers. This text is like a flash; like a panoramic vision of all the Constitutions. On reading them we can see, in a summary, who we are, how our life is and what is our mission. It is like the ID card of our Institute. In the chapters that follow after the Fundamental Constitution, some of the same concepts will be retaken to explain them in a more detailed way.

Saint Anthony M. Claret and Mother Maria Antonia Paris, impelled by the Holy Spirit founded our Institute on 25th of August 1855 in Santiago de Cuba. It was approved by Leo XIII in 1901 as independent convents; and then by Pius XI on July 4, 1922 as a congregation of simple vows.

The name of our Institute is: Religious of Mary Immaculate Claretian Missionary Sisters.

This first number describes our origins; it is like a birth certificate. First it introduces our Founders – our father and our mother in faith – who gave us in legacy our charisma. The Holy Spirit, guide and teacher of the Church, who distributes his gifts, inspired and moved them to establish our Institute with a very concrete mission. As stated by John Paul II:

It is the Holy Spirit, who, along the centuries spreads the riches of practicing the evangelical advice through multiple charismas, and also through this means makes the mystery of Christ an everlasting presence in the Church, the world, time and space (VC 5).

The date of the official foundation of the Institute is the date, in which the Decree, authorizing the establishment of the convent in Santiago de Cuba, was signed, by our Founder on August 25, 1855²⁹. Nevertheless, according to the tradition within the

²⁹ J. ALVAREZ, History of the RS...I, 180-181.

Congregation, we publicly acknowledge as our founding date, the day in which Maria Antonia professed her vows in the hands of Claret on August 27. We celebrate it as a *holiday* (*Dir.* 73).

Afterwards, there is the date of approval as independent convents in 1901 and as a Congregation of simple vows in 1922. That is in summary the path of our history (Historic Introduction, 15) – from cloistered sisters living in independent convents to a Congregation of sisters with simple vows.

The name of our Institute still reflects the aspects our Founders wanted to underline from the beginning:

- a) Mary, within the mystery of her Immaculate Conception, contained in *Religious of Mary Immaculate*;
- b) The apostles, to indicate our apostolic and missionary charisma, contained in *Claretian Missionary Sisters*, which also reminds us of Claret's fatherhood over the Congregation.

In the course of our history, we have worded our name in different ways, but these two elements have always been present:

- *Apostles of Jesus Christ imitating the Virgin Mary Most Pure* (Initial Experience. *Autobiography MP 7*)
- *Religious of the Apostolic Institute of the Immaculate Conception of Mary most Holy, Mother of God and Our Lady* (Foundation Decree)³⁰.
- *Institute of the Teaching Sisters of Mary Immaculate* (Minutes from the meeting in Reus, 1919)³¹. *Teaching Sisters of Mary Immaculate* (Decree of Approval of the Constitutions by Pius XI, July 4, 1922)³².
- *Teaching Sisters of Mary Immaculate, Claretian Missionaries* (Constitutions 1946).
- *Religious of Mary Immaculate Claretian Missionary Sisters* (General Chapter 1969).

2. *Our Congregation has been born in the Church to be a "new Order, not new in the doctrine, but new in practice."*

Since the origin of our Institute, the Holy Spirit has urged us on to renew the Church by keeping of most its most holy Law and by our radical living of the evangelical counsels with a special love for evangelical poverty, "the foundation of new apostles"

The first part of this number transports us back to the Initial Experience of our Foundress. In her autobiography she tells that while being in prayer, imploring the Lord for the evils that the church was suffering, the Lord imprinted in her heart the meaning of the Gospel. It was then that she realized that the wrongs of the Church are rooted in the lack of faithfulness of the followers of Christ. When she asks the Lord what was she supposed to do, His answer was to create a new Order; not new as to the doctrine, but new in the practice (*Aut. MP 7*).

The second part, talks about the renewal of the Church. We know, through her autobiography, that in this Initial Experience she basically understood two things: the

³⁰ J. ALVAREZ, History of the RS...I, 180-181.

³¹ Id. 1035.

³² Const. 93.

creation of our Order which would renew religious life; and to work for the renewal reformation- as she said – of the entire Church.

Our Congregation is called to contribute towards the renewal of the Church through our life style and the proclamation of the Gospel. Gospel lived through the religious vows, particularly the evangelical poverty. Maria Antonia considered that poverty was the foundation of these new apostles (*Aut. MP 11*). Due to the lack of poverty, the Church was unfaithful to its mission, too worried about power and money.

This number was introduced for the first time in the renewed Constitutions that were approved on February 2, 1984, as stated in the Historic Introduction (p. 22).

3. *“The main goal of the sisters of this order is to diligently work in the Lord; towards the keeping of God’s law and the utmost fulfillment of the evangelical counsels and, in imitation of the Holy Apostles to work until death in teaching every creature the Holy Law of the Lord.*

This point encompasses what our foundress calls the *Aim and Goal of the Order*. It has a unitary structure, but we divide it in two parts to better explain it. The first part tells us what is the life and mission of a Claretian Missionary:

a) ***To diligently work in the Lord.*** It says work, meaning there is a personal effort; but it is *in the Lord* which means *with Him, for Him or from within Him, and to Him*. We do not trust in our strength but in his grace. We put our maximum effort, *diligently*, but it is him who does it in us.

b) ***To keep his divine law.*** Maria Antonia, frequently and without distinction, speaks of Law and Gospel. In her Initial Experience she states: *...and I felt I was reading the Holy Law of the Lord...in a very particular way the book of the Holy Gospels (Aut. MP 5)*. And in the Plan for the Renewal of the Church, Mother speaks to the Prelates and asks them indistinctly to conform their lives to the Gospel (*RP 6*) or to the Holy Law (*RP 11*), because the Lord has given us only one Gospel (*RP 8*), the Holy Law of the Lord is only one (*RP 13*).

c) **The keeping of God’s law and the utmost fulfillment of the evangelical counsels.** Meaning, to live fully our consecrated life, as our concrete way of living the Gospel. This sentence makes us think of the demanding words of Jesus that Mathew hands over to us in chapters 5-7.

d) ***And imitating the Holy Apostles.*** Our life and mission must be like theirs, since Maria Antonia understood that the Lord wanted an Order of new apostles. These words coincide with the invitation to *a new evangelization*³³ that John Paul II made a century afterwards. He, in reference to the first evangelization in America, states that the novelty lies in adapting to the times but, always, carried out with the same initial ardent fervor. In the same manner, we are invited to be like the first Apostles that the Lord chose; our novelty is consists in spreading the same Gospel to the new generations and new cultures.

³³ It must be a *new evangelization in its ardent desire, in its methods and in its expression* [John Paul II, *CELAM (Spanish for Latin American Episcopal Counsel) Speech*, Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, 3/9/1983].

e) ***To work until death to teach every creature the holy Law of the Lord.*** This can mean two things which might also be only one: *until death*, that is, until the end of our life. The Claretian Missionaries are called to evangelize through out our life; from the day we make our vows, until the day the Lord calls us to His side. There are no vacations, no time to retire; not even sickness or old age is an excuse to spreading the Gospel. But it is also *until death*, which implies the intensity of our apostolic work, because *Christ charity* insists upon it, and forces us to give everything we are in our apostolic mission. *To every creature* speaks of the universal nature of our Claretian mission, that cannot be absent in any race, culture or place because *the whole wide world must be the native home of the missionaries of Christ (MA10)*. After this part of the Aim and Goal, the Founding Mother continues telling us how is it that we must live to make the mission possible, reminding us Paul the apostle's style.

Our way and style of life

a) ***Asks that everyone that wants to be listed be crucified to everything worldly,*** meaning that worldly issues are not for us. We must be interested in the world, but not to live as it tells us, but to be an alternative as to our life style.

b) ***Our Institute also asks daughters who have renounced to all their disorganized affections and passions, so they can follow the steps of Christ our righteousness.*** She explains this little farther saying that all this is necessary to follow Christ, our righteousness, to whom we have consecrated our whole life; for which we live; and to whom we entrust ourselves. Pay attention that it is not asking us to be women devoid of feelings or passions, but free from everything and anything that might disrupt and separate us of our true selves; of our vocation.

c) ***Ask them to be dead to themselves, so they can experience only the justice and the sanctity, in order to become, like Saint Paul says, faithful servants of our great God.*** It is not only to let go, but to die to ourselves; to our persona; to our own interests. It is not to destroy ourselves, but to reach a greater freedom that would let us experience justice, which in the Bible is the synonym to sanctity. And how to achieve this goal? In order to do so, Maria Antonia proposes almost literally what's on 2 Corinthians 6, 5-7:

- ***Vigils, fasting, work*** = prayer and austerity in coping with all our daily needs in life, as a continuous effort.
- ***Chastity, science and sweetness*** = undivided heart in God and to our brothers, an apostolic life derived from contemplation; knowledge to meditate the events and find, like Mary, the presence of God in them; and courteous, simple, humble and charming manners.
- ***Moderation and joy in the divine Spirit*** = know what to say and do what's necessary in every moment, with great respect and kindness to others; serene joy that is contagious and inviting to live the Gospel.
- ***Charity that is not fake*** = love that is always available and aware of the needs of others; love that does not look for itself when offered, but honestly interested in others' needs.
- ***True words*** = a transparent life, without hidden motives or personal interests.

d) ***And while walking towards their heavenly home, may they teach and make it easier for others the same path.*** All that we have mentioned we experience while we walk towards our heavenly home, that is, towards God himself. And we travel this path following *Christ's steps, our righteousness* and helping God in the building of His

Kingdom. This sentence of our Founding Mother reminds us of Luke's gospel in which he presents Christ teaching while walking towards Jerusalem. With our walking, with our life, Maria Antonia wants us to make easy the path we teach, which is the same Path (Jesus Christ) we follow. May our life be an invitation to build the Kingdom, and to unconditionally follow the Lord.

- ***With justice and example as weapons, using them unsparingly here and there*** = we already said that in the Bible justice is a synonym of sanctity. By our baptism we are called to be holy like Jesus and with our life invite others to live the same way.

- ***Whether it be by honor or dishonor, prosperity or adversity*** = at every time, everywhere, do not forget to do what you're supposed to do, not even if they praise you, despise or insult you. Do not change the way you live and work for the Kingdom, not even when things go wrong, or when they go right. In other words, the results or others' reactions cannot be the measure that decides our lives.

e) ***looking everywhere and at everywhere:***

- ***Every consecrated person's, at the service of the Lord, conversion.*** In our mission and our life we must always have present the other consecrated individuals (something crucial for both our Founders), including the other sisters.

- ***Everybody's conversion*** = of every creature regardless, without distinction.

f) ***To the glory of the Lord and his Most Holy Mother.*** The ultimate objective that our

Founding Mother asks from our life, is that God being glorified, known and loved. And that Mary is also loved and imitated.

4. *This Aim and Goal expresses, at the same time, our apostolic mission and the way to perform it in complete abandonment to the Lord: "you will join action with contemplation, most important topic in our Institute".*

In this point it is clear that in the same way that the Aim and Goal joins our apostolic objective with our way of life, our life must also be unified by joining *action with contemplation*. It is an invitation to view creation, the events, the people, and all our life with God's eyes. In finding Him always present in everything, we know that He is constantly waiting for our answer to His continuous calls. In order for us to accomplish that, we must go inside ourselves constantly to find the God that inhabits us and is waiting to talk and have dinner with us (Rv 3:20).

It is precisely this intense union and endless communication with the Lord, what gives us the energy to work and love everything and everyone with the heart of God. It invites us to live self-assuredly, without stress, putting all our confidence in Him. It also shows us the hidden goodness in others and ourselves, so we can look upon others as brothers and sisters.

5. *We are summoned by the Father in the Spirit to follow the steps of Christ, our righteousness. We want to be put together with Him in the knowledge that he still suffers in his body, the Church, until the glory of His resurrection becomes the law of life and freedom.*

It is in this way that we participate in the only mission of the Church, begun by Christ, sent by the Father, and followed by the Apostles, sent by the Lord resurrected, to spread the Gospel to all creation.

This point shows us how our mission as a congregation is one of convocation, meaning we are called one with another. And this mission is ingrained in the same mission of the Church, which continues here and now, the mission of the Son.

The Father asks us by the Spirit to be like the Son, and one with Him, to become His disciples. The disciple, in turn, is one that walks behind the teacher, never in front. To walk behind is to follow the same path with Him; to live like Him; be in the same places as the Teacher. Today in the XXI century, in our society, we must ask ourselves where the Teacher is and what path is He marking, in order for us to follow His steps and be able to teach His presence to all our brothers and sisters.

The Lord is within every man and woman we find in the path of our life, but we know that He is still suffering in His body, in His Church, and most especially in every brother and sister crucified in this world. In this way, we read in the parable of the judgment of all nations: *'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And the answer is that every time we did it for one of these least brothers of His, we did for Him (Mt 25:39).* This suffering will continue until the coming of God's kingdom. When the only law of love (*Jn 13:34*) blooms in freedom and giving spirit, then, and only then, will the fruit of Christ's resurrection have fully developed and there will be no more pain. Until then, we want to work for the kingdom!

We participate in the Church's mission because it is the Church who continues the Son's mission. The son incarnates from Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit and is sent by the Father to tell us the Good News. He, in turn, gathers a few friends and sends them as apostles to continue His mission along the world (*Mt 28:16-20*). They, answering the call of the resurrected Lord, spread the Gospel everywhere. That is how the first communities that start organizing in a Church are born (*Ac 2:42*).

6. We commit ourselves to follow Jesus' life style by professing public vows of poverty, obedience and chastity; through a profound experience of the Eucharist mystery, in fraternal communion of mission and life; in simplicity, poverty and labor; to be witness of God's saving love for men and of the essence of the kingdom to come on earth.

In this point we can find the description of some of the life style elements we commit to personally as well as a community in our public life:

- To live, through our vows, Jesus' life style according to history. That way we get back what our Founding Mother proposed in the Primary Constitutions (poverty, obedience and chastity).

- To live deeply the mystery of the Eucharist. Through this sacrament Christ invites us to turn our life into a continued thanksgiving and gift; so we can turn ourselves into bread to feed our brothers and sisters and wine to give joy to this saddened world. Our Founders lived their lives completely in love with Jesus Eucharist. Claret was blessed to maintain intact the sacramental species between communions at the end of his life. And Maria Antonia received this same gift for nine days after professing her vows. Both of them spent long hours praying in front of the Holy Sacrament and received many gifts and mystical communications during these moments.

- To share our life and mission in communion with the sisters of our Congregation. Since the beginnings of the Church, when the Gospel of Jesus is announced, a new community is born. The Church is the fraternal symbol that the world is supposed to live. Our Founding Mother always dreamt for our Congregation to be one family with one sole heart, because it is what the Lord asks us to be (*Test. MP*)³⁴.
- In simplicity, transparency and poverty; not attached to anything or anyone. Laborious, using our time wisely, discovering the value of work, in solidarity with every man and woman who goes out every day to win the bread for themselves and their families. Our founders were privy to the birth of the working class after the industrial revolution and everything it meant to society in general. We know how deeply and profoundly Claret lived the reality of the textile industry in Barcelona, Spain. In Maria Antonia's case, it is more difficult to know to what extent she was aware of what was going on in the labor world. But it is clear that both of them wanted us to work to win our daily bread, and that they refused for us to live of the rents (although by then the Church required a rent from the nuns in order to be able to survive). It is interesting to note, that in Santiago de Cuba, before founding the first school, the sisters worked washing and ironing clothes to the parishes, because at that time, it was the only job they could perform to win their bread.
- All this will turn us into credible witnesses of God's love for all humanity, and, in this way, we will announce that the Kingdom is becoming present in our world and that it is growing like the seeds spread on the furrow. Even without the seeder noticing it, the seed will flourish and give fruits. The same way, the Kingdom seed we sow will grow without us being aware.

7. We must feel the weight of the Church on us, and it must drive us to spread the Holy Law of the Lord to every creature and to contribute to the permanent renewal of consecrated life.

We make ourselves completely available at the service of the Church in order to tend to the most urgent, opportune and efficient, according to our charisma.

This point and the next speak about the ecclesial dimension of our charisma. The Initial Experience of Maria Antonia was, as all her other mystic experiences, clearly ecclesial and theological. Particularly in this one, Christ and His Church appear in their suffering phase (*Aut. MP 16*). In these persecution times of the Church, Maria Antonia realizes that the real evil of the Church is not the attacks against it, but the lack of evangelic feeling of its members, particularly of those who have committed their lives to it (referring to bishops, priests, curia and religious...).

Even at her profession of vows, she tells us, that when Claret placed the flower crown on her head, which in itself was very light, she felt a heavy weight and the voice of the Lord telling her that it was the weight of the renewal of the Church that she carried upon (*RC 9*). A weight that includes the constant worry for the renovation of all that form the Church, particularly those committed to our vows; a weight that, far from crushing us, drives and enraptures us to pray and announce without rest the Word of the Lord.

Our life is completely devoted to servicing the ecclesial community to perform the Church's only mission – to spread the Gospel, prioritizing what is most *urgent, opportune*

³⁴ EP, *To the Bishop of Cuba*, (Carcaixent, 09/30/1877) 317-318.

and efficient, like Claret. Since the needs are always many, we want to urgently tend to what is most convenient and adequate every time. This urgency also reminds us of the total commitment to spreading the Gospel, which constituted the greatest urgency to the first Christians. The evangelists write about this in various styles. Let's remember, for example Luke's gospel in which Christ teaches walking without rest. We can find another example in the Visitation, when we are told how Mary hurried to visit her cousin to help her. Also when Peter's Mother-In-Law immediately after being healed, got up and went to serve. The flame emanating from God's love must urge us and make us restless in our quest to turn our reality around and make it more to His liking.

8. *The love and communion with our Church, Christ's wife, are entwined in our Congregation. We completely and entirely adhere to the Pope's and Bishop's mandates. We work with especial attention for the Church to show Christ's face to all men from different cultures, times, and places.*

As we said before, in this point we are reminded of the importance of ecclesial communion. We are part of the Church along with all baptized. Within this Church, Christ's Wife, it is our mission to announce and sow the Kingdom.

In order for the Church's mission to be successful it must be organized and we must all depend upon one another. No one can be an evangelist by itself since Christ, we gathering the apostles, form them in a group, in a community living with Him and were sent by Him. Likewise, we, as members of the Church, are sent by our Superiors, who represent for us the authority of the Lord. The Constitutions mandate us to not only go where the Church needs us, but also to accept and make ours the mandates from the ecclesial authorities, inasmuch as they are in accordance with our charisma. This disposition entails to welcome the invitation and discuss it within our community, weighing our apostolic possibilities to be able to make the right decision.

In all of this, our main goal is that, through the Church, Christ might be known and loved by every man and woman of diverse cultures races and languages. This is the same wish expressed in the II Vatican Council when it states:

Christ is the light of the world. Therefore, this Sacrosanctum Concilium, gathered in the Holy Spirit, ardently wishes to illuminate all mankind, by spreading the Gospel to every creature, with the clarity of Christ, who shines over the face of the Church (LG 1).

9. *The Love of the Virgin is a part of the Congregation in itself. Mary must be the great 'beacon' in our path. Her life in poverty, obedient and virgin, completely dedicated to the work of her Son; all of these must be part of our role model. "Tell everyone who lives in this family that all must work to attain the Virtues of our Holy Mother Mary". In loving her we love the Lord and we help her in her role as mother of God's people. We have Mary as our patron in the mystery of her Immaculate Conception. This mystery compels us to fight evil in any of its manifestation sand opens us to joy and hope.*

This point is dedicated o Mary as the beacon that lights our path to Christ (LG 68), and invites us to live our life like hers. The experience of the three vows also applies to Mary:

a) In poverty, like her, totally dependent upon the will of the Father, always ready to do what He expects of me. Like she used to say: be done unto me...

b) In obedience, from radical poverty and total dependency upon the Lord. Like her, faithful collaborator, always accepting without restraint God's plan, even without understanding it, but totally trusting His love.

c) In virginity, with a humble heart fully turned to God. An indivisible heart; a heart fully and totally surrendered to God's love, expressed in the unselfish love and service to all creatures.

Maria Antonia invites us to absorb all the virtues in Mary so we can integrate them all in our own life. When we love Mary we love the Lord in her, and with her, we help, from our feminine side, in the mission of the Church. To become part of Mary's maternal role over God's people, we must welcome every creature and event with motherly kindness. A mother knows what every son/daughter needs, and tries to give it because she knows and loves each one as they are. A mother teaches and firmly corrects their children, without overprotecting or annulling their autonomy, but at the same time she knows how to be a warm and unconditional place in which they can always count on. A mother expects everything from her children; she always cheers them and she never take off from a sleepless night; a mother is the ultimate joint between all since she lives their joys and their suffering of her children as if they were her own. A mother is not looking for leadership, nor does she impose her wishes, because her main concern is not her well-being, but the happiness of those she lives by as her own.

The Marian mystery part of the congregation is the Immaculate Conception. When talking about mystery, we talk about God's making, of His love giving, way beyond our comprehension. Mary Immaculate speaks of God's mystery fight against evil and His call to us to be part with joy, and to always hope that good and life will have the last word over sin and death. Like Mary Immaculate we want to express through our life that God's Kingdom is always present and that it is acting upon the world. Our job is to welcome it, wait for it, and prevent anything that in any way might hurt Humanity and History.

10. *Our reason for being in the Church is that God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, be known and loved by all men.*

Everything we have said, everything we are and do, has one sole reason – to make God known and by knowing Him love Him. We insist that it is not to share any image of God, but which Jesus lived and gave us. Our God is *the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ep1:3)*. In this paragraph we can almost literally read the very much loved expression of Claret:

“May he know you and make you know; may he love you and make you love; may he serve you and make you serve...” (Aut. FC 233).

To know in the Bible means much more than an intellectual knowledge; it is a vital contact between the persons, to the point of using the term to express the intimacy in a sexual contact. This is the vital knowledge we want for all humanity. A knowledge that feeds the

love and grows everyday, helping us spread the civilization of love, aiding in the coming of the Kingdom of our Father and our God.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE FUNDAMENTAL CONSTITUTION

The name of Fundamental Constitution is by itself indicative of the nature of these first points. As we said in the beginning, in this first part we want to express the most essential part of our Claretian live.

In mirroring ourselves in these points, we must find the most genuine of our lives, because the life of our founders is the clearest indication of their way of answering to the demands of the Word of God and of reality. Therefore the auto-biographies are the best comment to our Constitution³⁵.

Apostolically, they can also be a brief and concrete help to teach the essence of our particular personality as Claretians. If it is with young women that want a closer approach with us, it can serve as an explanation. If they were given to read, it would only be after an extensive process of getting to know one another with these young women.

³⁵ J. ALVAREZ, *Charisma and History*, Madrid 2001, 131.

Our religious and apostolic life Consecration

INTRODUCTION

Very often we use diverse terms which are somehow related such as: religious consecration, evangelical counsels, vows...In the Second Vatican Council they preferred to talk about the evangelical counsels to avoid reducing consecrated life to the three traditional vows (prayer, fraternal community life, apostolic mission are also evangelical counsels). Besides, in this way we do not make the evangelical counsels something belonging only to those consecrated in religious life (*cf. LG 42 and PC 12-14*) but we present them as invitations that the Gospel makes to all Christians, who are called to holiness (*cf. LG 43*)³⁶.

*Without relationship and without correlations the different forms of life stump, they dissolve and become sterile...God's people, the Church, is the fantastic result of multiple correlations. What is common, what we all share, is lived and administered by each person individually in a unique and peculiar form, according to the gifts received.*³⁷

Therefore, we also are also indebted to the Council for going back to the understanding that religious consecration originates in our baptismal consecration, which is proper to all Christians. The risk could have been in trying to dilute the identity of every particular vocation within the Church, by strongly insisting on one unique and same dignity for all baptized person. For this reason, Paul VI himself, on May 23rd, 1964, took advantage of his address to the General Chapters celebrated in Rome, to confirm.

*The profession of the evangelical vows adds to baptismal consecration, making it complete, because it is a peculiar consecration, through which the faithful gives and consecrates himself or herself fully to God, dedicating his or her life to God's service.*³⁸

It is this perspective that appears in our Chapter Documents of 1969:

³⁶ P. FERNANDEZ, *Consejos evangélicos*, en: AAVV, *Diccionario teológico de la vida consagrada*, Madrid 1989, 397.

³⁷ JCR GARCIA PAREDES, *Teología de las formas de vida consagrada II*, Madrid 1999, 227-298.

³⁸ Quoted by S.Ma.ALONSO, *Consagración*, en AA. VV, *Diccionario teológico de la vida consagrada*, 380.

Religious vocation cannot be understood outside the context of the Christian vocation in general. It is essential to Christianity to be called...The Christian person is called by God to receive Christ's grace...Nevertheless, a vocation is addressed to each person in particular, within his or her own circumstances. God's call opens in Christ, within the Church, to each one of us, a concrete space of salvation and sanctification that is proper to each person. It is unique and not repeating. This is why God's call seals the person being called forever³⁹.

Through Baptism, each Christian is consecrated to God in his or her own particular vocation. Left behind are the theological and spiritual understandings that situated religious life as the life of perfection. If we depart from the foundation that each Christian can reach perfection in his or her concrete life style, we cannot affirm that religious life offers a Christian life style that is better than the rest; not even that it may offer better means or structures to unmistakably reach such perfection. This life style is the best for those who have been called by the Lord⁴⁰. Our consecration is a place of perfection (if it helps anyone to continue using this kind of language) a place for holiness and mature growth, in the same way in which everything that leads to a commitment in my life, may help me to integrate and harmonize my psychological and spiritual capacities, to follow Christ more closely in building the Kingdom.

The consecrated person commits her or himself to love humanity and the world, according to Christ's desire:

Consecration, according to the biblical meaning of this word, is the participation in God's holiness, which is the Holy One, and therefore the giving of oneself totally to God. (LG 44).

Every era and circumstance will have to incarnate the Gospel message and the call to follow Christ, in the best way to build the Kingdom, which is the main purpose of our consecration. Even though religious vows have been changing throughout history, this has not affected the prophetic, radical and interpellant essence that is proper of the vows.

We pronounce our vows publicly to our sisters and the Church community (cf. Const 91). This is the anthropological-theological place where God's face is shown to us concretely. This is why our vows are public, not private. Therefore our commitment is not only to God, but also to history and the world where we profess our vows. There is no doubt that it is a historic responsibility.

It is God who consecrates us and we freely accept this commitment with a vow, not only with an agreement or an oath. It can help us to see the differences that exist among them. To make an oath is to affirm or to deny one thing having God as a witness. In a covenant or an agreement, both parties are obligated to comply with the agreement. To make a vow implies all this, but it is more than that: it surpasses the oath because besides of having God as a witness, we are aware that without God we would not be able to accomplish such promises. The vow is not only a covenant or an agreement between two parties because there is no equality in the fulfillment of one's commitment: God calls and the one who is

³⁹ DDCC 1969, *Decreto sobre la Formación*, 1.6. In spite of the time elapsed, as it is the case of the documents of Council Vatican II, our Congregation has in most of this Documents intuitions, criteria and lines of action which are still to be discovered and made reality.

⁴⁰ J.M. TILLARD, *Consejos evangélicos*, en AA.VV, *Nuevo Diccionario de Espiritualidad*, Madrid 1983, 243.

called enters into the mystery and the gratuitousness that surpasses us and gives us the strength to live up to it. Literally what is specific to a vow is to renounce to something good and positive because we choose and express in this way, the choice of something of higher value. This is why our vows are not focused on the renunciation to good things, much less on the rejection to things because they are bad or of less value (sexual relationships, a partner, making you own decisions, the use of goods...).

Besides, our vows are public because in choosing the discovered treasure, we abandon other fields and in this way we proclaim with our lives two things: that Christ's resurrection and the power of his Spirit are so real that common men and women like us are able to live of God and for God, and thus transform the world. And we also remind others that God's dreamed Kingdom is on its way; it is being formed in the temporality of our limited historical reality, which is not and cannot be permanent. Some people even find a foundation in this reality for the fact that our vows are not temporary but perpetual: they are an everlasting commitment until God fully reigns. Something similar to the promise Jesus made in the Last Supper: "for I tell you that from now on I will not drink from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes"(Lk 22: 18)⁴¹.

It is convenient not to confuse this with our apostolic activity, since the vows are not justified only by more efficiency in the mission. If this would be the case, the elderly and bed ridden religious men and women, who are no longer active in mission, would stop practicing poverty, chastity and obedience. The vows are means, but fundamentally they are a way of living that aims to express an interior disposition to give oneself to God. And it is the love for Christ that moves us to give our whole being as a response to His invitation. When we give ourselves because of love, we do not measure the limits of chastity, of poverty or of obedience; we simply desire to give ourselves in all the relationships and capacities that we have. We give our present and also our past and future, our projects, our dreams and our whole life⁴².

This is why it is beneficial for us to remember briefly how religious life emerged in the Church as a means to try a different life style; to offer an alternative to a materialistic Christian community of that time. Towards the IV century the alliances with the ruling powers provided peace for the Church and the number of baptized people increased, but at the same time the quality of their faith life diminished. During this time the first monks emerged, but it was not until the VII century, with Cassian, that we have record of the three vows as we understand them today. It will be in the XII century, when for the first time the notion of "religious status" with the obligation to be obedient, poor and chaste, was elaborated and sealed by canon law⁴³. What has been evident since the beginning, independent of whatever situation the church might have been in, is that every religious family is born to respond in some way to the challenges, needs or threats that were presented by the men and women of that time. Therefore, we could affirm that in addition to the unity of our religious vows, our consecration goes together, historically and charismatically, with the commitment to the situation of the world and the Church in each era.

In any case, more important than what we do, the prophetic sign of religious life is in living our faith with such intensity that it becomes the motor and the explanation of why we give up certain values to follow Christ. Maybe a lukewarm faith and mediocre life style are the

⁴¹ C. CABARRUS, *Seducidos por el Dios de los pobres*, Madrid 1993, 19-21.

⁴² C.PALMES, *Nueva espiritualidad de la vida religiosa en América Latina*, Colombia 1999, 217.

⁴³ M. SEDANO, *Votos* in AA.VV, *Diccionario Teológico de la Vida Consagrada* 1997.

greatest enemies of our consecration. Other options in life can be lived with lukewarm faith, but it is impossible to live with joy celibacy, evangelical poverty, community life and availability for the mission... without a profound passion for Christ and his cause and without providing adequate means⁴⁴.

To be a Christian is to live according to Christ's way of life, to find the meaning of our life in Christ the Truth; to be a religious man or woman means to bring our life of faith to a radical commitment, thus being able to discover the meaning of our life and of the many structures (of poverty, of celibacy, of obedience, of life in communion...) which in other circumstances would not be integrated in our own life. This is the reason why the religious man or woman who experiences doubts about his or her faith, feels as if the ground is breaking under his or her feet, as if he or she is losing touch with reality... While the lay Christian person who experiences his faith weakening can still find meaning in his or her life at work or in family relationships, the religious man or woman, on the other hand, perceives the weakening of his or her faith as a worthless risk for his or her life, which has already lost meaning, and this causes the collapse of values to the point of making life unbearable. He or she chooses the safest path: leaving the community. Or, if the person is lacking the strength to leave, he or she will continue doing the minimum effort, making of his or her religious life not a choice for Christ, but the result of a cold calculation: "after seeing and considering everything, it is convenient for me, to remain in religious life" conducting his or her life in the most peaceful and uncommitted way possible⁴⁵.

Every time we choose something we renounce to something else; the act of renouncing requires a dose of asceticism and self-denying. Consecrated life and the vows, strongly participate in this reality, but they are not only that. As we said before, the choice gives joy for what we receive and for what we keep. Every choice brings with it freedom and liberation from something that you wanted to let go of. Not because it was not good in itself, but because you prefer something else. If the radical aspect of our community life, our austerity, our being crucified for the world or our celibate life, do not express this joyful dimension of our choice, the criticism that Luther made of the vows will continue to be real:

- they attempt to monopolize the Gospel, which belongs to all Christians
- they deny freedom, which is essential to Christian life
- they pretend to have the guarantee for salvation through our deeds, our merits or our greater perfection⁴⁶.

The Church, in confirming religious profession, considers it a canonical state of life together with other vocations in the Church. (*cf. CIC c 654*) even though, in reality, more than acquired states like everybody and everything in us, it is the beginning of a process that will last for life. Recalling the words from the letter to the Hebrews: more than being consecrated once and for all, we are being consecrated little by little (*Heb 10:14*).

Our consecration also has its proper liturgical celebration, uniting the special surrender of ourselves to the total and unique donation of Christ in the Eucharist (*cf. LG 45*). As for any Christian, in Jesus we find the ultimate meaning of our life. In Christ, for Him and in Him we live. But, furthermore, as consecrated people, we want to make of our life an ongoing memorial of Jesus: a visible sign, concrete and real of Jesus' life style. We want to carry

⁴⁴ PALMES, Nueva espiritualidad... 100.

⁴⁵ J. ROVIRA. Cit by A. Rodríguez Echevarría, General Superior fsc, Christmas Letter 2005.

⁴⁶ J. ALVAREZ, History of Religious Life I, Madrid 1987, 78-80.

Jesus' trademarks to the Church and to the world, as a permanent and beautiful presence of the Risen Lord⁴⁷.

I would like to show you the beauty of being Christian, because some think that Christians have to conform to a huge number of commandments, prohibitions, principles.... And thus Christianity is, according to this idea, something tiresome and oppressive for life, and that one has more freedom without all of this.

On the contrary I would like to stress that to be sustained by a great Love and by a revelation is not a burden, but wings, and that it is something beautiful to be a Christian. This experience gives us freedom, but upon everything, it gives us a community, the knowledge that as Christians we are never alone: first of all we encounter God who is always with us; and then ourselves, among ourselves we form a large community, a community on the way, that has a future project; all of this helps us to live a life which is worthwhile to live. The joy of being a Christian, it is also beautiful and just to believe. Benedict XVI, Meeting August 15, 2005, in occasion of the World Youth Day in Cologne (Germany)

COMMENTARY TO SECTIONS 11 AND 12

11. *The Lord has consecrated us in Baptism and has given us the grace to follow Christ, as the apostles did, to form one family and to announce the Good News of the Kingdom.*

It is very important for the life and mission of our Institute that all our communities have among themselves "perfect charity and harmony in living as members of the same body," expressed in their total communion and sharing of spiritual and material goods.

Every person rejoices with the vocation and she or he is called to live and to grow as a person in the grace of a concrete vocation. God has a path for every one within the universal call to holiness which we have all received in baptism:

Nobody went yesterday
Nobody is going today,
Nobody will go tomorrow
towards God
through the same road
I'm going.
For every person the sun has
a new ray of light,
and God a virgin road.
(Leon Felipe)

Furthermore, this point expresses our religious consecration from a Claretian perspective: to follow Christ, to imitate the apostles and always seek through our evangelization, to be and form one family. Maybe this explains the persistence on the dimension of community of our consecration, as if we were one body, taking gentle care of the harmony and the communion in our human relationships. Community life and mission belong to the essence

⁴⁷ G. URIBARRI, *Portar las marcas de Jesús. Teología y espiritualidad de la vida consagrada*, Bilbao 2001, 282.

of our Claretian vocation. Furthermore, we might even affirm that from the charism received from our Founders, our Claretian consecration wants to contribute to the life of the church this specific dimension: family life, the care of personal relationships, and the fraternal dimension of the Kingdom of God that we search for and preach about. A great challenge and strong demand to check the pulse of our consecration in the midst of today's world.

This insistence in caring for fraternal life is also a response to the centrality that effective poverty has in our congregation. This is to say, the poverty that our Foundress always wanted for us, includes the real communion of all kinds of goods, material as well as human and spiritual, something that is impossible to accomplish without fraternal relationships and a healthy and evangelical community life. It is not a coincidence at that in our First Constitutions, after the "Aim and Goal" she wrote a chapter whose title was: *Of the mutual unity and conformity that all the Houses in the Order must have*. It is clear that she did not separate material communion from spiritual communion when she comments upon the functions of the First Mother:

*She ought to know the needs of all the members of her family, and she will see that the donations and other goods are distributed; if there is anything left over or less needed in the annual balance of any of the houses of the Order, so that as members that they are of the same body they will equally share the good and the bad*⁴⁸.

12. *In our religious consecrated life, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we give a response of love in total oblation of our being to God our Father; we become one with the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, living poor, obedient, and chaste; and together with joy we carry on to the end our apostolic mission to which we have been sent. The nature of giving oneself totally that consecrated life implies drives us to give a daily response that will become complete and definitive when the mystery of the Passover is fulfilled within us.*

This point expresses the Trinitarian dimension of our life, as Christians and consecrated women. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that initiates in us the possibility to respond to God the Father. This response consists in loving and in offering ourselves because of love as Jesus, the Son, did it. This life style encompasses the whole life, death and resurrection as well. Meaning that he shapes us into his Paschal mystery, so we can live with him our own paschal mystery. We live it in everything that happens to us, and it will be definitive in our own death and resurrection.

Probably the character of total giving is one of the features that most frequently throughout history, is presented as a distinctive aspect of consecrated life. If any Christian vocation is a call to holiness and to radicalness, then every Christian is called to live his or her own specific vocation as a total giving of him or herself. However, we cannot deny that the consecrated life is shaped by this totality and exclusiveness. (VC 15; PC 1), as a "plus", in the following of Christ. This call is pure grace, *not a passport for intraecclesial arrogance*⁴⁹.

As paradoxical as it may seem, it is important to remember that the big decisions, the great dimensions of human life, often are at stake, for good or for bad, in the small and unnoticed things that weave our daily lives. This also happens in our vocation: it is the daily events that confirm or contrast the truth of our self-giving. The day-to-day events have a density

⁴⁸ First Constitutions, Trat I,c1,n.10. Comments by J.Alvarez, in History of the RR...I, 948 ff.

⁴⁹ G. URIBARRI, *Portar las marcas de Jesús...*, 278.

and depth that we need to unveil and cultivate. Thus we can live the day-to-day events as a place of incarnation, allowing ourselves to be intimately transformed little by little. In our daily routine, we can see the reflection of our entire life, because it is in that daily routine where we find ourselves, where we love, where we work, where we pray, where we rest, where we celebrate, where we suffer and rejoice. One day is comparable to the totality of our life. We would be deceiving ourselves if we pretended to be in our lives what we are not on a day-to-day basis, in relationship with the hidden mystery that we call God⁵⁰.

With clarity and evangelical sense, let us remember that our life, as any other life, is called to fullness, radicality and total self-giving. And all of this knowing that we are only asked to walk and renew our desire to be consecrated to God, the only One who will give plenitude to our response when we meet Him face to face:

We will never understand the greatness of the benefit God our Lord has given us in calling us to the religious state until the day of judgment, and only then will we know what we cannot grasp at the present (Const.94).

CONSECRATION IN OTHER SECTIONS OF THE CONSTITUTIONS

A vocation is a call from the Lord; it is a gift from God the Father. Everybody, men and women, are created to accomplish a mission in this world, regardless of our religious affiliation or our state of life. Our duty is to discover this call in the different events of our lives, in our desires, in what makes us happy, in our skills and abilities...In all these we can find indicators, signs, to discover our vocation. It is then when we can live our life to the fullest, in freedom and happiness; happiness that is not incompatible with difficulties and suffering. The logic and spontaneous response is a life of total self giving on a day-to-day basis, since this is how God calls us every day. The call is never in the past, always in the present. For us, Claretian Sisters, this call invites us to follow the example of the apostles, in a family lifestyle, poor, simple, working tirelessly to teach to the entire Lord's holy law.

To live our Claretian vocation we also need ongoing formation that will continue unveiling for us our true identity as members of the Claretian Family, since this our specific way of being Church. Formation allows us to grow daily in seeing the links that unite us to other sisters in the Congregation and to other men and women, who in their own life style, also participate and renew the charism of the Claretian Family. Formation allows us to discover the vocation journey of each and every one of our brothers and sisters, especially of each Claretian sister. It also enables us to be responsible and live in solidarity with our sisters in their vocational journeys.

Formation is a way of life. Since each person is unique, formation even though the same, is different for each sister. Our being is woven by:

- Our family life, patterns of life that we experienced and have integrated since we were born and even before.
- The customs acquired from the society and the culture where we come from.
- Our own way of being, physically and psychologically
- The model of church where we learned to be Christian women.
- The lack of faith in some cases.
- And the way we have been responding to the happy or difficult situations in our life.

⁵⁰ X. QUINZA', *Pasión y radicalidad. Posmodernidad y vida consagrada*, Madrid 2004,76-77.

All of this requires that the formation process be adapted for each sister; otherwise, instead of forming the person, it can destroy the person.

Formation

71. *Our Claretian vocation is a gift to which we must respond day by day, living in a total availability to the will of the Father, joyfully committed to teach the Lord's holy law to every creature, in a lifestyle that is laborious, simple and poor...*

72. *Our formation is organized in such a way that, from a growing experience of faith, hope and love, we may understand and assimilate in all its depth the identity of the Congregation as a concrete way of being in the Church: let us feel solidary and responsible of the vocation and training of the other sisters: and let us learn to read in the light of the Gospel, the situation of the people we have to evangelize*

Novitiate

80. *The novitiate is the time prescribed to prepare oneself for the religious consecration. During the novitiate, the novice tries to discern the will of God and joyfully embrace it, to further deepen her Christian life, to know and assimilate the Claretian life, and to acquire the necessary virtues.*

90. *Finishing the period of the novitiate, during which the novice must have verified the certainty of her Claretian vocation, in loyalty to Christ who has called her, she will ask with freedom and responsibility to profess in the Institute.*

91. *"In response to God's call, I Sister N.N...., desire to consecrate myself to God the Father, through the Son in the Spirit, and with the help of Mary Immaculate, to follow the footsteps of Christ our highest good, in imitation of the Apostles, teaching the holy Law of the Lord to every creature.*

92. *The Religious profession is a reciprocal and public commitment. The professed sister remains consecrated to God is incorporated to our Institute and participates in its mission within the Church. The Congregation receives her, welcomes her and assumes the responsibility of helping her to be faithful.*

93. *As a sign of consecration and a witness to poverty, we wear the habit of our Institute⁵¹. Where valid apostolic demands require it, we may wear also a simple and decent dress with a crucifix, so that our consecration may be visible. The major superior will give that permission.*

Juniorate

94. *It is the stage of formation between the first profession and the perpetual vows. During this time, the Young professed sisters have to endeavor to strengthen their vocation with the joy of a progressive configuration to Christ, through the experience of the Claretian spirit.*

⁵¹ cf. c. 669 # 1.

“We will never understand the greatness of the benefit that God our Lord has made us in calling us to the religious life until the Day of Judgment, and only then we will know what we cannot grasp now.

Ongoing Formation

100. *The true faithfulness to our vocation is an everyday task, because every day we must choose the Lord anew by a fidelity that sometimes can be difficult, but we know that neither anything nor anybody can separate us from the love of Christ.*

101. *The fullness of the spiritual and apostolic life proper of the Congregation demands of us an ever renewed impulse and constant search, stimulated by the unceasing calls of the Spirit, the voice of the Church and the signs of the times. Therefore, our formation must continue throughout our life.*

103. *After some years of perpetual profession, there should be a stage of greater dedication to personal formation which will give a new impulse to our religious-apostolic life.*

EVANGELICAL POVERTY

INTRODUCTION

As we will see in the other vows, we cannot ignore the voices that ask for a change in name to better express what is the substance of this option. In fact, it is evident that we, in the Religious Congregations, are not poor in the literal sense. The variety of proposals is broad: austere solidarity, common fund, works for justice...What ever it might be, it is something that makes obvious the internal paradox that to profess a vow of poverty entails, since we do not share the situation that two thirds of humanity experience in the world. Even if we might live among the poorest of our brothers and sisters, there will always be our religious community to support us financially and socially. Only the rich speak and write about poverty. The poor are not worry about explaining poverty, but to know how to come out of it⁵².

Therefore, we will talk about the vow of poverty, assuming that we do not live under the threshold of poverty⁵³ and we struggle, in different ways, so that our brothers and sisters do not suffer the dramatic consequences of injustice, inequality, and misery. By the vow of poverty we want God to be the only richness in our life, and we renounce to look for greatness, prestige, wealth, honorary titles or positions...We also renounce to independently use our state and money. We choose a life according to a scale of values different from the one that predominates among the people with power in the world, so that, in the spirit of freedom, like Paul says it, let us be like those, that lacking everything have it all (cf. 2 Co 6: 10). It will be then, when we will not have to make any effort to be poor, like Claret used to say, when one is poor and really wants to be poor, freely and not by force, then he enjoys the sweetness of poverty. (*Aut. FC 364*). This is the moment in which, beyond any ascetic efforts, you become aware that living in poverty makes you happier and more faithful to God's project on you. It is a poverty that goes beyond the moderate use of material goods and that we will be able to call it evangelical poverty if what moves us to be poor is our love and our desire to follow Christ poor⁵⁴ Our desire to have Him as our only treasure and the awareness, given to us gratuitously, that everything we are and have is God's gift to us.

⁵² cf F. MARTINEZ, *Refundar la Vida Religiosa*, Madrid 1994, 133-134.

⁵³ Speaking of terminologies, it is customary to distinguish between impoverished (those materially poor, as a consequence of an external dynamic in which others accumulate what the poor lack) and the dispossessed (outcast of society, interiorly desintegrated, sinners, dehumanized, delinquents, drugaddicts, corrupted rich persons, persons discriminated againts due to race, sexual orientation, ideology...) If we choose to belong to any of those groups is to help them to come out of that condition. We have chosen to be poor in spirit, or as Ignatius Lacurria would say: **poor with spirit** (cf. C. Cabarrús, *Cuaderno de Bitácora*, Bilbao 2000, 283-287).

⁵⁴ cf C. PALMES, *Nueva Espiritualidad...*, 229.

Since the origins of Religious Life, the vow of poverty has been an essential part of the diverse ways to understand the Gospel. Likewise, in the first Christian Communities poverty was part of love, of charity, and of justice. They used to put their belongings at the service of the apostles, not just because of an ascetic practice, or to make a sacrifice, but to share their goods with those who had less than themselves and to accomplish in this way the ideal of fraternal communion which they used to preach in the name of Jesus the Lord. Along the path of the centuries, poverty freely chosen has had a great prophetic and witnessing power. St. Anthony of Egypt feels that God is calling him to live a hermit life, when he is at mass and listens to the Gospel that speaks about the rich young man and he gives away that entire he possesses to the poor. St. Basil, in a more communal life style, holds to personal poverty and his adds something indispensable, the communal sharing of goods. Since St. Benedict's times until the middle ages religious orders witnessed how they were losing power and meaning as they were abandoning a radical life style in poverty. St Francis is, without doubt, the best simple and clear example of one who rejoices in a life of evangelical poverty. This key position continues to be part of the XIX century foundations, since beyond the particular charism all the religious congregations share the same view that is to dedicate their apostolic works to the poorest people. In the history of the Church there is no movement of renewal that has not seen poverty as an indispensable condition⁵⁵, and our Founders are not an exception.

It is also good to remember that Jesus does not put any value on the socioeconomic poverty and the lack of means as something good in itself; rather, he takes sides with the poor and denounces the inequality and the surplus of the rich. Thus we could call poor the person who, following Jesus' steps, focuses his or her life in God the Father. One is poor when one accepts with joy the giving away what is of value so those who are in most need no longer be so (*cf. Heb. 10: 34*); we are poor when we no longer need superfluous things because we are happy with what is necessary (*cf. 1 Tim 6: 7-8*); the one who loves his or her brothers and sisters, to the point to be willing to share one of his or her tunics (*Lk 3:10-11*). Therefore, the theological or spiritual poverty cannot be disconnected of a material and visible poverty. As a matter of fact, spiritual poverty will never be able to be a justification to withdraw in a mediocre, comfortable and bourgeois way of life, one that does not continually question our material wealth, expenses and the life style of those who have abundance of money...Mother Antonia Paris, continuously calls our attention so we do not fall into this trap:

Those are slackening that the spirit of the world is sponsoring saying that poverty does not consist in the lack of wealth of goods or the lack of any other things, but it consists instead in that your heart is not attached to such things... To those who speak in this way, destroying the religious spirit, listen to these words: sell what you own, give it to the poor and follow me. Listen that he did not say detach your heart from wealth and follow me, but: sell your belongings, give them to the poor and follow me. If to be poor would be childish action the Lord would have never chosen to be born and to live all his life as a poor person (PR 18.47).

In short, we could affirm that Religious Life has understood the vow of poverty in three dimensions:

- Spiritual poverty that puts us among the little ones, God's chosen ones, those that recognized themselves in need of everything and are always in God's hands.

⁵⁵ For this historical perspective, J. Alvarez, *Diversas formas de pobreza religiosa*, Madrid 1975. The author himself puts as title in the introduction of the book: "When the Church reforms herself, she questioned herself on poverty."

- simplicity of personal and communal life that makes real and effective our deep and joyful desire to make of God our only possession and not to live depending on other goods.
- commitment with the poor, since we cannot follow and love the Lord, without allowing him to lead us to live a life of poverty and to embrace his cause, in a humble and austere life style, personally and in community. Only this life style will allow us to denounce the injustices inflicted on so many of our brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of God (*cf. VC 82*).

The three dimensions will take different shapes in order to be applied to the specific place where we live, and especially, according to the charism that is proper to each religious congregation. We could visualize it as the three necessary sides to form a triangle; now, the triangle will differ according to the weight that is given to each one of its sides and angles. Besides, each sister receives a spiritual gift and a particular charism, which within the Church and the Congregation- since all the spiritual gifts are for the common good (*1 Co. 12: 7*) will lead the sister to respond to God living an specific life style of poverty, just as it happens in other dimensions of our life.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

In the Bible, poverty is a painful experience, it is an evil that God himself struggles against through those who listen to his Word and accept his mission. If God's people suffer humiliation, oppression and need, God suffers with them. The prophets of the Old Testament have always a word of encouragement for the indigent and a word of accusation for those who take advantage of their brothers and sisters. It is a poverty that we could call it a social poverty, and it should be fought against.

The Old Testament differentiates: the destitute person (*dal*), the beggar that is in need (*ebion*), and the oppressed person by anybody or anything (*anaw*). We can see the three dimensions united in one citation: "they sell the just for money and the needy (*ebion*) for a pair of sandals; they tread on the head of the poor (*dal*) trample them upon the dust of the earth, while they silence the right of the afflicted (*anaw*) (*Am 2: 7*)."

The poverty applied to the *anaw* is the one that God loves; is the poverty in a deep sense, is an attitude of trust and surrender in Yahweh's hands because Yahweh is the only guarantor of his or her life (*Ps. 34: 7; 22, 25; 9: 19*). It is the poverty of the *anawin*, which Mary sings in her Magnificat. The poverty of those who know that everything they have is a spiritual gift from the Lord and to Him they refer it and in Him they trust. It is a particular way of relationship between God and the human person, between the Creator and the creature, with a profound and joyful trust, which is at the same time simple and contagious. The one that suffers and lives in God's presence, trusts and let go of all human securities, because he/she knows that God is the Savior, the unconditional protector and a companion in the journey. When we become aware of our poverty and we trust God, hope springs out; it produces in us the spirit of thanksgiving. We become the ones who search for God, the ones with a clean heart and clean eyes, revealing through our life God's fidelity, that never abandon us ⁵⁶. It is, therefore, a poverty of our whole being, as an internal attitude of the person. Certainly it is very difficult for somebody whose life style is this, who lives it wholeheartedly, to need many material things in his/her way of life.

⁵⁶ cf V. CASAS, Pobreza, en AAVV, *Diccionario Teológico de la Vida Religiosa*, 1327.

The people of Israel continuously experienced how God provides and takes care of their needs, God blesses them with all kinds of goods, but they, Israel, have to learn not to rely on the power that comes from having material possessions, and not make them the center of their lives, because then they forget about God. It was so. When the people reaches the Promised Land and does not remember these warnings, they become unfaithful, divided among themselves, and make agreements with foreign nations. This is why it would be during the exile and in the time of suffering injustice from the Empire of Babylon, when a small group, the remnant of Israel, turns to God and recuperates the value of being poor, not only to use material things adequately, but also to experience that everything they have and are comes from God; that there is nothing they can do by themselves; that only in God is their strength, their joy and their hope. And thus the two dimensions of poverty unite inseparably. They are the poor of Yahweh (anawin), the origin and thrust of the new people of God.

In the literature of the Proverbs many times temperance is recommended and warnings are given against wealth and the excess of attachment to material things (*cf. Pr. 28: 11, 22; Pr. 30: 7-9; Ps. 49: 17-18; Ps. 52: 9*). Jesus continues this very old tradition from the Old Testament, but at the same time, he contributes to it something new: Until Jesus time there is no expressed value in the Bible for a life style that renounces willingly to wealth. In fact, there are writings from Rabbis where they write about how a pious Jew cannot approve nor look for a way to renounce to his own possessions; even more, it is a sign of God's blessings to try to increase our wealth as long as we do not hold them as the most precious treasure for us. We will see further that the same happens regarding to Jesus' celibacy: these are two ways of relating to wealth and to love that challenged the cultural and religious world of Jesus time.

As far as we know, Jesus lived with simplicity, freedom, and detachment from any material or human good (*Is he not the carpenter's son? Mt 13: 55; "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* Lk 9: 58), but it does not seem that he had financial problems in his life⁵⁷.

After his death and resurrection, Christians understood in depth, Jesus' poverty: He is the Servant that Isaiah announced; he is Yahweh's Poor, the One that putting his trust in God the Father, emptied himself (*cf. Ph. 2: 7*) made himself in human likeness, although he was rich, he made himself poor to make us rich through his poverty (*cf. 2 Co 8: 9*). And precisely because he is so, he can offer himself as a refuge and a place to rest to those who carry heavy burdens and feel oppressed (*cf. Mt 11: 28*), he can take to be accused of eating and drinking and relating to sinners (*Lk 7: 34*) and at the same time, ask the rich to abandon their wealth to follow him. The proclamation and the accusations of Jesus are credible because they can see in him not only an austere man, but a free human being, committed to serve those most in need, doing it with simplicity, a man of God, a poor of Yahweh.

CHARISMATIC FOUNDATION

We, the Claretian Missionary Sisters, have received in the Church the call to be poor. It is a priority of this call to give a public witness to the real detachment of possessions, since we see poverty as the master-key to introduce the Gospel into the heart of every person

⁵⁷ cf J. AILVAREZ, *Diversas formas de pobreza religiosa*, 26.

(*Const.13b*). It is an apostolic poverty, since, the lack of it has diminished the value of religious life, also through it, religious life can regain its worth (*cf. Aut. MP 11*). Maria Antonia Paris and Claret wanted a real poverty, not only an affective poverty.

*What happens to us is an exceptional case...God wants that we give a public witness to poverty, since unfortunately; nowadays there is more trust in the possession of material wealth than in God.*⁵⁸

Poverty as a foundation of our Institute is a reality present in Ma Antonia Paris from the “*Foundational Experience*” (*cf. Aut MP 11*) until the last day of her life:

*I need to tell you earnestly, that the main foundation of our Institute is the perfect and real poverty*⁵⁹. *Even her last words evoke this code: I want nothing more, but the Lord Jesus Christ*⁶⁰.

Our Founders aimed to live the Gospel and the vow of poverty without gloss, without palliatives and without concealments, and whoever knew them, acknowledged this about them. Currius, recollecting these values, used to say to our Foundress *that we cannot loose sight of poverty*, and to Claret *that it was better to have nuns who had their trust in the Divine Providence even in the case they cannot collect the annuity, than to have them secured by their wealth, in which case they might cause great disturbances to all the community and attract to themselves the envy of society.*⁶¹

Maria Antonia’s quotations on poverty would be endless, since they are present in all her writings and in all her letters. In the booklet “*Apostolic Missionary*,” she gives clear and specific norms to live poor on a daily basis and always, because of two reasons: one, to conform our life, our self and our ways of being, to Christ (*cf. 1.30*) and the other, to be an example for those who see us, meaning, to bear fruit, to announce the Gospel in a credible way, (*cf. 1-3. 31*). She even goes to small details such as the grocery shopping list (*c. 6.18*) or a humble and simple way of our relationship with others, that far from harming our image, it dignifies it (*cf. 7.31*).

In the “*Plan for the Renewal of the Church*” poverty has a central place if we want to renew the Church (*cf. 16*). It is a personal, communal, and visible poverty (*cf. 15, 28-29, 35*), *since it does not match to wear a poor sackcloth and step on a marble floor and to live in a house that was built for those with abundance of wealth* (*Aut. MP 72*). A poverty that, as everything among us, wants to bring together action and contemplation, the external and the internal, without separations:

Humility cannot go without poverty...Our Lord does not want us to have material profits, nor possessions because He wants to be our inheritance and only possession (*PR 67-68*).

All the editions of the First Constitutions⁶², presented to the Holy See start with the evangelical poverty (after the *Aim And Goal* and the Mutual Union and conformity that all the local communities should have). Ma Antonia Paris did not have any doubts regarding the importance of poverty. It can be affirmed that it is an issue of deep concern for her. The

⁵⁸ EC, *to Mother Paris* (Madrid, 1-30-1862) vol II, 440-441.

⁵⁹ EP, *to D. Silvestre Rongier* (Reus, 3-8-1882) 457-458.

⁶⁰ *Testimony of Gertrudis Barril*, Positio MP 293.

⁶¹ cited in J. Alvarez, *Spirituality of the Claretian Missionary Sisters*, Barcelona 1970, 54.

⁶² cf J. ALVAREZ, *Historia de las RR...* I, 961-968.

renewal of the church, that was the nucleus of her vocation as a Foundress, revolves around this issue. In fact, as she begins to write about poverty she expresses two fundamental realities: only the one that recognizes oneself as poor, will be able to experience total dependency from God's hands, without having to depend on material wealth or one's own strength; only in this way the person can choose God as her only and definitive good, preferred Him over anything else. On the other hand, only in this way will the proclamation of the Good News be credible.

In this First Constitutions, she dedicates chapter 2 from Vol.I to poverty. She begins clarifying, once more, how important it is for our Institute:

It is for this reason, says the Lord, that I want the foundation of a new Order and that they be called apostles, who will enkindle with their example the fire which lies beneath the ashes of ostentation where so many religious have buried it, in such a way that their founders would scarcely recognize them. (n.4)

In order to be faithful in matter of poverty, she requires that none of the communities have properties or possessions, not even the houses where they live (n.6); that we sustain ourselves with our work (although she does not refuse the donations that we might receive) and without revenues (nn 7-8). In the personal and communal poverty she takes care of all the details with the sensitiveness and minuteness which characterizes her, but without disregarding the dignity of our look or the quality of our buildings (*strong, but build with the most common materials found in each place n.10*). This common sense is evident especially when she speaks of the sick sisters. When it is the case to take care of the needs of others, she insists that those needs have to be taken care of, because it is the way to prevent that they try to satisfy their needs in other ways:

With great charity and affability she will give to each sister what she needs and asks for, without saying to anyone that she spends too much or more than the other Sisters, because each one will consciously be responsible how she lives her poverty (c 32, n 8).

When Claret speaks about the virtues of Jesus that he planned to imitate (*cf. Aut. PC 428-436*), he focuses on Jesus poor, in his humility in regards to clothing and housing, his simplicity in the relationships, his preference for the least of society.... Not in vain Claret had begun a new life, when he heard, in the midst of his many tasks and promising projects, the words "what will anyone gain by winning the whole world and forfeiting his life?(Mt 16: 26).

He, wanted to mention many anecdotes which reflected his love for poverty, sometimes, like M. Paris, getting down the smallest details:

This whole adventure confirmed what I had already believed: that the best and most effective means to edify and move people is good example, poverty, detachment (Aut. FC 135).

Thus, we may say that in both Founders, poverty has a primal value, in the example of Christ poor: *...for me, I preferred to be poor with Christ than to have rents to give to the poor, (Aut. MP 221); and the joy I experienced in feeling that poverty was so great that the rich could never enjoy all their riches as much as I enjoyed my beloved poverty (Aut. PC 363)*. In both it is an apostolic poverty, as a privileged means to proclaim the Gospel, to transform the world, to renew the Church and to shape ourselves more and more into the image of Christ poor:

Whatever I have, I have received it all from God... without water, not even the best-built water mill can turn; I have come to know that this is true with me (Aut. PC 344); I do not

*have any other riches in this world than the poverty and the Cross of my Lord Jesus Christ and even on these I cannot boast of since they belong to my Lord*⁶³.

COMMENTARY OF THE POINTS 13-20

13. *Christ, himself became poor, being rich, to enrich us through his poverty Moved by the Holy Spirit, we wish to participate in the poverty of Christ, seeking the Reign of God as the one thing necessary.*

On making the public vow of evangelical poverty in the Church, we propose to be living copies of the first apostles, considering ourselves as pilgrims on this earth. Poverty is the basis and foundation of our Institute. It is the master-key that introduces the holy Law of the Lord into the heart of every person.

Like Mary, the first among the poor of Yahweh, we recognize our need of God and we present ourselves before Him in a humble and needy spirit, as persons who have nothing and who have all hope in their Saviour.

As usual the first reference to live our poverty is Christ. It is interesting that He does not become poor to enrich ourselves with his richness but with his poverty. Maybe, on the example of Christ, we enrich others more with our poverty than with other riches that so often we long for. But in order to truly believe this we need a great faith. Jesus invites us to participate in his poverty, in his spoliation, the way that will really enrich us for ever and will allow us to enrich others, because we will have our eyes and our strength fixed on the Kingdom; we will consider everything else as losses. (*Ph 3: 7*).

Together with Jesus our Constitutions see in Mary a clear image of the poor, since she lived with austerity, in a very simple place without great financial means (in the Temple they offered for Jesus the offering of the poor, a pigeon and two turtledoves); she denounced the injustices of her society which destroy the dream of God over the world (this is what the first Christian community affirmed of Mary when they put on her lips the song of the Magnificat); she was poor in spirit, since her availability and surrender to the will of God made possible the incarnation of the Word. Like her we come into the presence of God:

- In poverty, which makes us humble because we recognize and accept what we are, and we trust ourselves into God's hands. Nowadays, humility⁶⁴ seems to have lost its positive meaning and it is seen as an aspect of our lives to be eliminated, if we want to be self-governing, energetic and free persons. But humility it is not about submission, but about learning from Jesus, who was meek and humble of heart (*cf. Mt 11:29*). This is why our Constitutions say: we are needy, beings absolutely in need.

- In poverty which makes us attached nor to anything neither to anyone, because we know that "*wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be too*" (*cf. Mt 6: 21*). We are all in need of material and physical means to live. Moreover we need them to be able to rightly accomplish our apostolic responsibilities. However all of us know how difficult the discernment can, sometimes, be when the persons and the means are a treasure for us. To give my surplus so others may have what they need, it is a question of justice. But we are

⁶³ EP, *a Currius* (Carcagente, 11-13-1875) 191.

⁶⁴ cf J. CHITTISTER, *Doce pasos hacia la libertad interior. Retorno a la humildad*, Santander 2005.

called to something more: to detach ourselves from the material goods and to use those we need without losing our freedom. This is the proposal of Jesus: to use the goods with measure, asceticism and watchfulness, because if we get use to accumulate, we wish more and more and finally we convince ourselves that we need it. If we follow that road it is very difficult to make real in our life that God is enough, that He is our only good⁶⁵.

- In poverty that commits us to love, because our heart, as the heart of God, suffers the poverty and the ills of others as our own. Thus the call to a preferential and solidary option for the poor (*Puebla 1979*) is more than a fashion, a resolution in our projects or an urgent answer in some continents due to the unjust distribution of the richness in the world. It belongs to the core of the Gospel itself and of the Consecrated Life. It affects all of us, as a personal, communal, provincial and congregational option. And in each different place it will have to be expressed in a particular way, not necessarily doing it in the same way everywhere. It is very difficult to prefer something or somebody without neither knowing it nor loving it; in the same way it might happen to us with regards to this preferential and solitary option for the poor. Our heart and our love are shaped according to the criteria, values and relationships that we consider as more important. In this social field, of justice, as in any other fields, we need first to educate and illustrate our mind and our conscience, in such a way that we may approach in an appropriate way to reality and that we single out the most evangelical priorities. The parable of the Good Samaritan shows very well this dynamic: none of those who passed by the wounded man would not probably be bad persons. When the situation arises, we decide according to what we have established as first in our mind and our heart. And if, we are not able to say the concrete names of brothers and sisters who are poor and with whom we relate ourselves and love them, with great difficulty we will be able to speak about a real option for them.

14. *We commit ourselves to live effective poverty out of the spirit of the Beatitudes, with such a detachment from all goods that, not seeking material retribution for our works, we show our predilection for the poorest and humblest.*

If we look at the gospel text of the Beatitudes, we see that the word used by Matthew and by Luke in speaking of the poor is *ptóchos*, which seems to be limited to the economic poverty of those in need of material things⁶⁶. In this point we cannot make a reading that idealizes our poverty. The poorest and most humble were the center of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, and thus they will also be our preferred ones (*cf. Const 17*)⁶⁷. Let us remember that when John the Baptist sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah they are waiting for, the signs that Jesus points out are: *the blind see again and the lame walk, those suffering from virulent skin-diseases are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor – ptóchos.* (*Mt 11: 4-5*).

They are not the first because they are morally or spiritually better, but because they need us. From there comes our predilection. When we will reflect on n. 17, we will speak a little bit more about our renunciation to look for compensation for our work.

⁶⁵ cf V. CASAS, *Pobreza*, en: AAVV, *Diccionario Teológico de la vida consagrada*, 1338.

⁶⁶ cf C. DE FREITAS, *Pobres*, en: AAVV, *Diccionario Teológico de la vida consagrada*, 1311.

⁶⁷ Const Prim, Trat I, c 34, n 26.

15. *By the vow of poverty we willingly renounce the right to use and to dispose freely of any temporal good without the permission of our legitimate superiors.*

We conserve the radical ownership of the patrimonial goods and the capacity of acquiring others, before the first profession, according to the Code of Canon Law, we must cede their administration, use and usufruct; We must also make a will civilly valid of all the present and future goods.

After the first profession whatever we acquire, by the own work, by reason of the Institute, as well as by way of pension, retirement or any other form of social or religious insurance, will become the property of the Institute.

After the perpetual profession, we can, with mature reflection and permission of the Superior General, according to our law, renounce definitively to our patrimonial goods.

This is one of the points which has the greatest influence of the Canon Law and thus it is subject to the civil and ecclesiastical laws. The first paragraph mentions canon 600:

The evangelical counsel of poverty in imitation of Christ who, although he was rich, was made poor for us, entails, besides a life which is poor in fact and in spirit and is to be led productively in moderation and foreign to earthly riches, a dependence and limitation in the use and disposition of goods according to the norm of the proper law of each institute.

Evidently, from the law also, we are reminded that we cannot reduce our poverty to the spiritual aspect, to a romantic and idealistic commitment with justice or to a legal consideration of our daily expenses.

The second paragraph has been modified in different occasions. It comes from canon 668 § 1:

Before first profession, members are to cede the administration of their goods to whomever they prefer and, unless the constitutions state otherwise, are to make disposition freely for their use and revenue. Moreover, at least before perpetual profession, they are to make a will which is to be valid also in civil law.

The different changes were centered on the sentence: *we need to cede the administration of our goods, the use and revenue.* We may see what it is said in the Historical Introduction (cf. p.22) and check what the XIII General Chapter took away: *not being able to accumulate the fruits to the capital* (although in the present edition of the 1988 Constitutions we still have it) The reason to eliminate this was very much dialogued in previous General Chapters: the sisters, whose inheritance is some kind of estate, accumulate the fruits to the capital, since normally the estates increase in value; on the contrary those sisters whose inheritance is in currency could not accumulate the fruits to the capital. This seemed to be an injustice and for this reason, in dialogue with experts in Canon Law, it was eliminated from the Constitutions. That is to say that now all the patrimonial goods of the sisters can be reappraised.

When we make our vows we renounce to certain rights and we acquire others; if the moment to abandon the Congregation would come, we count on its spiritual, moral and social help and also economic help according to the possibilities of the Congregation, but *we cannot claim anything by title of economic compensation for the works performed during our stay in the Congregation, (cf. Const 181).* We have accepted this voluntarily; let us see how the Canon Law reflects this:

Whatever a religious acquires through personal effort or by reason of the institute, the religious acquires for the institute. Whatever accrues to a religious in any way by reason of pension, subsidy, or insurance is acquired for the institute unless proper law states otherwise (c 668 § 3).

The last paragraph says that we may renounce partially or totally our possessions, being prudent and having the right authorization. The Directory n. 28 establishes 10 years after the final vows to be able to do this renunciation. The Church recommends this prudence for reasonable arguments. So that –in case that the person leaves the Institute- she does not find herself without economic support. In any case, the Congregation helps the sisters who leave the Institute.

16. *In total detachment, we oblige ourselves not to give, receive, keep or use anything as our own; rather, in our use of goods we must depend of the superiors. Nevertheless, we have to be aware that this permission does not dispense us from being poor.*

We cannot say that anything is ours. We do not own any material goods. We are allowed only to use them. St Paul said to the first Christian community: *we buy but we do not own* (cf. *1 Co 7: 30*). Also de Canon Law c.600 speaks of the dependence in the use of the goods.

Moreover we are invited to live in poverty, obedience and our whole life in community, in relationship with others, but freely, autonomously and maturely. That is to say the permissions cannot spare us in any way from a personal discernment, nor will it be honest to base our actions or decisions on the greater or lesser approval, either on the part of the community or of the superior. Maybe sometimes the public witnessing to poverty that we give, is nullified by our childish way of life, as minors, that in order to do what we think has to be done, we do it in hide, we wait for a permission or simply we continue to do what we wanted independently from the decision taken by our superiors or by the community.

17. *Love of work is a characteristic of our Institute. We work in order to earn our sustenance and to attend to the needs of the Congregation, of the Church and of the poor. The communities cannot accumulate “at the cost of the poor of Jesus Christ”.*

This point goes together with n. 14. Both speak about work and of the especial place that the poor must have in our life.

It is part of our congregational tradition a clear love for work, since this is the best way, not only not to be a burden for anyone, but also to help the Congregation, the Church and in a very especial way the poor. ... *I want those poor, but laborious* (Aut. MP 88). Mother Paris puts as example *Mary that even being the Queen of heaven, wanted to earn her sustenance by the work of her most holy hands, applying to herself God’s sentence given to our first parents*⁶⁸. And our Founder acknowledge in a letter to our Foundress: *you well know that I cannot be idle*⁶⁹. And certainly it is not something new; already among the first Christian communities they put in guard against those brethren who, with the excuse of the imminent second coming of the Lord, would not work but would eat (cf. *2 Th 3: 6-10*).

People with fewer economic means, the poor, have to live from the work of their hands; this in the time of our Foundress was much clearer because then handworks were done by the poor. For this reason, Ma. Antonia not only speaks about not having rents in the Institute⁷⁰ but also to live as the working class, which at that moment was emerging.

⁶⁸ Const Prim, Trat I, c 2, n 16.

⁶⁹ EC, *a la Madre Paris* (Vich, 12-8-1865) 921.

⁷⁰ Const Prim, Trat I, c 2, n 5 .

There had to be works with a clear apostolic dimension⁷¹. The retribution for the work done was not forbidden, since it is not only just but necessary in order to sustain ourselves, what she wanted is that the motivation to work would not be the recompense received for it. If the work is an apostolate, what has to be the priority is the evangelizing service, the work of charity toward our neighbor. And more than that, it has to be a work lived in justice, since very often we are the owner's or principals of the schools and, in some occasions this can be an excuse to allow ourselves things that those who work with us would never ask for or to use our buildings in a somehow not generous way. Moreover, the work is for us an occasion to grow in the image and likeness of God. Through our work we become co-creators with God, but in many places of the world, work is a way to exploit and humiliate many of our brethren young and old. To know and to be sensitized toward this social situation of our time is a human and evangelical duty, so that we might be able to buy some products and not others, and also in some stores and not in others....

To serve others without any selfish interest, without expecting any recompense neither material (stipend) nor spiritual (gratitude), is a consequence of the life of evangelical poverty embraced by a Claretian Missionary Sister.

This last sentence reminds us once more that nothing belongs to us:

Everyone's rent belongs to the poor (deducting what each one needs) and therefore it should be given to them ...so that what is justly owed to the poor of Christ, is not spent on scandalous and profane ostentation and (PR 18.34).

This same idea is taken by Claret in the *Notes for a Plan to Restore the Beauty of the Church*:

The bishop must remember continuously that all his rents are patrimony of the poor, and thus it has to be distributed among them (66).

It is important to remember here what the Constitutions say with regards to the temporal goods (173-178).

18. *As a demand of our consecration, the work should be serene and equilibrated, because " to weary ourselves out thinking about what has to be done, simply wastes our bodily energies and exhausts the spirit of recollection which is so necessary for our Congregation.*

This number helps us to see clearly the importance to read and to interiorize the Constitutions as a whole and not taking isolated sentences, in the same way that we approach the Scriptures. The love for work is a characteristic of our Institute, but only on the condition to be serene and equilibrated. Such an apostolic work is what is proper of us, and not a working dedication which shuts us inside of ourselves, drains us, is an obstacle to live with joy our daily life and to take care of our body, our spirit, our relationships.

However, when we say to be alert to the will of God, with serenity and equilibrium it does not mean that we are going to lead a comfortable style of living, leaning on the security given by the Congregation and the communion of goods. Neither can we live accomplishing tasks which might give satisfaction to us but which are not always the most urgent, timely and effective according to the gospel. The extremes will always separate us from what we are searching.

⁷¹ ib Trat I, c 2, n 21.

It is significant to see in the First Constitutions the context of this sentence, *speaking to the young professed*⁷², but addressing all the other sisters: *They will join action with contemplation, the most necessary point for our Institute.* In that text we discover the intuition that in some situations, in the name of poverty, our work and its excess, *does not allow us to have the peace of mind needed to do what is most important: Do what you are doing.* And thus we lose sight of the style, the meaning and the reason which moves a missionary to work without rest in her mission. That is to say, when we are giving what God asks from us, we feel peace in doing God's will. Thus we are able to live without comparing ourselves to others, without hastiness or laziness, doing the best we can.

19. *The life of the community has to be a witness to poverty by its simplicity, austerity and laboriousness, rejoicing in the Lord if sometimes we lack something we need. "God wishes that a public witness be given on behalf of poverty, since at present, unfortunately, more confidence is placed in money than in God.*

This point is based on phrases from our Founders. Poverty is contemplated in its communal dimension, so much to give a public witness to poverty as to point to the poverty of simplicity, austerity, freedom, welcoming relationships, far from always demanding, we are happy when we lack something that we need⁷³. Maybe we do not have to think only about lacking of material things but also on our own personal and communal poverties which are more difficult to accept in our daily life. Thus we will show that it is not money, or riches, or prestige that governs the world, but God (*cf. Mt 6: 19-21*).

On the other hand, it is important to discover how simplicity, austerity, laboriousness and joy go together. This means that the poverty we profess, and also the other vows, is mediations and expression of our consecration; thus it would be incomprehensible that our poverty would show stiffening, hardness, unhappiness, uncomfatableness... The highest good, source of our joy, is the best inheritance which we could have received (*cf. Sal 15*). Austerity goes together with an ascetic will and with some sort of renunciation, but it does not have to conceal the most vibrant, joyful and chosen meaning that this vow has. This becomes possible in the measure we let God transform our desires and needs. When we love poverty; envy, duty, renunciation are not allowed. It is then when our life in poverty may mean something to the world; because a dry austerity may be admired or respected, but will never move anyone to a joyful imitation⁷⁴.

In our charism, austerity and visible or public poverty are a proper characteristic. The external appearance of the buildings was very often causing of conflict for our Foundress:

*I am displeased about what has been build here. Very large doors which look like belonging to a palace and the windows made according to his caprice, very large also and more than needed... We do not have to shine because of our elegant buildings, but because of the education we give... Our Lord wants us to be convinced... that religious simplicity and good education can go together*⁷⁵.

Maybe due to that especial interest, Ma. Antonia wanted that those women who would be initiated in our life style had to experience the lack of means or at least of something. As in any mystical dimension, asceticism has a place and more than ever at the beginnings. Both have to mutually nourish and enrich them in order that none become distorted.

⁷² ib Trat III, c 6, nn 8-11.

⁷³ cf ib, Trat I, c 24, n 32.

⁷⁴ cf G. URÍBARRI, *Portar las marcas...* 355-359

⁷⁵ EP, *a Orberá* (Carcaixent, 15-6-1876) 220

20. *The good of each sister has to be the good of all: we have to put our qualities, energies, the fruit of our labour and whatever we have at the disposition of the community so that, as members that we are of the same body, each of us enjoys equally the goods of the others.*

According to our First Constitutions the sharing of goods is a foundational column on which fraternal charity is built⁷⁶. When we are aware that everything is a gift, thanksgiving springs up spontaneously and we feel the need to be aware of the needs of others (*cf.* 2 Co 8: 9). Thus we offer humbly and simply our talents, our energies, our goods, and we value and enjoy the gifts that other bring. This attitude does not renounce to the capacity to identify caprices, pretensions and superficialities in which we might fall personally or as a community.

As we speak of these common goods in the Congregation, we need to have in mind what has been called the *fatidic circle*: poverty produces wealth and this generates relaxation⁷⁷. That is to say, that pure austerity and individual or even communal savings produce an institutional wealth which keeps us far from what we have professed, unless it leads us to a greater commitment to the poor and to justice. This problem is not new; in the III century, when the Christians lived radically the sharing of goods, the ecclesial property began to grow so much that the Bishop of Rome was envied as a political and economic authority among the leaders of the Empire. Very soon the official Church was not anymore the credible sign of Christ poor, even though the intention was noble as it was to share the goods and to use them to take care of those in need⁷⁸.

In a world like ours, poverty demands today an appropriate formation and information which will allow us to do an intelligent, prophetic and evangelical financial administration. We cannot remain indifferent, without knowing to what point we are cooperating to social dynamics that might not be evangelical (stock market, bonds, transactions, the use of some banks instead than to look for ethical ones...) Many people, believers and non believers remind us that the historical commitment does not have to be about great deeds.

It demands that we live honestly, committed in our daily life, and in the measure that each one might be able, so that multiplying this little actions, we somehow transform the distorted face of the world. See what Eduardo Galeano, a contemporary writer, says: *They are little things. They do not eliminate poverty, they do not pull out ourselves from the underdevelopment, they do not socialize the means of production and do not expropriate Ali Baba' caves. But maybe they trigger the joy of doing and they might be translated into actions. Acting and changing our reality, even in the smallest way, it is the only way to prove that reality is changeable.*

This is the attitude that so many times Jesus asked for and praised in the Gospel: a Samaritan heals a wounded man (even though we cannot solve the violence in our world, the armed gangs that attack on the roads or the structural injustice which reaches beyond us), a very small quantity of yeast will make the whole dough rise (even if it is very slowly and in the darkness of night, without noise, without pause) and that woman at Bethany that wasted the perfume and the time to anoint Jesus and to keep him company because of love (in spite that everything was lost and the Master had only few hours to live). How

⁷⁶ cf Const Prim, Trat I, c 1, n 4

⁷⁷ cf S. M. GONZÁLEZ SILVA, *Pobreza*, en: AAVV, *Diccionario teológico de la Vida Consagrada*, 1347

⁷⁸ cf J. ALVAREZ, *Diversas formas de pobreza religiosa*, 34-35.

good it would be to listen from Jesus these words at the end of our life: she/he has done what he/she has been able to⁷⁹.

To put to the service of the community our qualities requires that we offer with simplicity of heart and humility all our talents received from God, having at the same time a good self-esteem and generosity. In the same way it requires that we be in a continuous process of maturity and formation to grow as Claretians. Poverty demands also that we do not fall into the ambition of knowing and possessing, not in an excessive desire of our own perfection, of the perfection of the community and the Congregation.

POVERTY IN OTHER POINTS OF THE CONSTITUTIONS

The training and knowledge about poverty begins at the first stages of our religious life and is continued along our entire life. This process has to be done in freedom, respecting the rhythm of each sister, paying attention to the fidelity to the spirit and tradition of our Institute.

The sister in the first stages of formation learns, day by day, the poverty we have been called to live. This happens living in community and with the community, and the same time the words and the example of the formator give light and meaning to the actions.

Through prayer she learns progressively about Christ. This knowledge leads her to love him more every day, to wish to be poor as him and to follow him unconditionally.

In the community life and participating in its mission, she discovers that work and the adequate use of time are an essential part of our poverty. Joining action and contemplation, *the most necessary point of our Institute*.

The gradual knowledge of herself, her gifts, her limitations, have also to be enlightened by an adequate biblical understanding of the true poor of Yahweh, the *anawin*. The gifts from God are always a responsibility to serve the Kingdom; our limitations are the way to get more and closer to him, to our brothers and sisters with greater humility.

The formator has to encourage the Sisters to live the theological virtues, which are very much related to poverty in an especial way hope which:

- Will help them to live trusting in the loving and provident hands of God.
- Will make easy for them the little or great renunciations which they will have to do in their process of depriving themselves of their own self and letting Christ transform them.

The formator has also to encourage them to live and to work for true justice within the community and in the mission.

It is necessary that the forming community be a witness of poverty and of evangelical simplicity. Only in this way will the sisters in formation be able to discover in poverty the pearl, the treasure for which we sell joyfully everything else.

The community is asked to live the Claretian life style: laborious, simple, poor; in an atmosphere of friendship and joy, which will invite the sisters to live in poverty. Thus they will discover in the everyday life and history, the gentle presence of the Lord and will become instruments of peace and hope.

Our Founders wanted that our poverty be visible and public. In the Congregation we accomplish this in different ways: our buildings, our inclinations or tastes, the means of work and our houses, the way we dress simple and poor....

⁷⁹ cf. C. CABARRÚS, *Cuaderno de Bitácora*, 298.

Formation

71. *Our Claretian vocation is a gift to which we must respond day by day, living in a total availability to the will of the Father, joyfully committed to teach the Lord's holy law to every creature, in a lifestyle that is laborious, simple and poor.*

Noviciate

80. *The novitiate is the time prescribed to prepare oneself for the religious consecration. During the novitiate, the novice tries to discern the will of God and joyfully embrace it, to further deepen her Christian life, to know and assimilate the Claretian life, and to acquire the necessary virtues. The novitiate is under the governance of the mistress of novices, whose responsibility is to help the novices throughout their process of formation and discernment.*

82. *“The mistress of novices should found the novices from the beginning in the three virtues of faith, hope and charity, from which are born all the other virtues and evangelical perfection and without them, all the others are like a body without a soul.”*

“Faith enables them to walk without stumbling in the darkness and night of ignorance; hope teaches them to live always in the arms of divine providence [...] and charity encourages them to undertake the most arduous and perfect works, and enkindles within them living wishes to work for the sanctification of their neighbors, without neglecting their own.”

83. *The novice must experience the following of Christ, “to whom she proposes to resemble.” In order to attain the perfection of charity, she should exercise herself in the practice of the evangelical counsels of poverty, obedience and chastity, which one day she will profess, and in the community life. Let her be simple, cheerful, friendly, condescending and honest.*

85. *The community where the novitiate resides should endeavor to be true witness of the Claretian life, which serve as a stimulus to the novice that begins her religious life. In this way she will assimilate the spirit of the Institute both in the communion of life and by the doctrine.*

91. *Our formula of profession is... I profess and vow to God poverty, obedience and chastity*

93. *As a sign of consecration and a witness to poverty, we wear the habit of our Institute. Where valid apostolic demands require it, we may wear also a simple and decent dress with a crucifix, so that our consecration may be visible. The major superior will give that permission.*

Juniorate

97. *Encouraged by the community and guided by the mistress of juniors, they will devote themselves to a work compatible with the preparation they are acquiring. “They shall join action with contemplation, the most necessary point for our Institute.”*

During this time they should exercise themselves in the practice of prayer, in accepting day by day the vicissitudes of this life, as coming from the hand of God. Thus they will not

depend on times and happenings, but they will fix their souls in God, who never changes. Thus they will not depend on times and happenings, but they will fix their souls in God, who never changes.

Formation Directors

107. *They should always give witness to love of poverty and evangelical simplicity, to friendliness, understanding and respect for the person, so as to create among the novices and junior sisters an atmosphere of confidence, docility and openness. They should lead them to a generous donation of themselves in faith, foster in them the joy of the proper vocation; lead them to cooperate with active and responsible obedience in their own formation.*

111. *Let them train the sisters in the truth, justice, freedom and solidarity. Let them foster creativity and initiative in the young sisters, trying to develop as much as possible the qualities and gifts that God has placed in them.*

Let them always bear in mind the profound apostolic dimension of our Institute, and train them to be brave and daring in their commitment, to go forth into the world which they must transform by the Gospel.

CONSECRATED OBEDIENCE

INTRODUCTION

Before we speak of the vow of obedience, it is necessary to identify the framework from which we will try to understand this reality:

- All the faithful live their faith in obedience, that is, listening to whom they know has the first and the last Word on the world and on history. There is no other way to follow Christ than being attentive to the Spirit who leads and invites us to allow ourselves to be taken by Him. *Faith is to live the audacity of allowing you to be led*⁸⁰.
- This obedience to God, radical and essential component of the human being, knows also that the experience of God and his Word is given to us through mediations: the Church, history, my body, my feelings, my intelligence, my friends, suffering and joy... Christianity and the human being itself are sacramental realities, incarnate, because this is the way God has chosen to give himself to the world in Christ Jesus. In this way, we know that any mediation is a revelation of God, but at the same time it also hides God.
- Whoever lives the vow of obedience finds support on these two criteria and makes them concrete in a particular way of life. Way that the church-sacrament, sign of salvation for the world (*LGI 9, 48*) has acknowledged as a valid way to live the gospel and to *follow Christ, our good*, within a concrete Congregation, with its own charism. This way of living is described in our Constitutions. We live it in community and with the mediation of a superior. To forget this basic obedience to our Constitutions, as a project of life in communion, may lead us to situations with no outlet. But if we start from this shared obedience, power, hierarchy and privileges will be no more: we are all sisters in search and in a common discernment⁸¹.
- We are profoundly bonded in faith, obedience and freedom. Christ, obedient unto death, is also the free man and the liberator, the Way, the Truth and the Life. His freedom makes us free (*Gal 5:1*). This freedom must be shown in all that we are and do, in all the aspects of our life (*IP 2:16*). It manifests itself in our passionate commitment to the mission that God has given us. This mission when lived properly does not allow us to be slaves of anyone not even of our own self. Our self cannot be absolute. In religious life we make the vow of obedience in order to orientate our life and our decisions to God. We live this within a concrete charism, with the mediation of brothers and sisters which among us assume the service of authority. The only absolute is God, only

⁸⁰ This is the title that C. Cabarrús gives to one of his books, in which he speaks about the discernment. It has been published by different publishing companies in several countries.

⁸¹ T. CATALA', *Vida religiosa a la apostólica*, Santander 2004, 163-164.

God is God. But the congregational charism which I live is the concrete way where I have been called and which I have freely decided to make my own. Thus, within the total freedom that only the Spirit gives, we may be suspicious of ourselves, if we often feel that the will of God over me or over some matter that concerns me, does not coincide with the way to see and respond which is customary in the Congregation. It is not the case to uniform our criteria and thoughts, but to live our own vocation, the charismatic tradition and the judgment of the Institute as a gift, as a simple and kind richness. When I am not convinced that the concrete way of the Congregation is my own way to follow Jesus here and now, it is very difficult to speak about obedience in a coherent and evangelic way⁸².

Authority and obedience are realities which are present in any human group, either through an institutionalized way or through spontaneous forms of leadership. We can say that this is one of the many forms of service to society. Also in the Church and in religious life we count on this service of leadership⁸³. This service is orientated not only towards a more successful organization of our community life and apostolic mission, but also to maintain the entire Congregation in communion (Const 112), with better relationships and a better presence in society.

...It is necessary that Religious Life offer a new kind of relationships, a new space, a space of gratuity... Our relationships should promote nearness not anonymity; communication not isolation; personalization not number; cooperation not emulation; trust not aggressiveness; freedom not oppression... Each one of us needs to ask herself if the way we use our authority helps our communities to become places of gratuity ... This is not only the responsibility of the superiors... All of us have some kind of authority in our community⁸⁴.

Through history, authority and obedience have been expressed in diverse forms. To go over the course of history will help us to value what is essential and see as relative what has been changing.

At the beginning, in the Church, the person who led the community – the episcopo- knew, with certainty, that due to this position he would be the first to die in case of a persecution against the community. But, very soon, to lead the Christian community was synonymous of honor, prestige and power. We are moving from a moral authority coming from personal testimony and charism to an institutionalized one. From this came the confrontations between the Christian emperors and the ecclesial authorities over questions of power.

In the IV century, with Constantine, the Church has stopped baptizing converts; rather she tries to convert the baptized within a sociological Christianity poorly authentic⁸⁵. Thus the first monks go to the desert, not only to distance themselves from the world, but to live the gospel with authenticity, making of the will of God the only criteria of life, renouncing to their own likes and inclinations. With this new style of life, emerges also a new form of authority in the church. Up to this moment the only hierarchy was that of the ordained ministers. The monks had a moral authority because they were considered worthy of confidence, they could be asked for counseling and guidance. They were not obeyed due

⁸² Ib, 161.163.

⁸³ This is the way that the mission of the superiors in our Congregation is presented in a Circular letter of the Superior General, Encarnación Velasco. This letter is completely dedicated to reflect on this theme (October 24, 2000).

⁸⁴ Ib.

⁸⁵ J. ALVAREZ, *Autoridad y obediencia*, 31. In this book we find the detailed explanation of the whole historical evolution.

to any role or title granted by the Church, but for their personal qualities. With Pacomio (IV century) already living in community and not in solitary, emerges the first written Rule with authority for all who shared this style of life. At no moment the idea that the superior is the representative of Christ, is found, because it is felt that a monk cannot be for his brother, anything else than an example, a witness of Christian life coherence, never a legislator⁸⁶. Afterwards, St. Basil will maintain this idea, making the point that mutual obedience within the community is at the service of the mission; the superior continues to be a guide, the eye of the community and not the head, which can only be Christ.

While this was happening in the East, communities of priest were formed in the West. Among these, the Rule of St. Augustine (IV-V centuries) is the most relevant. Augustine will not insist so much on the ascetic dimension, but on the obedience out of love, in communion, in fraternity and thus in dialogue. We need to reach the VI century with St. Benedict, to present the authority in Religious life vertically; the abbot is now considered the head and the representative of the will of God, because he is in the place of Christ (Benedictine Rule). The institutionalization is clearly shown: one does not obey moved by the coherence of the life of the Abbot (even though the election would usually fall on a faithful monk representative of the Rule and able to guide spiritually the brothers) but by the charge that has been entrusted to him which makes of him a teacher and mediator of God for the others.

On the XIII century, the Mendicant Orders, responding to the new situation of society in Europe, propose a new style of Religious life and thus a new way to live the obedience in fraternities that pray and work for the service to all.

St. Ignatius Loyola (XVI century) will radicalize this way of understanding obedience, becoming afterwards the normal way to live it in any Religious Institute. Since the apostolic action becomes the center of our consecration, both community life and obedience are at the service of the mission entrusted to us. *We obey our superiors, never looking upon them as the person to be obeyed, but rather as Christ our Lord in them, whom we obey*⁸⁷. We do this to reach a greater cohesion among all the members of the same apostolic body and uniting the desires and the duties that all the consecrated persons have to seek the will of God. Ignatius makes popular what has been called *blind obedience* towards our superiors⁸⁸. It was Francis of Assisi the first to ask the brothers to obey as a corpse. The difference between both is that Francis was not referring so much to the legitimate superior, as to the Rule of life that all shared in common.

The Ignatian style of obedience was what predominated in the time of the foundation of our Institute and thus it is present in our First Constitutions. However the way that Paris and Claret understood obedience, was more circular and community minded⁸⁹. The obedience to the Constitutions is seen as the normal way of living of the Claretian Missionary Sister if she wants to be faithful to her commitments, even in those moments when there are no explicit mandates from the superiors.

⁸⁶ Apothegmata Patrum , n°17

⁸⁷ Ignatius Loyola, Letter 83; to the fathers and brothers in Portugal. In Obras Completas, Madrid 1952, 835. This letter, known also as the Letter on Obedience, is at the base of the chapter which Ma. Antonia Paris dedicates to this vow in the First Constitutions.

⁸⁸ This term- blind obedience- was never thought by Ignatius as a way to obey in which the persons do not think or form their own opinions on what is required from them.

⁸⁹ From the beginning we discover that in our communities all the sisters participate in the things that affect all the sisters, our Foundress would make possible moments and spaces for this (*First Const*, Trat I c27)

The historical perspective helps us not to discard the valuable intuitions which through the centuries were shaping what we call today the vow of obedience. All of them are present, in a greater or lesser manner, in our Claretian spirituality: personal ascetic dimension of sane self-denial to make of the will of God the center of our life, communion of brothers and sisters to the service to the gospel and to the needs of our world, persons of dialogue, untiring seekers who believe in Jesus, the Son of God made man, and thus they well know that any grace is given to us mediated, incarnate, embedded in history.

For this reason the vow of obedience makes complete sense when it helps us to seek and fulfill with great passion the will of God. It will be an efficient and evangelical obedience when it is a way of life for us, a concrete way of living the obedience of faith, and not concrete and sporadic acts. It carries with it the profound theological conviction that my discernment on the decision to make on the community life, on the apostolic service... is not the only way. I do not have the last word on my life because that is how I want it to be, not because someone has imposed it on me (*Jn 10:18*) or because I am unable to do it. The discernment that the Congregation or the Church makes, whether or not it coincides with mine, will be what prevails.

In the commentary on the points of obedience, we will refer to the points of the Constitutions on the form of exercising the leadership in our Congregation (*Const 112-172*). Even though the numbers are not always transcribed, they are present in some way.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

To obey comes from the Latin word *audire* (to hear). Other languages, like the biblical languages, refer also to the dimension of listening: the Hebrew language uses the verb *sama* (to listen), and in Greek the verb *hypakow* (to obey) is formed by *akow* (to hear, to listen). Something that may seem anecdotic offers to us a valuable clue to understand the meaning of obedience: *Morning by morning he makes my ear alert to listen like a disciple. The Lord has opened my ear and I have not resisted, I have not turned away (Is 50:4-5). But my people would not listen to me; Israel would have none of me... If only my people would listen to me, if only Israel would walk in my ways! (Ps 81:12.14)*. In fact we could say that obedience to God is the leading thread across the entire Bible: from Genesis, where everything comes into existence because God so wants and says it, to the separation of the human being from God, understood as disobedience. For this reason Paul will say: *Just as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience are many to be made right (Rm 5:19)*. In Christ we are all called to live in this same code, because *not anyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven. (Mt 7:21)*

When I hear or listen I have to live attentive and in relation to that thing or that person from whom I want to understand something. The one who hears listens is someone who does not live for him or herself, but on a word spoken from someone else. In our case, persons who are obedient, hearers and listeners of God, in order to live in the way He wants for us.

Looking at the Old Testament it is evident that in the Jewish culture and religion, the word is an important way that God uses to relate to his people and to all creation. When we have spoken about poverty we have said that biblically the poor who is blessed by God is the one who lives in humility and in the confident abandonment of being radically needy and in the hands of our Creator and Lord. In the same way, in the Bible the obedient person is the one who knows that he or she is a creature in relation with his her creator, and who

listens to Him out of love. This is why; our obedience will correspond to the image of God that we hold in our heart⁹⁰. The precepts of a God, who is love, will never be arbitrary, unjust or despotic... and thus He can ask from us a total adhesion to those precepts, with all our soul, with all our heart, with all our goods and strength (*Dt 6:4-5*).

Probably, the way that the people of Israel contemplates its history, its past, influences the way the people lives deeply the obedience. Yahweh is not only their Creator who loves and sustains them now, but He has always been like this from generation to generation; the recollection of the people and the action of God gives shape and support to the faith and trust of the one who obeys. And on the contrary, when Israel forgets about the works of God and does not respect the covenant with God, Israel disobeys, does not listen and loses its faith: *You have seen for yourselves what I did to the Egyptians and how I carried you away on eagle's wings and brought you to me. So now, if you are really prepared to obey me and keep my covenant, you, out of all peoples, shall be my personal possession (Ex 19:4-5)* When we do not listen to the voice of God, far from living a greater freedom, we usually build golden calves to which we may give our will: *wooden idols that have mouth but do not speak, eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear (Ps 135:15-17)*. The basic reason of the obedience in the Old Testament is the recognition of Yahweh as the only God (*Ex 20:2*). He is the one who keeps faithfully the covenant made with his people. The faithful cannot serve other gods because Yahweh is a zealous God (*Dt 28:1-14; Ps 119*) If the commandments of God are always life giving, the disobedience is not punished, but in itself it distances men and women from God and destroys them: *I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live, in the love of Yahweh your God, obeying his voice, holding fast to him; for in this your life consists (Dt 30:19-20)*. In the Old Testament it is very clear that the human being finds him or herself the truth on his or her own life, and the meaning of his or her existence, in the knowledge of the will of God, and in the obedience to Him. For this reason it is not right to identify the Jewish religion as a pure legalistic religion; it is rather a beautiful spiritual tension which springs from the free and personal relationship with God. But, as in every human relationship, this sense of obedience can lose its real meaning, and the prophets and the same Jesus call the attention on this (*Is: 1,11-17*).

In the New Testament, there are many texts which present Jesus as the Servant, the obedient one and from Jesus we Christians are asked to live *the obedience of faith (Rm 1: 5: 16: 26)*. God continues to be the main object of our obedience (*Ac 5: 29*), not only because we have experienced his love for us, generation after generation, but because Christ is also the Word that launches us forth into the future and invites us to live in a particular way, in the following of his footsteps wherever He might go (He is also the Way). This is what Paul exclaims: *if we are living by the Spirit, let our behavior be guided by the Spirit (Ga 5:25)*. Thus let us say once more that obedience is not imposed on me from the outside, but is more deeply inside of me than my own self. Without faith, there is no obedience, but submission; without love, there is no obedience but slavery.

The central experience in the life of Jesus is his being the Son. He lived with such an intimacy with the Father that to do His will became the food that would nourish his entire life (*Jn 4:34; 5:30*) and in no moment what Jesus does and says has authority because of himself but because this is what the Father does and says (*Mt 11:25-26; Lk10:1; Mc 19:45*) The entire life of Jesus is mission (*Mt 5:17; 7:21-24; Lk 2:49;4:16*). He is the one the Father has sent. His being Son is the support of his mission.

⁹⁰ J.L. ESPINEL, Obedience in AAVV, Theological Dictionary on the Consecrated Life, 1172.

But, according to the New Testament, Jesus never obeyed anyone as to a superior and he would exhort his disciples to have no other authority over them than God (*Mt 8 ff.*) We know that in Nazareth he lived under the authority of his parents (*Lk 2:51*) like any other child his age. As an adult, he also obeys the civil and religious authorities, but being careful that this obedience would not interfere with the will of the Father. His confrontation with the Pharisees in relation to the Sabbath shows very clearly that free obedience of Jesus.

Therefore, we could say that from the three religious vows, this one has less similarity with the life of Jesus. He lived poor, going with his disciples from one place to another, having their money in common, he lived in celibacy... but, did he live under obedience? However many affirm that this is the most biblical of the vows⁹¹, since his life was a continual effort of listening, service and humiliation to be one with the Father (*Ph 2; Jn 10:30; 8:29; 16:32*).

It is also very clear in the New Testament that Jesus has authority, (*exousia* in Greek, *augere* in Latin, words that we may translate as “to make grow from the inside). It is an authority that is not sought but given by God (*who being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped at...and for this reason God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names. Ph 2:6.9*) an authority which is not exercised as power over the others, but as a service to others (*the rulers of the nations lord over them, and great men make their authority felt. Among you this is not to happen. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant...just as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:25-28)*). The way a person obeys and the way he or she exercises authority are not two different things, because both come from the same inner source. In the case of Jesus, our point of reference is self evident: he neither obeys to the Father as a slave or hireling nor does he see himself as master of anyone. His way of life is continually showing to us the face of God, and in the same way through the way we live, we will show how is the God to whom we have consecrated our life (*Principles of Government, Const 118-121*).

CHARISMATIC FOUNDATION

If for Maria Antonia Paris, poverty is clearly *the basis of this Order, holy obedience is essential to give its being, form and complement*⁹². The reason is always the same:

Its individuals are to be living copies of Jesus Christ, imitating our beloved Mother Mary Most Holy and his beloved apostles (nn2-3).

In accordance with the will of God, she lives in this willingness: *I only chose not to choose anything; but to be hanging on obedience (Aut. MP 99)*, because as soon as I know the will of God there is nothing difficult to me (*Aut. MP 7*).

This centrality of obedience in our Foundress is reflected also in the extent with which she speaks of it in the Constitutions, since *only the vow of obedience make humans religious and constitutes in them the state of religion, because it includes and confines under it the other vows, rules and statutes* (n 13-14).

⁹¹ F.J. MOLONEY, quoted by J.L Espinel, *Obediencia*, in AAVV, *Diccionario Teológico de la Vida Consagrada*, 1178

⁹² First Constitutions, Vol.1,ch.3,n.1 All the references in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from ch. 3 “On the virtue of obedience” of the First Constitutions.

The same occurs with Father Claret; the special love he has for obedience is seen not only in his writings, but also in his autobiography and in all the decisions he made:

*the essence of religious life is obedience, that is why, Jesus Christ who is the best religious, was obedient unto death and death on a cross*⁹³.

For both of them, the crucified Christ is the complete model of religious obedience: *He told me to look at how He had obeyed and was on the Cross* (Aut. MP 42).

Our Foundress asks an obedience that is not satisfied only to do what is asked externally, but rather an obedience through which the entire person is at the disposition of God's will, including our own free will, intellect and judgment.

To obey our superiors in the external execution of an order is the basic degree, and practically, is a given, *not neither because (the superiors) are more prudent or good nor because they are more qualified in other gifts, but because they represent and have the authority of Jesus Christ* (n 3). Nevertheless, today it is not as easily embraced not even conceptually. We can no longer speak of superiors as *interpreters with certainty of God's will* (n 10). The genuine experience of faith reminds us that only God is God and as such, everything else, is relative, we are mediators, saints and sinners, but only mediators. The one who receives the service of authority, confirmed by the Church, also receives the necessary gifts to carry it through, since Christ himself is accompanying said mission. Now then, in the same way that we believe in the Church as the sacrament of salvation but we do not identify Christ with the Church, our superiors are for us mediators of God, but we cannot mistake one thing for another⁹⁴.

Maria Antonia, aware of the wide margin that obedience leaves in our interior (we can execute the order and not be completely obedient), invites us to true and continual transparency, not only with the sisters and with our superiors, but most of all with ourselves. Given the difference in age, experience, capabilities...we can fall into mutual manipulation which rather than drawing us closer to God's will, which is the ultimate goal of this vow, it may alienate us:

If openly or cunningly, makes the superior order or command them what they want, the subject is not obeying the superior, rather the superior obeys the subject, corrupting the order and deceiving themselves when they think they are deceiving the superior (n. 11).

When obedience does not yet touch our interior, our judgments, our thoughts, it not only remains as something superficial, but in addition, it also will easily lead us to make *the mistake in what is most convenient to us* (n 24). That is to say, if we limit ourselves to what we are being asked, without putting all of ourselves into it, the *gifts from nature and grace* (PC 14) –as II Vatican Council says –, we end up obeying amid complaints, *with discontent, with difficulty, lazily, with tardiness, grumbling, with excuses, with sadness and other imperfections and faults which are the hammer and whip of our sisters* (n.17) On the other hand, truly obeying is another form of poverty, of renouncing the possession of the last or the only word over my life.

⁹³EC, to Mother Paris, (Madrid, 9-24-1867) II, 1202

⁹⁴ Cf. G. URIBARRI, *Portar las Marcas de Jesús*, 394-400.

Now then, the surrender of our will and our judgment does not require from us to annul our understanding, rather it requires offering it. The one who surrenders something first possesses it. We need to put all our willpower and internal resources into making our own the order we receive, whether it agrees or disagrees with our personal thoughts on the matter. Naturally, within the most genuine ecclesial tradition, after praying and discerning, we need to explain what we think, since God gives himself to all of us, and we are all co-responsible of what happens and of the decisions to be taken. Even if the superior after listening with a welcoming heart makes a different decision, we will do our best to obey in action, in will and in mind, *having the same will than the one that gives the order (n 6)*. M^a Antonia made a vow of obedience to his confessor, encouraged by the words of Currius: *in this way you will not possess yourself neither in the less nor in the much*⁹⁵. But we know, from history, that when she saw that this could be against the will of God, she not only explained it to her confessors, but she even broke the relationship with them, being object of many enmities.

When we have the conviction that as long as we obey, we are not mistaken, we might be living priority to the ascetic value of the renunciation and self denial, forgetting that it is also an ascetic value to live in a continuous search and personal discernment in the following of Christ⁹⁶.

When our Foundress addresses those who have the service of authority, she is very demanding⁹⁷. Their responsibility is not easy and it is so important that from its right fulfillment depends the very existence of the Order⁹⁸. This truth may not allow her to forget the virtue of humility in the fulfillment of her mission. As an example let us mention a correction to one of the superiors of the community of Reus. It seems that she had become conceited in the fulfillment of authority:

*I am astonished to see the doctoral tone that your being the superior has given to you, instead of making you more humble, not even a Superior General would give orders to her subjects with more tone*⁹⁹.

The Superior is not above the Rule; on the contrary she is subject to it like the rest of her sisters. Thus it is required from her to lead with her example, since she has to be a living book of the Rule, the first in the practice of the virtues... a mirror in which her daughters have to look at, always busy even in the humble responsibilities of the house as any other sister:

*The good example of the Superior has to be a continuous sermon which will always preach to them the most solid virtues, because this is the sermon which softens the hardest hearts and the mirror in which the weak can look*¹⁰⁰.

The model that our Foundress presents to the superiors is Mary, whose heroic virtue they need to copy, in a special way the love of God and neighbor (n 2). Even in their external bearing they must be a living copy of the Virgin, in a special way: to be grave but pleasant, near, serene, loving, welcoming all... They have to excel in a particular way in two virtues: charity and prudence, without making any difference among persons, treating each sister as she is, never giving orders with arrogance, correcting each one separately, with a non feigned love, making hers the worries of all the sisters trying to solve them (n 4.8.27). In

⁹⁵ P. CURRÍUS, *al. Ilmo. Caixal*, (Santiago de Cuba, 29-9-1856) in: Positio MP, 71.

⁹⁶ cf F. MARTÍNEZ, *Refundar la vida religiosa*, Madrid 1994, 202-203.

⁹⁷ cf *First Constitutions*, Vol. I, ch. 24-29.

⁹⁸ *First Constitutions*, Vol. I, ch 26, n 1.

⁹⁹ EP, to Sister M. Luisa de San Pablo (Carcaixent6-4-1877) 300-301.

¹⁰⁰ cf *First Const.* Vol .I, ch.24 All the references belong to this same chapter.

order to have the trust of her sisters, she needs to be a person able to keep the secret of what has been told to her, and never talk about anyone's intimacy.

According to our Foundress, religious obedience must be total, prompt, sincere, joyful, active and responsible, to all superiors not only to one of them¹⁰¹.

Father Claret, with his readiness to convey his experiences and ideas by means of comparisons, he sees in the fidelity of a dog, a good symbol of the obedience to which we are called (*cf. Aut. FC 671*). He also lived the obedience understood as dialogue in community, when he asks for the prayers and discernment from those in his household before accepting the nomination as Archbishop and later on that of Royal Confessor, since these were against his likings and wishes. As he said:

Lord I do not seek or wish to know anything but how to fulfill your holy wills (Aut. FC 755).

He himself, who considers obedience the essence of our consecration, sees the perfect model of obedience in Jesus in the Eucharist and in the whole of Creation as well:

Jesus teaches us obedience, but the whole universe also shouts with strong voices and says: Obey God in the same way I do and keep his law as I also do. And this is true: look how the stars keep the law of God. The sun, the moon, the planets and the comets... the law for water is to wet and it always does it; the fire... may all of us be obedient as the universe and with so much love as the angels and saints and even as Jesus Christ... Who would dare not to be obedient? ...The ancient Hebrews had a tradition that when God had created all things, he asked all his angels what did they think about it and all answered that everything was very good. However one of the wisest said "Lord I miss a great voice that could be heard from the four corners of the earth that would continually say: Thank you Lord, thank you Lord... The Lord did not answer him; but He already had in mind that voice, which is Jesus Christ in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the altar, this is why it is called Eucharist which means Thanksgiving... In the same way that from Jesus, the spouse of our souls, we have to learn obedience, let us also learn thankfulness and to thank Him continually for having created and redeemed and called us to religious life..."¹⁰².

COMMENTARY ON POINTS 21-27

21. *On making a public profession of obedience, we wish "to be a living copy of Jesus Christ, who, by becoming obedient unto death on a cross, through His obedience redeemed the world that had been lost for lack of it." Thus we remain more closely bound to the service of the Church and of our brothers and sisters. Obedience is "indispensable in giving the being, form and completion" to our Congregation. Following Mary's example, we wish to make our life a constant and generous "fiat" to the will of the Father.*

This first point has several biblical and charismatic quotations, which give the meaning of obedience in our life. First of all, Christ, the Servant, the obedient who enter the world, as it is said in the Letter to the Hebrews, not to offer sacrifices but to do the will of the Father. It is him whom we follow, because through his obedience unto death he redeemed all who were marked by sin, by the disobedience, by the estrangement from the will of God. This can be a simple and at the same time profound definition of sin: to live under a law which

¹⁰¹ *cf Ibid.* Vol. I, ch 3 .

¹⁰² EC, to Mother *París* (Madrid 24-09-1867) II, 1201-1204. Found also in J. BERMEJO, *Cartas Selectas*, Madrid 1996, 476-478.

is not the law of the gospel. Thus, it is the obedience of faith, the obedience to the Holy Law of the Lord, to which proclamation we have consecrated our life that redeems us in Christ.

Jesus is the only authority for the religious community and the desire to be everyday more like him, is the foundation of our choice. But besides this, moved by the Holy Spirit, we see in this vow the best way to be at the service of the Church and of our brothers and sisters, being obedient to our superiors, who are the first to encourage our search and common obedience within the same life Project (described in the Constitutions), in the style of Paris and Claret. Thus far from annulling us, obedience gives us the fullness of our capacities and makes us able for a greater surrender.

And next to Jesus, we always find Mary, the woman of faithful listening and following. Probably, living many situations and decisions which apparently did not make any sense and even seemed to be opposed to the promises of God. But she trusted and was happy, justly because she believed that what God says is always fulfilled (*cf. Lk 1: 45*).

Mary, the first listener of the Word of God to put it into practice (*cf. RM 20*), is also the one who encourages us to be obedient, *to do whatever he tells us* (*cf. Jn 2:5*), even when we will be called to perform the service of authority (*cf. Const 119*).

22. Our obedience is a holocaust in which each one of us entirely, without any division of herself, neither reserving anything for herself, offers herself to the Father and Lord in the fire of charity through the hands of her superiors. We are assured by the Lord's Word that "the least act of obedience is much better and more worthwhile than the greatest sacrifice, because in a sacrifice we offer something foreign to ourselves, whereas in obedience we offer and sacrifice our own will".

Authority and obedience complement one another in sharing in the very self donation of Christ.

Nowadays, the word holocaust has a negative meaning, obscure, sacrificial. However it will be good to remind us of the biblical meaning: a sacrifice was called holocaust when not only a part of the animal was offered but the whole of it, even the skin¹⁰³. Obedience will be a holocaust when the offering will be without reservations, without limit, in complete trust, without keeping anything for ourselves. And this, giving us up in love (*in the fire of charity*), without deceit, because we do it willingly. Small or great personal sacrifices have no value, when our will or our ego wants to be the lord of everything, not allowing that the voice of God speaks and lead our life. Following the comparison of St. Anselm, who in turn is mentioned by St. Thomas Aquinas, the religious does not offer to God only the fruits of the tree of his or her life, but the tree itself, with its roots and the soil where it is planted with all its capacity to give fruit; and not at different times when the season is ready for the harvest but once for all¹⁰⁴.

No doubt that this complete surrender of the person, involves a high degree of honesty not only with our superiors but also with ourselves. Without a good knowledge of myself, of my most common self deceits, of my most hidden unconfessed desires and needs, of my customary way of acting, choosing, relating to others, of working... it is very difficult that I may be aware and discover what really underlies my acting, will and thought. In the

¹⁰³ cf *Diccionario Bíblico abreviado*, Estella-Madrid 1985³, 266

¹⁰⁴ cf St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2-2, 88, 6; 186, 6, 2

measure I better know myself; my surrender will be more free, clear and honest. I will accept the fraternal corrections, the criticism or the praises, either when I have to accept an order or to give it.

It is important to remind ourselves that all of us live under obedience. Thus we are all depended on one another. Maybe the superiors have to live a greater obedience than the rest of the sisters, since having a greater responsibility in the final decision; they have to be more attentive to the will of God, revealed in so many signs (*cf. Const 118 b*).

23. *By the vow of obedience we oblige ourselves to obey our legitimate superiors when they command anything in conformity with our own law. Only major superiors can command in virtue of the vow after mature examination and with much prudence, either in writing or in the presence of two witnesses.*

For the first time in this section we find a reference to the Canon Law: The evangelical counsel of obedience, undertaken in a spirit of faith and love in the following of Christ obedient unto death, requires the submission of the will to legitimate superiors, who stand in the place of God, when they command according to the proper constitutions (*c 601*). This point of the Constitutions mentions not only the Constitutions but the law proper of the Institute, which besides the Constitutions is formed by the Directory and the Documents of the Chapters.

In some way the Canon Law points out the minimum, the boundaries which make that the things be as we say. For this reason, they are not only legalities, but also, in some way, they are theological minimum which show us how to live.

We have said many times that only Christ is the Lord and that we cannot call anyone Teacher (*cf. Mt 2:8*) but we have also spoken about the non replaceable role that the mediation of the superiors has in our life. As any other human reality, authority may drift into abuses, mainly when to this service any kind of greater power is associated to it. Thus, it is the Church itself and Religious Life that give the guidelines to understand what obedience is. It gives to us a great peace and a joyful freedom to know that the Congregation cannot ask from us anything that may be against the Constitutions (*cf. Const 116*) accepted, prayed and more than anything else loved as the way to God¹⁰⁵. That is to say, that we obey knowing that no superior may order anything that is not in accordance with our law (*cf. PC 14b*). Being the authority among us a service to help the community in the search for the will of God and to fulfill it, it will never be a means to impose likings; personal criteria or small decisions (*cf. Const 119*). There are things which are not the object of obedience, they simply are part of what is disputable, and the normal diversity, autonomy and flexibility of a human adult group that wants to live in community. This is the reason it cannot be imposed. However, the consecrated persons who do not enjoy interior freedom are requesting for themselves the power to give orders.

We have already read how our Foundress reminded us in the First Constitutions that our obedience does not depend on the kindness or ability of the superior, since each superior order what she thinks is the will of God, even if she is right or not. That is to say, not everything that happens in the world is the will of God by the sole fact that it has been

¹⁰⁵ cf T. CATALÁ, *Vida religiosa a la apostólica*, 163

ordered by obedience¹⁰⁶. But in faith, we believe that the loving and providential hand of God is in everything and in them we obey.

On the other hand, to order in the name of the vow of obedience, taking into account that the last responsibility lies in the conscience of the person, will be done in very serious circumstances, as it is described in this point of the Constitutions. The Directory offers guidelines, drawn from experience, to be applied in such situations (*cf. Dir 38-40*).

24. *All of us, who share the same vocation, have to seek together the will of God as it is manifested in his Word, in the teaching and authority of the Church, in the Constitutions, the signs of the times, persons and events: collaborating actively and responsibly, in attitude of spiritual discernment and of serene and constructive dialogue. This work of common search should, when be the case, conclude with the judgment and decision of the superior.*

Very often, the vow of obedience is associated to the submission or renunciation of our freedom, will or reason. Being all of them gifts from God and knowing that He calls us to surrender our self completely and not only partially, it would seem strange that he might be asking us to renounce the use of those human dimensions. We cannot search the will of God together with our sisters without putting all our capabilities in it, actively and responsibly. In the same way we need to surrender our will and our reason.

At the base of the vow of obedience we will not find the inequality between the superior and the rest of the sisters, but equality in diversity (*cf. Jn 10: 30*). Since our communities have to make visible the mystery of the ecclesial communion (*cf. Const 36*) and even the Trinitarian communion as the theological foundation, the base of our relationships is not in power or submission but in love (*cf. Commentary of the Const 27*).

The dialogue of obedience lived in such a way, maybe hard and tense sometimes, as the obedience of the Son to the Father in Gethsemane, and even then be based on love.

Our Christian faith, the faith of the Incarnation, knows that the seeds of the Word may be found in any human reality. Thus we have the duty to search them and to make them grow. God waits for us in his Word, in the Church, in the Congregation and in the signs of the times – which are changing according to the times and places, so we will never consider that we know everything and that everything is completed. He is to be found in the persons and events, in order that we do not reject anyone no matter how enigmatic he or she might seem to us. Discerning and dialoguing all of that will make our obedience more alive and evangelical. The superior is responsible to encourage and empower this common discernment and the individual desire to find together the will of God, the best in each situation. That this dialogue be serene, evangelical and constructive will depend very much on the way the superior leads it and how she takes the final decision:

The superior must be a person of prayer who upholds the Constitutions faithfully. “She will strive to go ahead of everyone in the obedience...Charity and prudence must be the rule of all her works (Const 165).

In cordial dialogue with her sisters, she should seek God’s will about the life and apostolate of the community... She should promote and favour the fraternal relationships, prayer life and apostolic zeal of the sisters (Const 167).

¹⁰⁶ cf C. PALMES, *Nueva espiritualidad...*, 268

But it is no less important the internal and external disposition through which each member of the community cooperates actively. Not trying to present and clarify the proper point of view in order to convince the other sisters' to nullify another point of view, but to be able to find together what one alone could not. We do not renounce to think, to have our own point of view, to act in freedom... What we really renounce is to search the will of God alone; thus far from losing, we are enriched by the help that each one of us gives to the others in that search for the will of God. In such a way that we become the sacrament of the will of God for each other¹⁰⁷.

The Code of Canon Law makes clear these two duties

Superiors are to exercise their power, received from God through the ministry of the Church, in a spirit of service. Therefore, docile to the will of God in fulfilling their function, they are to govern their subjects as sons or daughters of God and, promoting the voluntary obedience of their subjects with reverence for the human person, they are to listen to them willingly and foster their common endeavor for the good of the institute and the Church, but without prejudice to the authority of superiors to decide and prescribe what must be done (c 618).

25. *We accept the dispositions of our superiors and put them into practice with active and responsible obedience. If it seems convenient to us to propose something contrary to what has been commanded, we should do with humility and freedom of spirit, after entrusting it to God and being ready to accept what obedience finally determine.*

Probably, the way we accept or do not accept a decision which does not coincide with our way to see the particular matter, shows whether we had presented our opinion in real obedience or not, that is to say, ready to accept a different opinion than mine. The same Council recommended that our obedience be active and responsible (PC 14). Obedience itself requires that we share our thoughts with those in authorities and with the community to be able to find the will of God. For any sister to share in an appropriate and free way her opinion, we need to be welcoming.

This is not something from the present moment or a transient style. We find it already in the *First Constitutions*, when our Foundress following the Ignatian tradition, says that we must present to the Superior what we see in a different way... remaining however indifferent, before and after we have said it to her, *not only in relation to the carrying out... but to be pleased with it...*¹⁰⁸.

It is a profound obedience because we do not obey only on the external, doing what we are told, but it is as well the surrender of our own will and reason. It is a spirituality marked by the discernment, which allows and empowers the religious person to offer his or her opinion to the superior after having discerned, always accepting what is commanded. Naturally, such an active way to obey has to be learned from the first years in religious life, either for those who enter very young, or for those who come already mature, having lived a life with diverse responsibilities in the market place, in the family or in society. If this is not the case, we are forming robots, which obey mechanically not evangelically. Surely, this is the easiest way for the superior as well as for everyone, because someone like these

¹⁰⁷ cf J. ALVAREZ, *Autoridad y obediencia*, Madrid 1984, 143

¹⁰⁸ Const Prim, Trat I, c 3, n 26

will not give any problems. But this is not what we want¹⁰⁹. On the contrary, obedience has to encourage us to offer audacious ideas and initiatives. This agrees with the charismatic and prophetic nature of religious life itself¹¹⁰.

26. We obey under the impulse of faith, aware that we are thus journeying toward the freedom of the children of God. Many times this acceptance of obedience will be joyful, while other times it will be painful and incomprehensible like that of Christ; but it will always be fruitful, since if the grain of wheat falls on the earth and dies it bears much fruit. In embracing the folly of the cross, we participate more intensely in the mystery of the sacrifice of Christ, for the salvation of the world.

The authentic faith in Jesus, which can only come from listening, helps us to see that we cannot do whatever we want for the mere fact to wish it. We learn to give up heartily because we stop being the center of ourselves. To grow in freedom and maturity is sometimes joyful and other times, very painful because it requires dying to many things. It is to live the fecundity of the Paschal mystery, to loose in order to win, to allow to be crucified to all the things of the world, stripped of all our disorderly affections and passions, dead to ourselves (*Const.3 Aim and Goal*).

In the measure that our life is shaped by obedience, by the continuous and habitual listening and search for God, it will also shape us into the image of the Son, and we know that this leads, unavoidably, to the Cross, but also to the Resurrection and to the mysterious spreading of the Kingdom of Christ. If Christ, being God, learned to obey by suffering, we cannot expect anything different for ourselves, his disciples. It is the fruitfulness of the Cross freely accepted, which will always be foolishness for the world but grace and salvation for the believers.

This Cross in obedience comes not only through works or appointments which are sometimes difficult and not pleasant to our nature but also in more simple matters when we have to let go our likings and point of view for the common good or because our superiors in their discernment have reached to different conclusions than the ones we presented to them.

27. Superiors should exercise their authority with spirit of service to the sisters, in such a way they express the charity with which God loves them. They should help them to live in communion and to identify with Christ, respecting the action of the Spirit in them, and contributing to the realization of their personal vocation in the Institute.

Thus superiors are not only mediation for the common search, but also channels of mercy, expression of the love of God for each one of us. In order for superiors to be able to do this it is indispensable to treat each one according to her own characteristics, needs, values and possibilities. The service of authority, far from placing us in a position of inequality, has to increase and encourage our basic fraternity, our life in communion. For this same reason, the way we obey has to be fulfilled in a way that it does not hurt the other sisters, does not break our communion, nor does hinder our vocational, personal and community fulfillment.

¹⁰⁹ cf C. PALMES, *Nueva espiritualidad...* 270

¹¹⁰ LOS RELIGIOSOS Y LA PROMOCIÓN HUMANA. Documento de la Plenaria de la CIVCSVA (1978) 395

Canon 619, which is mentioned in this point, says very clearly.

Superiors are to devote themselves diligently to their office and together with the members entrusted to them are to strive to build a community of brothers or sisters in Christ, in which God is sought and loved before all things. Therefore, they are to nourish the members regularly with the food of the word of God and are to draw them to the celebration of the sacred liturgy. They are to be an example to them in cultivating virtues and in the observance of the laws and traditions of their own institute; they are to meet the personal needs of the members appropriately, solicitously to care for and visit the sick, to correct the restless, to console the faint of heart, and to be patient toward all.

Those are the attitudes that are required from the superiors in the *First Constitutions* and in our present Constitutions. In the points on Governance they explain the way in which the superiors have to live obedience in their service of authority. During the time of their appointment, the way for this Sisters to be obedient, is to fulfill their mission of authority in an appropriate way.

Authority comes from God, who is Love. "Charity is the fulfillment of the Law." The authority must be exercised in the manner of Christ, and in the name of Christ and of the Church, according to our spirit. It is necessary in order to favor the unity, life and the development of the Institute. It guarantees the essential mobility of the sisters for the mission. Authority and obedience mutually complement each other, and this interdependence contributes to realize the fraternal communion (Const.118).

Let the superiors fulfill the service of authority with love and spirit of poverty, in obedience to the will of the Father. Let them manifest the charity with which God loves the sisters, let them listen to them with affability and let them welcome their initiatives with simplicity and attitude of evangelical service. Let them facilitate the generous acceptance of obedience moved by faith and love, ... Superiors should foster co-responsibility and promote, in a convenient way, the participation of all the members in the governance of the Institute (Const 119.120).

OBEDIENCE IN OTHER POINTS OF THE CONSTITUTIONS

Obedience, like the other vows and even our life style, is learned progressively, from the beginning, living in community the joy of the fraternity and sharing in the common mission, in response to the call we have received from the Lord.

Formation is a process of discernment of the will of God over each one of us. During this process it is important to discern everyday situations in which we find ourselves, to be able to discover in them the loving presence of the Lord and his word over us. This will help us to distinguish between what comes from God and what does not come from God; it will help us to learn to live in a constant listening of God's will.

From the beginning of the process of formation, but in a very especial way from the novitiate, the sister has to experience the following of Christ to whom she wants to resemble and whose mission she wants to follow. She will exercise herself in the practice of obedience looking at and contemplating Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became nothing taking, our human condition of servant and he emptied himself becoming obedient unto death and death on a cross (*cf. Ph 2:6-11*).

With the help of her formation director, the sister must practice obedience as it is lived in the Congregation, with the style proper of our Claretian tradition. We need to form persons with judgment able to look with objectivity to the situations, discerning them at the light of the Gospel, but also knowing that their judgment is not the only one, since she commits herself to live in obedience within a missionary community.

She needs to enlighten her life with the word of God and as Mary to give her generous and faithful yes. In the profession a covenant is established, reciprocal commitment between the Congregation and each one of us. We are consecrated to God and belong to a new religious family, sharing its life and mission. This means to discern what is important and convenient sharing it with simplicity, accepting afterwards the decision taken by those in authority at that moment. In the same way, we need to know how to give up our own points of view for the good of the community. To reach that goal it is necessary that the community live and stir up this environment of freedom and of search for the will of God, beyond our own interests and wishes.

The formation director must help the Sisters to discover true freedom, in order to live it; to live with joy the vocation, to cooperate with active and responsible obedience to her process of formation, in her daily discernment and in her whole life. May they also encourage the sisters to develop their own creativity and initiative so they may be able to discover the gifts that God has given them and thus to put them to the service of the mission of the Congregation within the Church and within our world.

Formation

71. Our Claretian vocation is a gift to which we must respond day by day, living in a total availability to the will of the Father, joyfully committed to teach the Lord's holy law to every creature, in a lifestyle that is laborious, simple and poor.

Noviciate

80. The novitiate is the time prescribed to prepare oneself for the religious consecration. During the novitiate, the novice tries to discern the will of God and joyfully embrace it, to further deepen her Christian life, to know and assimilate the Claretian life, and to acquire the necessary virtues. The novitiate is under the governance of the mistress of novices, whose responsibility is to help the novices throughout their process of formation and discernment

83. The novice must experience the following of Christ, "to whom she proposes to resemble." In order to attain the perfection of charity, she should exercise herself in the practice of the evangelical counsels of poverty, obedience and chastity, which one day she will profess, and in the community life. Let her be simple, cheerful, friendly, condescending and honest.

84. Through prayer, the liturgy of the hours and the Eucharist, let her journey towards the identification with Christ. Let her learn to enlighten her life with the Word of God. And like the Immaculate Virgin, who was ever docile to the Father's will; let her be ready to give her generous and faithful "fiat."

85. The community where the novitiate resides should endeavour to be true witness of the Claretian life, which serve as a stimulus to the novice that begins her religious life. In this

way she will assimilate the spirit of the Institute both in the communion of life and by the doctrine.

91. *Our formula of profession is: ... I profess and vow to God poverty, **obedience** and chastity*

Juniorate

97(b). *During this time they should exercise themselves in the practice of prayer, in accepting day by day the vicissitudes of this life, as coming from the hand of God. Thus they will not depend on times and happenings, but they will fix their souls in God, who never changes.*

Ongoing Formation

102. *For all its members, our religious community should be the habitual place of renewal and ongoing formation, creating an atmosphere of prayer, spiritual freedom and fraternal help, being attentive to what the Lord expects of her in each concrete situation, specifying objectives and evaluating them.*

Formators

107. *They should always give witness to love of poverty and evangelical simplicity,¹¹¹ to friendliness, understanding and respect for the person, so as to create among the novices and junior sisters an atmosphere of confidence, docility and openness. They should lead them to a generous donation of themselves in faith, foster in them the joy of the proper vocation; lead them to cooperate with active and responsible obedience in their own formation.*

111. *Let them train the sisters in the truth, justice, freedom and solidarity. Let them foster creativity and initiative in the young sisters, trying to develop as much as possible the qualities and gifts that God has placed in them. Let them always bear in mind the profound apostolic dimension of our Institute, and train them to be brave and daring in their commitment, to go forth into the world which they must transform by the Gospel.*

¹¹¹ Cf. *Const.* 1869, Tr. III, ch. 4, n. 10.

CONSECRATED CHASTITY

INTRODUCTION

We have already said that the religious consecration is not reduced to the profession and experience of the three vows, and that they make much more sense when integrating them globally. But, many think that it is the vow of chastity which gives a clearer charismatic specificity to our consecration, because we have learned that Jesus and his Gospel request not only our ability to work for the Kingdom, but the totality of our person¹¹² This appreciation is important not to reduce the vow only to sexual abstinence, nor to leave out the impulses, needs, affections, pleasures... It is the person as a whole that consecrates her because she has been taken by Christ. Biblically, the Christian anthropology is unitarian: we are corporeal, vital, and spiritual men and women. The Bible is neither dual (the body on one side and the soul on another) nor trichotomic (independent body, soul and spirit like three blocks or compartments that are added). God consecrates us in soul, body and spirit:

Yet it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature. Only thus is love —eros—able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur (Benedict XVI. DCE 5b).

When we engage with the Kingdom we are called to live serving its cause; when we give ourselves to the Lord, we are called to live with Him and to be like Him. The essence of virginity, of celibacy for the Kingdom is the intimate and absolute love for the Lord and, therefore, the fecundity of this state will depend on the love we live our celibacy. Moreover, it will depend on the love that we accept from Him, how we live it and give it.

Consecrated chastity will never be, in the first place, a personal initiative, but a charisma, that is to say, a special manifestation of the Spirit (1Co 12: 7), a gift received from God. One does not choose celibacy and virginity to enter the Kingdom of heaven, but because the God of the Kingdom has entered in our life. In other words: we do not remain virgin to more surely save the soul, as during centuries many affirmed within the Church,

¹¹² T. CATALA' *Vida religiosa a la apostólica*, 166.

devaluating the marriage and sexuality, but because the God of the Kingdom seduces me and loves my whole being, including my sexuality.

In this way, the difficulty of the vow will not be only in renouncing to all kinds of sexual relations and to a common project as a couple, but in the progressive “virginization” of our life: to re-orientate our affections, desires; to be tender towards others without distinctions; to love without hoping to receive love in return; to love those whom nobody loves and do not put anything before Christ in our life... A learning process that lasts while we are alive, and through which, we will constantly need the confrontation and support of other brothers and sisters, in order to watch from a certain distance, the always complicated affective-sexual aspect of our life. Chastity for the Kingdom of God seeks the brotherhood between all men and women beyond the barriers and boundaries that we constantly build among us. It is a process of maturity that helps us to give our heart and life to our brothers and sisters. For the disciple of Christ, the whole life becomes an offering and in this way it becomes an encounter with God.

For that reason, human maturity, and Christian maturity become one and the same thing. Our affective capacity matures inasmuch as we become more integrated persons; more independent; freer, and more Christian. In other words: when we center our affection in Christ and put the best of ourselves to the service of the Kingdom. Thus living like this, other loves, friendships, and affections are not annulled, but are all related to God; and we look for Him in all we love and yearn for. But there is no spiritual growth without psychological maturity. We are an integrated unit. Theologically, to live like this, with the rhythm of the Spirit, is pure grace, but it also requires that we use the means to grow psychologically, with the vitality, peace and inner joy that come from a balanced person.

In the same way that speaking of poverty it helped us to say a word about the meaning of the material goods in the Church, it is also important to know what concept of sexuality we have when speaking of chastity, virginity or celibacy¹¹³. This is one of the most conflicting subjects of the Church when confronted by society. We cannot deny that, historically, Christians have lived under some sort of obscurantism regarding everything that had to do with sex and pleasure. From the prohibition, we have equated too frequently sexuality and genitality, having neglected the capacity to live, to love and to experience intimacy that our sexual dimension gives us as pure gifts from God. The name that J. Alvarez gives to a chapter of his book about the origins of the virginity – *From the peacefulness of the Sacred Scriptures to the anguish of the Christians regarding sexuality*, is very significant¹¹⁴.

On the other hand, currently, in some cultures, sexuality has been trivialized:

Nowadays Christianity of the past is often criticized as having been opposed to the body; and it is quite true that tendencies of this sort have always existed. Yet the contemporary way of exalting the body is deceptive. Eros, reduced to pure “sex”, has become a commodity; a mere “thing” to be bought and sold, or rather, man himself becomes a commodity. This is hardly man's great “yes” to the body. On the contrary, he now considers his body and his sexuality as the purely material part of himself, to be used and exploited at will. Nor does he see it as an arena for the exercise of his freedom, but as a mere object that he attempts, as he pleases, to make both enjoyable and harmless. Here we

¹¹³ T. CATALA, Id. 241. The author distinguishes various definitions, (from the European context), that we might use indistinctively, pointing out that he stresses more each one in this vow: **chastity**, **virginity**, **celibacy** and **purity**. All these definitions have limitations, but what makes them particular to our charisma is the **motivation: for Christ, for His Kingdom**.

¹¹⁴ J. ALVAREZ, *Virginidad consagrada. ¿Realidad evangélica o mito socio-cultural?*, Madrid 1977. The entire historic process can be read here with absolute detail.

are actually dealing with a debasement of the human body: no longer is it integrated into our overall existential freedom; no longer is it a vital expression of our whole being, but it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere. The apparent exaltation of the body can quickly turn into a hatred of bodylines. Christian faith, on the other hand, has always considered man a unity in duality, a reality in which spirit and matter are mutually dependent, and in which each is brought to new nobility. Certainly, eros wants to 'elevate us in ecstasy' towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves; yet for this very reason it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing (*DCE 5c*).

In the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament, sexuality always appears with the naturalness, balance and the goodness that all work of God has; and with the ambiguity and possibility of sin of everything created. Nevertheless, soon sexuality will be looked as something dangerous and will be the object of negative statements; influenced probably by the Greco-roman culture of the time. That culture lessened the true value of Christian sexuality and also the value of virginity and marriage's well. It will be necessary to take this fact into consideration when establishing the foundation of this vow and of the holistic understanding of sexuality.

Virginity as a way of life was already very valued in the Church and spread very quickly during the life of the apostles. In fact, in the second century consecrated virgins are found in all regions where the Gospel was preached, and in the fourth century, the texts speak of a multitude. This option was specially significant during the three first centuries, a time of persecution for Christians, who saw virgins and ascetics¹¹⁵ as radical witnesses of the Gospel, not only because they had made the option to live in celibacy, but due to their austerity, their life of prayer, and devotion to the poorest and ill. In the midst of a pagan and quite immoral social culture in every aspect, they stayed away from certain shows, social baths and other practices.

Chastity appears for the first time as a vow, with a public ritual, at the end of the III century and beginning of the IV. We still have the Liturgical text of the imposition of the virginal veil to Marcelina (year 353), sister of San Ambrose, bishop of Milan. The love to Christ, her espouse, and the dedication to the Kingdom of God are described as motivations for this vow. It is important to see how from the beginning this double motivation sustains the consecrated chastity.

During the IV and V centuries, when the quality of Christian life began diminishing, virginity became the object of abuses and deviations. The high esteem for monks as new martyrs, and authentic witnesses of Christ, also entailed an excessive valuation of virginity damaging the image of marriage, sex and even women¹¹⁶. The culmination was reached in the Middle Ages and in some statements of the Council of Trent. But nowadays, after the Second Vatican Council, the Church affirms again that both ways of living called to holiness by baptism, are necessary and complementary as gifts from God to the Church. Now those of us who are consecrated, we are called to signify through our celibate life that God is the great Love of our life and in him we love everyone, without preference or distinction (*LG 42; PC 1, 12*). It is a way to proclaim with our life that the love of Christ *incapacitates us* to give the totality of our love, our vital, sexual and genital energy only to

¹¹⁵ That was the name given to men who practiced celibacy in the name of the Kingdom. Numerically speaking, there were much more women than men that chose this style of life. It is necessary to take into account that in a society in which women's value was placed only in being a wife and mother, to freely choose to become a virgin, was a sign of being quite free and prophetic.

¹¹⁶ It is very illustrative to read the writings of priests like Atanasuis, Chrisostom, or Augustin, who, while adding so much richness to the Church, also gave way to a very unhealthy morality regarding this issue, and with consequences that persist even today. J. ALVAREZ, *Virginidad consagrada*, 44-78.

one person. It is a way to proclaim with our own life, that what is final is not here yet. It will come but it is already active in us giving us the strength and meaning to live it.

In addition, it visibly expresses the unity of the person in Christian theology. By the incarnation the corporality of the human being is a theological place; a place of revelation and encounter, in the state of grace as well as in the state of sin. Thus, what we do with our body makes a difference. We cannot have a relationship with Christ, the Son of God made man, ignoring our body and our flesh. The consecrated person, accepting the gift of virginity, responds to the invitation of Jesus Christ to love Him above all things. The body is not only one conglomerate of systems and organs, condemned to return to the earth (*Gn 3:19*); it is grafted in the true Life, in Jesus Christ (*Jn 15:15*), she is the dwelling place of Christ and part of the Mystical Body of Christ (*1Co 12:12-27*). Our body cannot then be a mere wrapper, the jail of the soul or a continuous occasion of condemnation.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

From the times of the Old Testament, the human dignity is categorically accentuated. Not only it is the work of God, His creature, but it was also created in His image and likeness (*Gn 1: 27*). J. Flavius, in *Antiquitates Iudaicae*, makes an interesting etymology of the word Adam: taking earth dust God formed the man and instilled in him breath and spirit. This man was called Adam, who in Hebrew means red, because he has come to existence from modeling red earth, the color proper of the virgin earth.

Comparing the first account of the creation of man with the second account (*Gn 2: 7*), we see a common denominator: the total dependency from God. The clay of the first story as well as the symbol of the red earth of the second story and the virginity of the earth in Flavius, all stress the message that the human being belongs to God and that of him depends: Woe to him who contends with his Maker; a potsherd among potsherds of the earth! Dare the clay say to its modeler, "What are you doing?" or, "What you are making has no handles?" (*Is 45:9*).

Therefore the human being is the work of God. Nothing in him is impure. His entire being is the image and similarity of God; including its corporal dimension. According to the Biblical stories of creation, the human being, more than a corporal spirit, is mud, spiritual flesh that reaches all its dignity and potentiality when receiving the blowing of life, the Spirit of God. Once He created man and woman, God, pleased with His work, requests two things from them: to take care of creation and to grow and multiply. It is not strange, then, that in the Old Testament, sexuality is lived very naturally as a gift from God and that chosen celibacy is seen like something strange and even in opposition to the divine plan. The natural goal for man and woman was to be united forming a single body, but staying a virgin until marriage was greatly valued (*Dt 22: 14-29; Gn 34: 7; 2S 13: 1-22*).

The virgin was protected by the law (*Ex 22: 15*). The Highest Priest could only marry a virgin (*Lv 21: 14-15*). Maidens, as well as virgin boys were seen as signs of the strength of God and the hope of the chosen people, that was the reason why their slavery causes pain and a still greater sadness (*Lm 1:18*). Virgin is also the name often given to the people of Israel - *virgin Israel* (*Jr 31:4; Is 62: 5; Am 5:2*), betrothed in perpetual covenant with her God, united in spousal love.

Nevertheless, a perpetual and chosen virginity is not understood. The fecundity was considered not only a privilege of the human being (especially of man) but an obligation and a responsibility received from God, of which only you could decline if you had some

physical incapacity. For a woman not to marry or being sterile (it was always assumed that she, and not the husband, was responsible for it), this was a tragic situation, because she became an outcast, considered damned and rejected by God Himself (*Gn 30: 23; Is 49:21; 1 S 1: 6-11; Gn 29: 31-32*). And nevertheless, many women who were virgin and sterile were the object of the preferential love of God precisely for that reason, and channels of grace for all: Sara, Rachel, Anna, Elizabeth, Mary...

An exceptional case, and with strong symbolic sense, is the case of Jeremiah, who chooses not to marry according to the command of the Lord: This message came to me from the LORD: Do not marry any woman; you shall not have sons or daughters in this *place* (*Jr 16: 1-2*). Also Judith, widow and without children, renounces to marry for a greater fidelity (*Jdt 16:22-24*). Few are the texts that praise virginity and spiritual fecundity in the Old Testament (*Ws 3:13; Ps 18 (17): 25; Ps 73 (72) 1. 3-17*).

Among the rabbinical texts, the only well-known exception is the case of Simon ben Azaj that, although like all, taught that man must marry, he did not do so himself. When he was criticized for that reason, he defended himself saying: *What can I do? My soul is adhered to the Torah. Let others populate the world*¹¹⁷.

Close to Jesus' time, it is probable that the Essenes and the community of Qumran practiced celibacy; the central motivation was to be convinced that the end of times was imminent. When considering this background it makes sense to think that John the Baptist also chose to be celibate.

But in Jesus, there is a style to live it differently. In order to understand it we cannot forget what He says about eunuchs in Mathew: *there are eunuchs that were born like that, others were done by the men and some became such to themselves by the Kingdom of Heaven. Not all can, only those to which it has been granted* (*Mt 19: 12*). It is clear that it is not presented like a necessary rule for the radical following of Christ. It is an *advice*, as Paul says (*1Co 7: 25*), and for that reason it is not good for everybody, but only for those that receive the grace. Jesus not only does not agree in seeing celibacy in opposition to the plan of God, but He affirms that some are celibate for the Kingdom, by pure gift of God.

Other texts of the New Testament related to chastity also invite to give up family, a concrete person on whom to recline the head... (*Mt 4 22:10 37-38; Lk 14: 26-27*). For Saint Paul, virginity gives greater freedom to love our brothers with a new love. Love all, like the Lord, without loving less, but more; but without being centered in any person in an exclusive way.

Jesus' free and voluntary celibacy, in spite of some theological opinions, seems beyond all doubt. In him one can see the solitude of a young man without woman; without children; not only insulted by its enemies as impotent (eunuch), but also calmly distancing himself from His family in Nazareth. Never as contempt, but insisting that the ties of flesh and blood are not the definitive ones (*Mk 3:34-35*) and that the matters of God always come before family needs (*Lk 2:49*). Once more, the freedom given to Jesus by His relationship with the Father, allows Him to live outside the main Jewish rule: to marry and have descendants. In addition, its relation with women as a social group and with each one in particular, is so simple, so human, that it is deeply prophetic and therefore, scandalous. Thus, for the first time in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Paul will write that, in Jesus Christ, there is no woman, no man, no Jew, nor gentile, neither slave nor free (*Ga 3:28*).

¹¹⁷ Cited in many places like A. APARICIO, *Castidad*, in: AAVV: *Diccionario teológico de Vida Consagrada*, 168.

But, the great newness that Jesus brings to this subject is that He presents Himself like the spouse, the fiancé, the treasure for whom everything else can be left aside, including marriage, descendants, and fecundity, gift so valued by the Old Testament tradition. We are not celibate only to imitate Christ more closely, but for Christ Himself.

CHARISMATIC FOUNDATION

The First Constitutions dedicate a brief chapter to “Chastity and Modesty”¹¹⁸. In the first point it speaks of the role model we must always imitate: Mary, our Mother. In the second it is recommended *to take extreme care of the doors to our senses, specially the eyes, ears and language*. On another chapter it talks about some rules that must be followed regarding “*What each one must take care about herself*”¹¹⁹ and finally there is a chapter “*About the young professed sisters*”¹²⁰. This is already speaking to us about how much wider is the concept of chastity for Mother Paris and in which points she puts a greater emphasis. It is not reduced to sexual continence, nor to any concrete way in which do we relate to others. She reminds us that on that subject it is also important the way in which each one of relates to herself. In addition, M^a Antonia considered that the young profess needed a greater attention in this subject, being centered in the tasks and the apostolic work, which lived in a way or another will help us to balance our life and therefore either it will integrate it affectively, or will lead it to burden, fatigue, and lack of interest in what we do.

When speaking of the care that we should take of ourselves, it reproduces the habitual way that religious life of the time would consider appropriate in this matter, many of them are not acceptable today (like the way of walking, to incline the head or to half-close the eyes...) Nevertheless, a deeper reading can offer us some valid criteria, like moderation in our acts (actions, laughter, tone of voice...) or the correctness and good taste in our physical aspect, without calling the attention neither by excess nor by defect, nor indirectly looking to seduce or to attract others.

In other chapters other virtues or some aspects related to chastity are treated, like industriousness, mortification, sobriety and fights against defects like desire to please and flirtation.

M^a Antonia lived consecrated virginity as the expression of her relationship with Christ. For that reason, she stresses that this is a vow that can only be maintained through deep faith and love, which in turn will lead us to a free, conscious and joyful choice. Remembering the frailty of human nature (2Co 4:7) and the arduous demands of a total consecration, we will never be conceited of our own virtue and we will use the necessary means to live what we have promised which is to live a simple, austere, homelike and affable life.

Mother Paris’ Epistolary is another living source where we can see her way of living chastity (although it does not speak specifically of her) through the freedom and affection whereupon she relates to different people, including important men in her life: Curríus, Nepomuceno Lobo, Caixal, Claret, Dionisio, etc... Without difficulty, she acknowledges *the great love* that she feels but at the same time she does not hesitate to renounce to those relationships when they intend to contradict what she clearly sees to be the *will of God*.

¹¹⁸ *First Const.* I, ch. 4, n. 1 & 2.

¹¹⁹ *Ib.* Part I, ch. 9.

¹²⁰ *Ib.* Part III, ch. 6.

Friendship is also important for our Foundress, especially with Florentina, combining human intimacy and unity in Christ.

Claret bases celibacy for the Kingdom on the Bible and on Theology:

*Jesus was the chiest; He greatly loved that virtue and all those that followed it... His enemies could never throw in his face any suspicion against that virtue.... and how much did He love this virtue in the people who surrounded Him! The Most Holy Virgin Mary, the most chaste Saint Joseph, the admirable Saint John the Baptist; the Apostles after their vocation, all were very chaste and, among them, Saint John the Evangelist was deeply loved by his virginity... And on earth He wants that those devoted to His service at the altars keep chastity*¹²¹.

He considers chastity a requirement of his apostolate and unites it to the virtue of mortification which strengthens and liberates the apostle (*Aut. FC 417-418*). In his Autobiography he dedicates two long chapters to mortification as one of the most necessary apostolic virtues. He links it with temperance, prudence, justice, strength, faith, hope, mercy and with continuous and ardent occupation in God in the interior and in the exact fulfillment of the law of God and of the Church (*Aut. FC 414-415, 419*).

Claret considers chastity fundamental not only in his apostolic ministry but in the ministry of all his collaborators. When counting his experience of the Angel of the Apocalypse in 1859, he says that the Lord insisted to him that also his brothers (the Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary) have *to imitate the apostles James and John in zeal, chastity and love for Jesus and Mary* (*Aut. FC 686*).

For our Founder chastity is a gift we have to ask for. In the third part of his Autobiography (since his consecration as Bishop) he gathers among his particular devotions, a beautiful prayer he has written in Latin, thus trying to give it a greater emphasis: *Father, give me humility, meekness, chastity, patience and charity. Father teach me goodness, knowledge and discipline. Father, give me your love together with your grace and I will be rich enough. My God, my Jesus and my all* (*Aut. FC 657*). A prayer that can be related to the last words of M^a Antonia Paris in her deathbed: *nothing else I love but Our Lord Jesus Christ*¹²².

At other instances, like in his *Letter to the Missionary Teofilo*, Claret unites chastity with Mary and the simplicity in the way of presenting the message:

*Learn, Teofilo, from Mary; with your chastity you have to please God and by the humility whereupon you will study the Holy Books and with which you will pray to God, you will receive what you're to say or the Word that you are to preach. The Virgin wrapped Him in swaddling clothes; you will wrap Him in a simple and natural style. The Virgin placed Him in a manger... you will place the Word in such a way that even the simplest of men can grasp it*¹²³.

In order to collaborate in fidelity to this gift from God, Claret advised to take care of prayer and to make conscious the presence of God, together with the love to Mary. He knew by experience that temptations can even be stimuli to go to God, whether in prayer, in the sacraments... specially penance and the Eucharist. He also considered our responsibility to avoid circumstances and everything that can make difficult our fidelity. Not by running away from or denying ourselves, but because common sense and sobriety as habitual note

¹²¹ F. CLARET, *Espiritualidad sacerdotal*, Ch. IV, n. 5; in J. BERMEJO, *Escritos espirituales*, Madrid 1985, 306.

¹²² AAVV, *To hope against hope*, 94 *Positio*, MP 293.

¹²³ F. CLARET, *Carta al Misionero Teófilo*, in J. BERMEJO, *Escritos espirituales*, 377.

of our life, helps us to live our faith better¹²⁴. He himself had experienced this personally in that temptation against chastity, while being a student in Barcelona, which shaped the rest of his personal and missionary life (*Aut. FC 72, 95-98*).

COMMENTARY TO POINTS 28-34

28. *Consecrated chastity is a precious gift which we receive from the Father. He consecrates us so that we follow and imitate Christ Jesus, virgin, for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus, through the power of his Spirit, He manifests in the frailty of our nature a glorious sign of the good things of heaven.*

This first point condenses very well all the theological foundation of the vow. It is a gift from the Father; therefore it cannot be born of our own effort or of a personal choice based on the evaluation of chastity over other forms of life. It is a gift that is given to us to better follow and imitate Christ, virgin for the Kingdom. As it happens with the other vows and, with our consecration seen as a whole, chastity only has sense if it fulfills me and allows me to grow in such a way, that it gets me closer to Christ and the brothers, and helps me to better serve the others.

By being consecrated in chastity, we declare that our whole life is fulfilled thanks to the action of the Spirit in us, fragile creatures, in need, always open to God that sustains us. And this is how chastity may signify in this world the beauty and the love of God, whom we want to proclaim with our whole life. Virginal love shows that the Resurrection of Christ is so real that it can fill our life with meaning, making us to live with a love that cannot lean on bonds of flesh and blood. It is a total love, but it simultaneously expresses and proclaims that we are living in relativity, because only God is God, and this time is a journey towards another definitive time, begun and made possible with the Resurrection of Christ.

29. *We surrender ourselves to a personal friendship with Christ, which transforms us and penetrates until the inmost depths, through a mysterious likeness to Him. Consecrated chastity expresses the mystery of the spousal union of Christ with his Church.*

Here, the core of a celibate life is retaken: the intimate union, the personal friendship with Christ. This relationship is the one that makes us more and more Christian, more like Christ; this not by asceticism, renouncement or mortification, but through the love with which He loves us and for which we have chosen to live in chastity.

There exists a relation between the evangelical attitudes with which we tried to live: chastity, brotherliness and prayer. Only the love of God, welcomed, contemplated, shared in our relationships and praised in prayer, can feed, impel and vivify such choice (*VC 88*).

For that reason, it also includes a dimension of mystery that we cannot forget. In each man or celibate woman for the Kingdom of God, there is a message to the world affirming that the love of Christ to His Church - symbolized sacramentally in marriage - is so real that some of us make that love the affective motor of our life, our vital center.

¹²⁴ He does not refer only to the consecrated persons. Speaking of chastity in reference to the secular spirituality, he also recommends temperance, saying with Casiano: *it is impossible that the one saturated of food does not feel temptations*. And he adds texts from Saint Thomas, Saint Jerome and some biblical excerpts. (F. CLARET, *Espiritualidad seglar*, in J. BERMEJO, *Escritos espirituales* 182).

30. *Chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven is a work of the reciprocal love between God and His creature. It leads us to a total dedication to the service of God and of the brothers and sisters by enlarging the capacity of our love to the dimensions of the world that we long to save. As in Mary, the perfect servant of the Lord, the virginal love wants to be in us fruitful and creative.*

In addition to the personal and intimate relationship between God and His creature, in which this vow is based, we have received an apostolic, missionary vocation and therefore, we cannot separate from it the evangelizing mission. Choosing virginity for the Kingdom we commit ourselves, together with Christ, to live for the Father and our brothers, but not like simple functionaries or workers, since for Christ we are not servants, but friends (*Jn 15: 15*). Every Christian receives the task of announcing and building the Kingdom, but we want also to do it being living signs in which the love does not know limits (*Rm 13: 10; 12; 21*). Celibacy is a life style through which we try to give testimony of the supremacy of God in all relations.

However, it is certain that the experience of our vocation as espousal love is not valued in our days; perhaps due to cultural or social aspects, or maybe also as a rejection to the excesses and ambiguity of past times regarding this issue - persons that loved no one because they only loved God; conflicts between a more universal love and more concrete and specific that would make it effective; the concept of a sexist and submissive woman... But it is evident that these conclusions do not follow from a well understood spousal spirituality.

This is how the special covenant of spousal love is made, in which we seem to hear an unceasing echo of the words concerning Israel, whom the Lord "has chosen as his own possession." For in every consecrated person the Israel of the new and eternal covenant is chosen. The whole messianic people, the entire Church, is chosen in every person whom the Lord selects from the midst of this people; in every person who is consecrated for everyone to God as His exclusive possession (RD 8).

On the other hand, in this point of the Constitutions, the vows of poverty and chastity overlap, because *the world we wish to save* is in a privileged way amongst the poorest, the marginalized, the rejected and the hated ... and this implies a thorough revision of the specific places where we are and the community and personal relationships we maintain¹²⁵.

A strong Marian spirituality can help us to better understand the virginal love in its dimension of inner freedom. Consecrated persons must breathe Mary the same way they breathe the air. Mary, one amongst us, was fruitful and creative because she knew how to be a faithful servant of the Lord and thus, it was done unto her what we all expect at the end of times – to be taken with Him in body and soul, completely, without divisions or exceptions of any kind. This is what we celebrate in the solemnity of the Assumption. The consecrated person is called, like Mary, to be virgin at heart and mind more than in body, and therefore, be able to beget the Life, which is Christ, and give it to the world. Our fecundity is fulfilled – in giving fruit, in giving life knowing that the seed comes from God and not from us or from any other human being. His love fills us and expects from us that we give birth to it for the world, for others, loving with the freedom, the tenderness and the brightness with which a mother or a father cares for their offspring. Following the example

¹²⁵ F. MARTINEZ, *Refundar la Vida Religiosa*, 191.

of Mary, as Claret would say, begotten, formed, *forged in the mold* of her heart, not to cling to him, but to be sent to the world as an arrow (*Aut. FC 270*).

31. *In imitation of Mary Immaculate, the life of chastity impels us to struggle tirelessly against evil by cooperating actively to the redemption of humankind.*

Being Mary the example of all virtues (*Const. 9*), our Foundress wanted that we make ours, in a very special way, the mystery of her Immaculate Conception. This mystery is not only a mystery of beauty and contemplation; it is also the impelling force against anything which is opposed to God. That is, she wanted us to live with particular strength the call to fight against evil in any of its forms, like free women liberated by the power of God; women that can bear life and give light even though the dragons might be waiting for these seeds of life to destroy them (*Notes 12*). And all these, we see it specially reflected in the gift of chastity, maybe to once again stress that such an extraordinary power does not come from us (*2Co 4:7*), or from a particular and special person with whom to share our life, but from God Himself.

32. *By the vow of chastity we oblige ourselves to perfect continence in celibacy for the Kingdom of Heaven. Our consecrated chastity creator of a new communion of brothers and sisters that is founded in the will of God and not in flesh neither in the blood.*

We have repeatedly said that it is a mistake to reduce human sexuality to a simple sexual aspect and consecrated chastity to sexual continence. But it is an important dimension of this vow because we continue being human with the same desires, passions and needs, therefore we must not under evaluate or over evaluate it. The Code of Canon Law reminds us:

The evangelical counsel of chastity assumed for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, which is a sign of the world to come and a source of more abundant fruitfulness in an undivided heart, entails the obligation of perfect continence in celibacy (c 599).

It does not say that it consists in keeping perfect continence, but that it bears this requirement. To make Christ the center of our lives; to become the sign of the world to come for our brothers and sisters and to love each person unconditionally, requires much more than renouncing to a sexual relation or to a life project in common. But frequently, we experience that only by feeding and strengthening the greatest common aspect (our relationship with God), are we able easily to live and also to make sense of the minimum aspects (the celibacy we freely commit ourselves to).

On the other hand, it is good to remember that the fulfillment of our celibacy does not spare us from feeling a physical attraction or even fall in love with someone, be it our same gender or the opposite one. We might realize that someone is becoming too important in our lives and in our affections; that someone starts becoming irreplaceable and unique; or that someone stirs a sexual desire in us (whether homo or heterosexual)... All this might scare us and we might deny it or flee, but that will not solve the facts. It can not be experienced like a catastrophe or as a sign that we must abandon religious life, but it should neither be experienced as if it were nothing or if it were not happening. Normally, the spirit is always willing but the flesh is weak (*Mk 14: 38*) and it is in the flesh, in the quotidian of our life, where the truth of our life is at stake.

God is the source of Love. He does not compete with our feelings; He can be present in all of them and goes beyond all of them. To fall in love with another person or to feel attracted by her/him is not a motive to distance myself from God, unless in fact, I am letting these feelings take charge of me (in actions, words and thoughts) by being incoherent, and conflicting with the vocation I have chosen. This circumstance must be dealt with enough clarity and honesty so as to redefine the relationship. It is important to be realistic and know that affections flourish slowly. We do not discover ourselves in a relationship born out of nowhere: sometimes small confidences; caresses; the continued need of physical contact (sitting together, be alone...) unnecessary secrets... help to develop a feeling that otherwise would have never been born. That is why it is so important to live in daily watch; to let us be accompanied with absolute transparency; neither deny nor keep anything concealed; take care of the limits in my relationships; and therefore to be aware of what is happening to me and where that relationship or those feelings leading me .

It is important to seek guidance from a calm, realistic person in whom we can trust. But each one of us will always have to consciously make the decision as to how we want to live. And we will have to take into account what vocational phase we are at that moment, because the perpetual commitment situates us within a life project ratified by God, through his mediation and through ourselves, in such a way, that it does not make sense anymore to think about other options. But, if the discernment comes at a time before the first profession or during the temporal vows, we should question ourselves if that is the way of life that God wants for me and the one I chose. Nevertheless, it can always be a growing crisis.

Along our life, we will experience many things in this and in many others aspects, but none strong enough that it might separate us from Christ, because in everything God is present for our good (*Rom 8: 38-39*). As in everything in Christian life, the ever present gratuitous mercy of God cannot be an excuse to live in any way we want; to the contrary, it is a urgent call to continue walking with Him, as faithfully as possible. It is not the case to look for a sterile perfection but to live in the certainty of being loved by Him. That is why, it will always be a situation in which He is calling me to another deeper step in my life and in my vocational response, and in each case it requires more coherent measures – physical distance, change of situation, decision making, and intensification of certain aspects of my life that I might have neglect (prayer, temperance in life...).

My vocation does not ask me to renounce to friendship and love. To the contrary, it invites me to live it to its fullest and generously, but in accordance to the life style I have promised to live, as is the case of a married person. Continence will have different nuances according to our age and the situations we will be living in, but it will always be a requirement which requires some auto control (continence = "con-tener" = self-restraint) and prudence because we are sexed beings from the day we are born until the day we die.

Another dimension of our chastity is the willingness to live a new way to relate to others, a new style of choosing to whom I talk, to whom I listen, whom I would accompany... It compels us to live making free, generous and fraternal relationships. If this is so I will not look for any *reward* in my relationships. With Christ and for Christ I have chosen to live in community as a daughter in God's eyes and as a sister to all, in particular of those He puts on my path and those who are the less loved. To share with others not only our possessions, but also our joys and difficulties, is not an easy, at least in certain situations. The Gospel call to share our life is within us, but it is present also with our desires of

power, of self-determination, of sensuality...In community we are called everyday to experience these inner opposition to keep choosing our unselfish self-giving. If sharing within my community is not important to me, I will find it very difficult to authentically live such commitment in my relationship with others.

33. *We should receive the gift of chastity in an attitude of poverty, aware of our weakness, without presuming of our own strength, with a fine spiritual instinct to preserve it. We respond to this gift, trusting in the fidelity of Him who is origin of our fidelity. Also “it is necessary to guard the doors of our senses most carefully,” to vigil the heart, to foster joy, to be “friendly” and above all to make God the center of our life.*

In reality, it is very difficult to choose for oneself to live in chastity. It may be assumed as part of the work towards a goal, a temporary commitment or a specific task. Nevertheless, if we want to make a definitive election with real honesty, it must come from strong, positive values, and not from a renouncement in our case, consecrated chastity is a gift and that is why we are able to live it.

The difficulties to organize our feelings is always there and in everything. To live life with theological fervor, in unselfish commitment with the needs of others, may be the nourishment to continuously grow in love and fidelity. Thus, this choice goes together with other choices presented by the absolute value of the Kingdom. My fidelity to my vocation depends on how now, and today, I love God and my brothers and sisters. It is not enough to stay put on that first decision to live in chastity, which was probably a more ingenuous one.

Chastity, as any gift, is also a task: we are called to collaborate with God to keep it and make it grow within us, knowing that with only our strength it would be impossible. It is Christ's faithfulness that sustains us and in given situations, even substitutes our own fidelity. At the same time, and with the passage of years, the progressive awareness; a firmer centrality of prayer in our life; and common sense will sharpen our instinct and our abilities not to unnecessarily expose ourselves to situation that might weaken our life option: people, images, conversations, movies, relationships, news, music, books... Each one of us must be vigilant. Our Foundress gives us the following advice:

- Take care of the senses that act as doors of our inner self to the world.
- Take care of the heart, as reminded by the author of Proverbs: *more than all else, keep watch over your heart, since here are the wellsprings of life (Pr 4: 23).*
- To promote, propitiate, look for joy in our life, because sometimes joy does not come if we do not look for it.
- Be friendly; maintain open, diverse, serene and some profound and stable relationships that is, nurture intimacy¹²⁶.

¹²⁶ The experience of intimacy includes deeper assertiveness, acceptance, fidelity and confidence. It allows us to be vulnerable and to come in to that kind of nakedness that shows our inner self and enables us to connect with the soul. Frequently, religious persons wrongly believe that to abstain from the sex aspect of love, they also renounce to intimacy. Such mistake might seriously threaten their growth as persons capable of authentic relationships, full of life and love. Evidently, unmarried persons must be very honest with themselves and others when expressing such intimacy (B. FIAND, *Luchando con Dios*, Madrid 2002, 95). Underlining is ours.

Above all, make God the center of our lives, because that intimacy with Him is what awakened and sustains our chastity.

34. *Consecrated chastity leaves us free, available and entirely open to the action of God in us. When this is a personal form of living and of loving, we will be in disposition to help to the brothers and sisters disinterestedly, without seeking any kind of compensation.*

As previously stated, one of the best criteria to confirm if this is the vocation to which God is calling us, and even if we are living it correctly, is to look if chastity allows us to progressively live from God. A consecrated chastity, completely irreproachable in its continence, but hardened towards others, enslaved and deaf to the action of God is not chaste. Chastity is a way of living and loving, as is obedience and poverty, not reduced to specific moments or actions but with a vital aspect that completely fills us.

It invites us to live without looking for rewards, which can be many: better valued tasks; activism; apostolic tasks more in accordance with my likings whether they are necessary or not; affectionate assurances in particular persons, even by paying the price of dependent and childish relationships; image; power; self-realization... That is why it is so important to be aware of our completely human, legitimate, and healthy needs and wishes, and to honestly decide what avenues I should take in order to fulfill them. In this way we will not seek secondary compensations, third ways, cheating or excesses. And if we do, it will be consciously, calling everything by its name and positioning ourselves with honesty before the decisions of our life.

In a world like ours where everything is erotized and seems to be at everyone's reach, whatever its price, our unmarried life may help us grow in freedom because it will allow us not to be part of this illusory wheel of compensations (*no type of compensation*, according to our Constitutions):

... There is a certain relationship between love and the Divine: love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence. Yet we have also seen that the way to attain this goal is not simply by submitting to instinct. Purification and growth in maturity are called for; and these also pass through the path of renunciation. Far from rejecting or “poisoning” eros, they heal it and restore its true grandeur (DCE 5a).

Thanks be to God, there are people in this world that help us to recognize the importance of appropriately integrating pleasure in our lives as consecrated and as believers, because too often we have demonized in the Church everything that is pleasurable as contrary to the Gospels. In taking our vows, we also proclaim that the pleasure of the sex relationship, although a good thing, is not the only one that fulfills and gives meaning to the human being. Our sexuality as consecrated men and women, vital energy and God's gift, cannot be lost or annulled, but also offered to Him so He can consecrate and sanctify it and make it bear abundant fruit through the appropriate channels of our vocation. It is not a matter of living in the sublime, but a way of also humbly enjoying the many pleasures that life has to offer us – an animated conversation; an ice cream; to listen to music; a hug; a good reading; a time of prayer; a walk through nature...

CHASTITY IN OTHER POINTS OF CONSTITUTIONS

In programming its formation, the Congregation must bear in mind the characteristics of the young women who enter it (Const. 73). Whether those who approach the Congregation be more or less young, they all usually have affective deficiencies that need to be acknowledged and worked out through the initial process of formation and along their entire life. It will also be necessary to study the cultures from which they come, know their personal history and their families in order to be able to help them mature in their affections. Without this growth one cannot experience the vow of chastity with joy and fidelity, or discover the happiness in true fraternity in community.

The sisters, looking and contemplating Christ, Who loved us to the point of giving His life for us, must make an effort to live charity as a way of love given for the good of others over our own interests.

We want to work on dialogue, on interpersonal relationships, and on the ability to make friendships in order to grow everyday in communion within the community. Our community must be the fraternal encounter that provides us with the thrust to continue being faithful.

In the process of formation, the living of chastity is essential for the postulants to develop a personal relationship with Christ through prayer and the reading of the Word. In this personal love for Christ, they will discover the presence of the Lord in their own personal history and in the history of the nation we live in and with which we share our faith and mission. We have to recognize the importance to the capacity of the person to establish healthy relationships with both genres. All this helps to discover if the person is called to consecrated chastity or not.

The formation director must help the sisters in formation to discover that the fidelity to our vocation is a daily task and that every day we must choose the Lord again with unconditional love, with the same enthusiasm with which we chose Him for the first time, but with the depth that experience gives. It is to remind us that we must always choose the Lord again, particularly when we face moments of chastity crisis, because in them we are deciding our entire life.

The formator must also facilitate activities that feed our affective life, strengthen friendship and the relationship with others of the same age group in the Congregation. It is also a need to have activities in which *to exercise and strengthen the body in a healthy way. Our body is our war buddy; it is the memory of everything we have lived*¹²⁷, without forgetting to look for ways of entertainment, recreation, relaxation...according to age.

Spiritual companionship (with the formator or with another sister or with another appropriate person) must continue after the first stages of formation, because the integration of our affectivity is a long process and carries with it many consequences in daily life, in the personal aspect as well as in the community or in the apostolic mission. Even after many years of perpetual profession, strong moments of loneliness and pain; of being in love; of demoralization and crisis of faith might surface, so the sister must face them with whoever is her spiritual companion and confirm or correct her actions by dealing with her wishes and searches. It is extremely important that every sister, at the time of perpetual profession, has orientated her affectionate dimension with enough clarity and

¹²⁷ C. CABARRUS, *Seducidos por el Dios de los pobres*, 161.

knowledge of herself. It is imperative that each one had experienced her wounds and her weaknesses; her strengths; and therefore had renewed the quality of her motivations. No one can live alone in this aspect of her life, because it is not something that is fixed for ever.

Formation

73. *Formation must be progressive, integral and continual, in order that our life and mission maybe more effective in the Church, and it should be carried out in distinct stages. In programming its formation, the Congregation must bear in mind the characteristics of the young ones who enter it, the milieu in which they are going to live and the type of insertion into the world that the Church expects of them.*

Postulancy

77. *It is to the Institute corresponds to discern a postulant's aptitude to our life and mission. Whether she has the necessary human and Christian qualities, rectitude of intention, and freedom of will, spiritual, moral and intellectual fitness, suitable physical and psychological health. If she is animated by an apostolic spirit.*

Novitiate

82. *"The mother mistress should found the novices from their beginning in the three virtues of faith, hope and charity, form which born all the other virtues and evangelical perfection and without them, all the others are like a body without a soul"¹²⁸.*

"Faith enables them to walk without stumbling in the darkness and night of ignorance; hope teaches them to live always in the arms of divine providence [...] and charity animate them on to begin the most arduous and perfect works, and enkindles within them lively desires to work for the sanctification of their neighbors, without neglecting their own"¹²⁹.

91. *Our profession formula is... I profess and vow to God poverty, obedience and chastity.*

Ongoing formation

100. *True correspondence to our vocation is an everyday task, because every day we must choose the Lord anew by a fidelity that sometimes can be difficult, but we know that nothing neither nobody can separate us from the love of Christ¹³⁰.*

101. *The fullness of the spiritual and apostolic life proper of the Congregation demands of us an ever renewed impulse and constant search, spurred on by the unceasing calls of the Spirit, the voice of the Church and the signs of the times. Therefore, our formation must continue throughout our lives¹³¹.*

¹²⁸ *Const.* 1869, Tr. III, ch. 5, n. 19.

¹²⁹ *Const.* 1869, Tr. III, ch. 5, n. 20.

¹³⁰ Cf. Rom 8:35.

¹³¹ Cf. c. 661.

102. *For all its members, our religious community should be the habitual place of its renewal and ongoing formation, creating a climate of prayer of spiritual freedom and fraternal help, being attentive to what the Lord expects of her in each concrete situation, précising objectives and evaluating them.*

Formation Directors

108. *They should maintain an intimate unity of spirit and action with the superiors and collaborators. Between themselves and their sisters they should form a true family which responds to the prayer of the Lord that they may be one¹³².*

CONCLUSIONS REGARDING THE CHAPTERS OF CONSECRATION AND VOWS

We have been repeating in the last pages that although our vows are possibly the aspect that identifies us the most as sisters, we cannot reduce consecrated vocation to the profession of poverty, obedience and chastity. Nevertheless, it is appropriate, after these chapters, to draw some joint conclusions.

The three vows, in their deep sense, are one same approach before the Lord and life itself. Poverty makes us live from Him as the only Source and Good; obedience impels us to organize our life according to His Will and this we do in chastity, for the love that He has awoken in our heart. And this brings as a consequence to try to love our sisters and every person as He loves us.

We have wanted to make ours the desire of the II Vatican Council that presents the Church as the Body of Christ and the People of God, in its various vocations, but all of them equal in their dignity and oriented towards the following of Christ, since all are born from Baptism. Our vocation as Claretians is founded in God's will and on the response that each one of us gives to that invitation. We want to consecrate our entire life, all our hours, all our past and future to Christ. Like in any other Christian vocation (ordination, marriage) we want, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to work in the building of the Kingdom, to commit ourselves with the cause of Jesus and to live in an intimate relationship with the Father. The way in which we discover the best way to do that is professing poverty, obedience and chastity within a religious community and proclaiming the Gospel. Therefore, the mission by itself does not justify that we give up material goods, a family or to make decision on our own. It is a concrete experience of God which invites us to live our life completely and only in Christ

Our religious life is apostolic and missionary and, therefore, we would make sterile the call of God in us if we would annul this dimension: strange to the world, forgetting its pains and hopes, without feeling with the poorest...

As our Foundress said, *the Lord does not ask anything new to His Church, only He asks us to fulfill what we have promised (PR 12)*. It is noteworthy to transcribe this point of *Vita Consecrata*:

¹³² Cf. Jn 17:11.

*To you, consecrated women and men, that at the end of this Exhortation I appeal with trust: live to the full your dedication to God, so that this world may never be without a ray of divine beauty to lighten the path of human existence. Christians, immersed in the cares and concerns of this world but also called to holiness, need to discover in you purified hearts which in faith "see" **God, people docile to the working of the Holy Spirit who resolutely press on in fidelity** to the charism of their call and mission.*

*You know well that you have set out on a **journey of continual conversion**, of exclusive dedication to the love of God and of your brothers and sisters, in order to bear ever more splendid **witness** to the grace which transfigures Christian life. **The world and the Church seek authentic witnesses to Christ**. And the consecrated life is a gift which God offers in order that everyone can recognize the "**one thing necessary**" (cf. Lk 10:42). To bear witness to Christ by one's life, works and words is the particular mission of the consecrated life in the Church and in the world.*

*You know the one in whom you have put your trust (cf. 2 Tm 1:12): give him everything! Our contemporaries **want to see in consecrated persons the joy which comes from being with the Lord**.*

***Consecrated women and men, old and young alike**, live faithfully your commitment to God, in mutual edification and mutual support! Despite the difficulties you may occasionally encounter, and despite the lessening of esteem for the consecrated life in certain quarters, you have the task of **once more inviting** the men and women of our time to lift their eyes, not to let themselves be overwhelmed by everyday things, to let themselves be **captivated by the fascination of God and of his Son's Gospel**. Do not forget that you, in a very special way, can and must say that you not only belong to Christ but that "**you have become Christ**"! (VC 109)*

If you look at them from the point of usefulness, the vows are worthless. They belong to that dimension of the human being and of the Christian life of being gratuitous, like the Eucharist, like prayer... There might even be persons that are more useful and prepared than us in the concrete actions of the apostolate; our peculiarity is to do everything based on the call to live in the way of Jesus of Nazareth and according to his methods and style, which are not precisely of opulence in means or wishes, but the way of the *Servant*.

It is important to purify our image of God so it will resemble, more and more, the God of Jesus, to whom we have made our *vows*. Depending on the image of God that we have, our ways of relating to others, our practices, and the way to relate with the preferred by the Father will be completely different. That is why it is possible that the future of Religious Life might probably rest more on the way we relate to God, than in anything else, because it is this deep and fundamental relationship in our life, a that determines in great manner how do we position ourselves in the world¹³³.

This implies spirituality incarnated in history, (as the XV General Chapter asks of us). God Himself, in Christ, wanted to become incarnate in reality and thus he has transformed it into a privileged place to meet Him. Therefore, it is in our quotidian reality where He habitually manifests Himself, questions us, and invites us to answer. This requires that we

¹³³ T. CATALA', *op. cit.*, p 144.

live habitually in His presence, asking ourselves daily about the small things, what is it that God wants me to do here, how I cooperate to build the Kingdom in this situation...

Naturally, in any reality we must inculturate the daily living of our vows. They are commitments that identify us as Claretian Sisters and they have to be lived serious and deeply from the cultural reality where we found ourselves. This must always be enrichment for the Congregation, a continuous and never ending search to enter more deeply in each culture and thus discover *the seeds of the Word present* in them. This is the only way in which we will be able to discern the truthful from the false, and then the special touch, that the Lord wants to give to the Gospel and to the charism in that particular place and time will be brought forth.

LIFE IN COMMUNION

INTRODUCTION

Religious life in community, as a reality and as a visible sign, finds its foundation in the mystery of communion of the Trinity. Before being a human structure, it is a gift from the Spirit. In effect, the religious community has its origin in the love of God poured out in the hearts of its members through the Spirit. On his part, this Spirit builds it as a true family gathered in the name of the Lord (*FC 15a, CIC c 602*). Therefore, it is impossible to understand the religious community apart from its mystery, its profound being received from above and rooted in the heart of the holy and sanctifying Trinity, which wants it to be part of the mystery of the Church, for the life of the world (*VFC 8-10, VC 41-42*).

The ideal of community life has always been sought by the Church from the beginning, and more over, since the inception of Religious Life. We can say that the first community was that of Jesus and his apostles. A difficult community, formed by the most varied individuals – Greeks, Jews, zealots, tax collectors, etc... And among such diversity, Jesus was able to create friendship bonds with each one and amongst them because he deals with each one as they are, creating in them the trust and passion for the same goal – his Kingdom. It is not a community that works under orders or permissions, because the only rule is love. The only thing that is forbidden is anything that might destroy the community – ambition of power and messianic mentalities¹³⁴.

Communion is fundamental in our Claretian life. It makes us live with abundant peace here and now (*Cons. 35*) in order to be true witness of the Gospels. In being such a fundamental aspect in our lives, we cannot forget to take into account the profound changes that the ecclesial and theological understanding of religious life has undergone in the last 40 years.

In simplifying this to the maximum, we could say that before Council Vatican II, the community was gathered around common acts, institutionally established, with a rigid and precise community structure and with a time-set for everything. Everybody did the same things, at the same time and the same exact way. Personal relationship took a second place. The membership was unlimited- it might as well be 15, 50 or two hundred. The Superior would centralize everything and made decisions without the input of the community.

¹³⁴ Cf. C. ALMES, *Nueva Espiritualidad...*, 193-194.

Perfection was based on performance, with the risk of creating submissive passive individuals that would neither make any effort to think, nor to make decisions.

It is true that this system had its pros, but left many profoundly unsatisfied. There was something important missing: a cordial and spontaneous environment that would favor friendship and a closer coexistence, one of real fraternity. Therefore, *the community structures are revised looking for more simplicity and proximity to the people. The missionary dimension of the community has been rediscovered, and the human and Christian value of living together has been re-evaluated*¹³⁵

COMMENTARY TO POINTS 35 – 48

Instead of commenting the points in numerical order, we are going to present them in two parts:

I. Love, the foundation of the community in diversity.

These are the points that specifically address love and everything related to the relationship between the sisters (and they are in this order: 35, 36, 39, 46, 38, 41, 40, 47, 45).

II. Prayer and daily life: the expression of life in communion.

These are the points that mostly address prayer (with special attention to the Eucharist), different moments of the day, and places of communion (they are presented in this order: 37, 42, 44, 43, 48).

I. Love, the foundation of the community in diversity.

35. *“The love of God and of neighbor has gathered us together in this apostolic Congregation only with the purpose of fulfilling the Lord’s precept.” “Charity makes us one family with one heart as the Lord wishes us to be.” “Thus we must love each one of our sisters in such a way that we could say, each one of our sisters is another me. And if this charity reigns among us, we will not lack abundant peace in this life and the eternal union of the blessed in the next”*¹³⁶.

In order to deepen the Trinitarian love as the spring and foundation of all community life, we will describe, first, the mystery of Christian communion:

- The Father exists loving the Son, and in Him, loving us and all creation (*Ep 1:3-14; Col 1: 12-20*). Everything that exists is because He wants it and therefore, because He loves it in His Son: *For you love everything that exists, and nothing that you have made disgusts you, since, if you had hated something, you would not have made it. And how could a thing subsist, had you not willed it? (Ws 11: 24-25).*

¹³⁵ USG, *Charismas in the Church for the world*, (II, 2) Rome 1993.

¹³⁶ cf. Dir 50.26.

- Christ loves the Father as a response to the love He receives from Him. The Spirit proceeds directly from this love dialogue. And because Christ loves the Father, He partakes in His love, he loves human beings and every creature, and gives Himself to them because they are the object of the Father's love (*Jn 3:16*). In sum, he loves everything the Father loves and with the love that he receives from the Father.

- The Spirit seals the Trinitarian love and sends it back to us, who participate in this supreme gift from the Son, which is the love, the life of the Father (*Jn 16: 14-15*). He makes us part in the divine nature (*2 P 1:4*) which is love (*Jn 14: 23; 1Jn 4: 8; Rm 5: 5*). The Spirit makes that community, and Trinitarian life circulate, embracing in it the whole humankind already present in the Word Incarnate, made man. Therefore, in the glorified humanity of the Word, the human family has definitely entered in God and with it all creation.

- The People of the redeemed participate in the love of the Father, thanks to the paschal mystery of Christ and to the action of the Spirit, the giver of life. And, precisely because of being part of this love (*Rm 5: 5*), it can respond by loving, always helped by the Spirit (*Rm 8: 1-17*). We love Christ and for Christ, with Christ and in Christ, with the love of the Father.

Thus, when I love with the love of the Father, I love all my brothers and sisters and all creation. To love all includes loving the sinners; loving those whom I do not like the way they do things, or those whom I believe do not deserve it (*Mt 5, 43-48*), because the nature of God is to love (*1Jn 4: 8-16; Lk 15*). For this reason creation is lovable in itself, that is, deserves love – everything that is, is because God wants it (*Ws 11 23-26*) and because, in some way, it will also be part of the final glory (*Rm 8: 19-24*). Having the Father himself as our ultimate and supreme role model (*Mt 5: 43-48*), the Claretian sister has Christ as example and historic visible reference who loves to the extent of giving up His life (*Jn 13: 34-35; 15: 12-17; Ph 2: 5-11*). The Father is the beginning and the end of everything, fruitful bosom from where everything comes to be (*Jn 1:18; Ep 1; Col 1*) and paternal home where everything aims (*1 Co 15: 24-28*). We could say that everything is: *a Patre ad Patrem, per Filium, in Spiritu, That is, by the Father's initiative, following Christ and consecrated by the Spirit (VC17, 19).*

Having said this, communal spirit and any external expression of community become necessary, essential. It is a gift from God! If this must be something almost spontaneous in any vocation, it should be much more so in our religious life. Remember that our Foundress goes to the extreme of considering *every other sister like another self* (*Const. 35*). She experienced personally this union with the sisters, and sometimes, she also experienced the strength that friendship can give to us in our religious life. Particularly significant was her relationship with Florentina Sangler (the first of her friends), and she expresses this in different moments of her life. Confronted with her sudden death, she writes:

Only the one, who knows the *sympathy of two hearts united by God for himself in the same spirit, can understand the pain that filled my soul in this most sad occasion. My suffering was equal to the love I had for her, because it was not less than the love fashioned by God, and I loved her as part of my soul. So I felt so much pain with this separation as if part of my soul separated from my body (Aut. MP 180).*

The call to union and to exemplary fraternal relationships among us is something continuously repeated in all the writings of our Foundress. For example, in her letter to the

Superior of the community in Santiago de Cuba, she asks her *to, somehow, be one in body and in spirit with the sub-prioress, and both must be one; "your charity" (you) knows that in one and same body nothing can be hidden*¹³⁷. She also writes to the community in Carcagente:

*Above all I recommend charity among you, because it is the bond of Evangelic perfection, and all virtues come with it; you might be five but you will have to be but one; may there not be among you the most minimal complaint, since such is perfect charity; and for it you will be recognized as perfect sisters*¹³⁸.

And she insisted on this topic in the First Constitutions:

*There is nothing more important for the conversion of religious orders, than maintaining among all the houses of a same Order, a perfect charity and a fine harmony in living as members of the same body*¹³⁹.

To believe in Christ means to share with others this experience of reconciliation and communion with God and with all creatures. There cannot be a Christian faith, or Claretian community without charity, because charity is the essence of being in Christ. The Claretian is, at the same time, reconciled and reconciliatory woman; promoter of community, instrument and witness of communion, since communion impels her to proclaim the good news, and as a fruit of the proclamation, communion is extended. The Church expands by communities.

*Charity makes of all of us one community and one heart, as the Lord wants from us (Test. MP)*¹⁴⁰. Maria Antonia tried to express with these words the unity that must exist among us, as in the beginning, when *the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul. No one owned their possessions; everything was everyone's (Acts 4, 32)*. She insists about this family authenticity to the point of becoming one of the particular characteristics of the Congregation. And about it she writes:

*All houses of the Order are part of one family, helping one another, without being a burden to the Prelate, the Municipal government, or by the sisters becoming dependent upon their families, because with the work of our hands the Divine Providence gives us abundantly every thing we need*¹⁴¹. *In our Order everything is one House, even if we had one thousand of them*¹⁴².

Even Jesus, before his passion, begged the Father for all of us to be one (*Jn 17: 21*), and this is the wish of Maria Antonia Paris:

*...all the houses will make one family*¹⁴³. Because in *our Institute* the main foundation is *the mutual union of all the houses and to form between them all one heart and one soul under one head*¹⁴⁴.

¹³⁷ EP, *to Maria Rosa Gual* (Trempe, 06/28/1859), 16.

¹³⁸ *Ib*, *To the Carcaixent Community* (Reus 09/14/1880) 405.

¹³⁹ *First Const.* I Treaty, ch.1, n. 1.

¹⁴⁰ EP, *To the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba* (Carcaixent, 09/30/1880) 215.

¹⁴¹ Ep. *To Msgr. Orberá* (Carcaixent 05/30/1876) 215.

¹⁴² *Id.*, *to Caixal* (Trempe, 12/12/1865) 117.

¹⁴³ *Id.*, *to the Prior of Reus* (Carcaixent 08/10/1877) 311.

¹⁴⁴ *Id.*, *to Msgr. Orberá* (Reus 01/30/1874) 370.

Since the beginning of the Congregation the union between its members has been paramount:

Day of the Assumption of Mary Most Holy (August 15, 1851). I gathered all the young women that I had admitted as companions ...and we receive the Holy Communion with great devotion and fervors, offering ourselves to God, by vow of crossing the seas and go to any part of the world without dividing the group, nor differ from anything coming from our Superior (Aut MP 121).

And she also stresses that she made this vow with two goals: first, to ensure the vocation of the other sisters through obedience; and second, to *assure them that she would never abandon them, as confirmed by the phrase: without dividing the group (Aut. MP 123).*

The religious community must live charity in a common life, forming a community that is *koinonía, signum fraternitatis*. It does not owe its existence to the natural similarities but to the common charisma. That is why our Foundress suffered dearly with the separation of the community of Tremp:

Those my beloved daughters have trespassed my soul as I watch them become more estranged from the body of the Order, in such a way that, in February, Mother Dolores wrote to inform me that they want to modify the Constitutions, and if I do not agree with what she will do, they will separate themselves from the Order¹⁴⁵. And she later adds: I trust in the Lord that this House will join the body, because no branch can survive cut from the tree, and even if for a while it looks like it is alive, it is only because it still has the sap from which it once participated, but it will not last long and it will dry out and will bear no fruits¹⁴⁶.

We do not become part of the Congregation based on our knowledge or previous friendships, even though they might help us in the beginning. We join because God is calling us; convokes us; we do not choose the sisters, but we find them; we know they were convoked just like us and we learn to love them. In the religious community, pluralism and diversity between us can be a sign of authenticity and a help to stress the real motive by which we live together – the evangelical call. But this diversity has a clear apostolic dimension:

Moreover, in the context of the diverse societies of our planet -- torn as they are by the divisive forces of passion and conflicting interests, yearning for unity but unsure of what path to follow -- the presence of communities where people of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, and which remain united despite the inevitable conflicts and difficulties inherent in common life, is in itself a sign that bears witness to a higher reality and points to higher aspirations. Religious communities, who by their life proclaim the joy and the human and supernatural value of Christian fraternity, speak to our society about the transforming power of the Good News". (VFC 56b)

Without any doubt, a diverse community, and even an intercultural one, is a strong sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God.

36. *With our community of life we wish to make visible the mystery of the communion of the Church. We should foster community life through fidelity to our own vocation and the*

¹⁴⁵ Id., to *Mosén Moñanet* (Reus, April 1874) 169 .

¹⁴⁶ Id., to *the Tremp Community* (Reus, 09/22/1880) 411.

witness of all virtues: Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, it is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, and it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

Each one of our communities is a lively expression of the communion of the Church. Religious men and women are Christians committed to express and live the communion, essential foundation of the Church, in a continuous and visible way. Also, institutionally:

The life of brothers or sisters proper to each institute, by which all the members are united together as a special family in Christ, is to be defined in such a way that it becomes a mutual support for all in fulfilling the vocation of each. Moreover, by their communion as brothers or sisters rooted and founded in charity, members are to be an example of universal reconciliation in Christ (CIC c. 602).

Communities are the multiple, privileged and peculiar expression of the mystery and experience of ecclesial communion. Religious should be experts in this communion by testifying to the eschatological reality (VFC 10d).

Our communities are called to be the reflection of God and His love in the midst of reality, taking into account our frailties, as it happens also to the Church.

Among the objectives of life in community is to stress the Christian koinonia (idealized state of fellowship and community that should exist), either by making God the only reason that justifies our life in common, or by living in a transparent and visible way a human community organization that makes concrete the mystery of communion of the Church (VC 41b. 42).

The community is a continuous intent, with more or less success, of making our new sisterhood, initiated by Christ, a tangible experience. Every day we try to live it in a more transparent and clear way, understandable by all who know us.

As usual, the theological-charismatic foundation can only rest on our, often fragile, human base. Therefore, we must remember the exhortation of the apostle Paul regarding love (1Cor 13: 4-7). Fraternal life demands from each of us a healthy psychological balance, over which our emotional life can mature. Love always broadens the horizons, and thus, to love our own vocation means to love also the Church, our Institute and the community as our own family (VFC 37).

The love of God goes together with the love to our sisters, particularly to those who are the least appealing to us, because, *if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5: 46-48).* Certainly, communion goes well beyond our personal affinities and no one can ignore the duty that we all have of contributing to the building up of the community.

39. *We are all responsible of the building of the community. We should welcome and accept one another as we are, counsel one another with the spirit of gentleness, encourage and help one another to persevere joyfully in our consecration, living “in unfeigned charity*

and in truthful words.” We must treat one another “with that sincerity and respectful frankness, proper of religious persons who serve God.” Let us live fraternally with everyone, even though they are of different opinion, language or origins. We should strive to adapt ourselves to the customs of the country where we live¹⁴⁷.

Faith and a humble realism must animate our determination to build a fraternal life, from which we carry on our mission in the Church:

Life in community is thus the particular sign, before the Church and society, of the bond which comes from the same call and the common desire — notwithstanding differences of race and origin, language and culture — to be obedient to that call... (VC 92)

In order to do this we must help one another with joy, as Mother Paris recommended

Love one another, says Christ Our Lord, as I have loved you, and you will live in holy spiritual joy, as I wish to you¹⁴⁸.

And every sister helps in building the community by giving everything she is to the common service: *so with you, as you are eager to have spiritual powers, aim to be rich in those which build up the community (1Co 14: 12).*

The grace of God acts upon human nature, created by God Himself, and transforms it; never destroys it, but needs it and perfects it. Our communities are formed by flesh and blood humans, with qualities, limitations and difficulties. We cannot rely on the building of healthy relationships, since we all share in this responsibility. But it is the proper mission of the Superiors

Superiors are to devote themselves diligently to their office and together with the members entrusted to them are to strive to build a community of brothers or sisters in Christ, in which God is sought and loved before all things (CIC c. 619).

Our current Constitutions remind this to the local Superiors (*Const. 167*).

A true community is realistic, the fruit at the same time of an intuition and a disenchantment. The intuition comes from the theological sense of the Gift that opens up our desire to testify to a life of faith and love, to help humanly and spiritually, of sharing the life and the goods, the charism and the mission. But the disenchantment is also present, whether it comes from ourselves, or from what we see in others, when we realize that the path that lays ahead of us — maybe, too long. In the others there is always something that does not coincide with what we would like and that can hurt us. That is why it is helpful to remember that the sisters were given to us by God as they are, not as we thought or wished they should have been. Naturally, disenchantment is reciprocal. There will always be a discrepancy between what we look for or expect affectively and what — real gratification we receive. We have to feel the deceit in our need of love, because neither all the persons we want, nor the way we want them, will come our way. The sooner we experience this healthy disillusionment the better¹⁴⁹.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Dir 51.

¹⁴⁸ Epistolary, *to the community in Carcaixent* (Reus, 09/14/1880).

¹⁴⁹ D. BONHOEFFER, *Life in Community*, Buenos Aires 1966,17-20.

The important issue is not to feel deceived by others, but to realize as soon as possible how immature such presumption is. On the other hand, we do not always give our best either; we have not always been close enough, truthful enough or creative enough as others or maybe as we expected, and we feel humiliated by the painful contrast between the ideal image of ourselves and the real us. And undoubtedly, to recognize such a contrast in ourselves, and to accept it, is paramount for the discernment of our vocation and human maturity along our entire life.

This point contains many quotes from the First Constitutions. The last one asks us to adapt to the customs of the country where we reside, in the schedules, the life style, meals. Naturally, any enculturation requires a deep discernment from the charismatic point of view, in order to truly live it according to the different places (*Commentary Const. 65. Dir 56*).

46. *We must make an effort to understand the characteristics of the different generations. The community has to pay special attention to the young professed sisters, helping them to become integrated progressively in the religious life. We should love, respect and care for our elderly and infirm sisters, in an attitude of thankfulness towards those who have spent their lives in the service of God in the Institute. They have an important apostolic mission in the community through their prayer, their life, and their joyful and constant fidelity. Through their sufferings and sacrifices they associate us in a special way with the paschal mystery.*

The community is an evangelical testimony insofar as we live united in the midst of our diversity, since that is Gift; only the grace of God is able to gradually accomplish this in us. The differences among the generations have also to be integrated. They are a great richness; they may be a call of attention and instrument of healing among us and always a good occasion to practice charity.

In addition to the active presence of new generations of consecrated persons who bring the presence of Christ to the world and the splendour of the ecclesial charisms to life, the hidden and fruitful presence of consecrated men and women who are experiencing old age, loneliness, illness and suffering is also particularly significant. In addition to the service already rendered and the wisdom which they can share with others, they add their own particular precious contribution by joining themselves in their sufferings to the patient and glorious Christ for his Body, the Church (Col 1:24).

Here lies the strength that life in common has as a sign: to stay together regardless of the lack of human homogeneity, and regardless of diversity as a focal point for conflicts, tensions and sufferings, because Christ is the only bond that unites us together.

The point insists in the need to help the sisters that are beginning their religious life. The young sisters, naturally, still need to integrate many things that, maybe, with the passage of time, will become connatural. The best way to help them is that the community may live a high level of joyful and fulfilling commitment. In this way, community environment and understanding will become the stimulus to keep growing and not a rigid demand that blocks the person.

As to the old and ill sisters, we are reminded in the Constitutions all they have already given to the Congregation. It is precisely during old age, when the human being needs the most help from others. It is a time of fragility and defenselessness that requires a delicate

fraternity, filled with understanding and love, to encourage them to continue giving the best in them until the end.

Certainly, there are also all the positive aspects, human and spiritual, which the encounter between persons of different generations, who want and choose to live together for a common mission, brings to us.

38. *As members of the same body, each of us should put the gifts we have received at the service of the rest, since the Spirit has granted them to us for the common profit. It is fundamental to live and work united in the love of God and in mutual help and collaboration; sharing our hard times, successes and our joys. Charity should be as an active hope of it that the rest can come to be, thanks to our fraternal help*¹⁵⁰.

We all need somebody to support us in our journey, and for us, Claretians, our sisters are the best support. *Better two than one alone, since this their work is really rewarding. If one should fall, the other helps him up; but what of the person with no one to help him up when he falls! (Ecc 4: 9-12).*

Our Foundress, regrets, with much sorrow, the ongoing differences between the Mother Superior and the Vicar in the community of Tresp:

*You see my daughter how easy it is to find the peace in the House that V. C. is looking for outside, where you will not find it. I do not know how are you not trembling from the horror of saying that the House of God where V. C. is seems like hell since I am not there!... I write this letter frozen!... A religious house is a body that has a head, hands and feet; V. C. should have been the hands and the feet of the Mother Superior, and these never oppose the head... The peace within monasteries resides in the virtues of the sisters by the humble subjection of the sisters to their Superior*¹⁵¹.

We are called to put our gifts to the service of the community following the teachings of the Apostles: *love one another with mutual affection, compete in respecting one another give the same consideration to all others alike (Rm 12: 16). Therefore be servants to one another through love (Ga. 5: 13) so give encouragement to each other, and keep strengthening one another, (1Th 5: 11), so as members as you are of the same body you may equally enjoy the goods and evils of one another*¹⁵².

In our life as Claretians, life in communion becomes the irreplaceable support to our own fidelity to God's call, because *to share the difficult moments, the successes and the joys* is the best way to assure one another the perseverance and true loyalty to the Congregation.

The quality of fraternal life has a significant impact on the perseverance of individual religious. Just as the poor quality of fraternal life has been mentioned frequently by many as the reason for leaving religious life, so fraternity lived fully has often been, and still is, a valuable support to the perseverance of many.

¹⁵⁰ Dir 50.

¹⁵¹ EP, to Sister Dolores de Santiago (Reus, 09/22/1870) 144.

¹⁵² First Const. Treat. I, 10.

Within a truly fraternal community, each member has a sense of co-responsibility for the vocation of the others, as stated in our Constitutions at the beginning of the chapter on formation (*Const.72*). Each one contributes in her own way to a serene climate of sharing life, of understanding, and of mutual help; each is attentive to the moments of fatigue, suffering, isolation or lack of motivation in others; each offers support to those who are saddened by difficulties and trials.

Thus, religious communities, in the support they give to the perseverance of their members, also acquire the value of a sign of the abiding fidelity of God, and thus become a support to the faith and fidelity of Christians who are immersed in the events of this world, where the paths of fidelity seem to be less and less known¹⁵³ (*VFC 57*).

Our Foundress considered fundamental to be united, because *as we all have professed one and the same Rule; we must all go together*¹⁵⁴.

With all these elements it seems clear that the religious community, living with faith, hope and charity, ends up becoming a clear sign and credible witness to the mystery, the communion and the mission of the Church; that is, of the unity, Catholicism and apostolicism of the Church.

Since we cannot forget that the members of the community are women on the journey:

39. *Given our sinful dimension, life in common can give rise to frictions that disfigure the true face of Christ in us. Let us ask pardon and give pardon. In the fraternal reparation, let us make public satisfaction for our external failings.*

Communities cannot, and should not, avoid all conflicts, because each Christian reality is built upon human frailty. The perfect "ideal community" does not exist yet: the perfect communion of the saints is our goal in the heavenly Jerusalem. Ours is the time for edification and constant building (*VFC 26a*). Therefore, the community we must build is founded upon reconciliation (*PC 15a, CIC c.602*).

Imperfection in communities ought not to discourage us (VFC 26b). On the contrary, it must invite us every day to put in practice the Word: *Welcome one another, as Christ welcomed you (Rm 15: 7); admonish one another (Romans 15, 14); bearing with one another through love (Eph 4: 2); be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another (Ep 4: 32); wait for one another (1Co 1: 33); clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings (1 P 5: 5)*. The peace and unity we ask for the nations living in war and painful divisions must be first built in our communities, since to Peter's question: *Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus answered, I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times (Mt 18: 21-22)*. All this are recommendations that go beyond of a communion based in superficiality or external formality.

The Lord exhorts us to live in communion with one another (*1Jn 1: 7*), and to let us not grow tired of doing well to all, especially to our brothers and sisters in faith (*Ga 6: 9-10*). Many times our problems and those of our communities are not problems of profound theology, but rather of human maturity, even sometimes, of pure and simple politeness. It is essential to remember that humanity is the base of spirituality, and the only platform that allows us to get in contact with any individual, be it faithful or not. A house without foundation

¹⁵³ Epilogue: About Fidelity.

¹⁵⁴ EP, to M. Dolores de Santiago (Reus, 02/11/1874) 167.

cannot stand; moreover, the taller the building the stronger and deeper the foundations must be (*Mt 7:24-27*). Certainly, in talking about humaneness, we speak of limitations and frailty, but we must not forget that the human foundation is also greatness of spirit, patience, balance, kindness, wisdom, affection, openness, gratefulness, flexibility, respect, trust, emotional stability, realism, determination, unified and an integrated notion of life, sweetness... without forgetting the sense of humor to be able to laugh at our own person and at others. In all of these we cannot ever forget to love and respect one another. To learn to laugh at our own flaws and those of others in a kind way and knowing the right time, is a healthy habit of our emotional and physical health – it is a sign of human maturity, wisdom and humility¹⁵⁵.

An attitude of continuous conversion may turn common life into a school of *holiness*. Thus we are invited:

Religious are to strive after conversion of the soul toward God, to examine their conscience, even daily, and to approach the sacrament of penance frequently (CIC c.664).

Besides the sacrament of reconciliation, we can count on fraternal reparation (*Const. 41*) as the fitting moment of personal and community conversion, if prepared and motivated. Appropriately Our Foundress expresses her wishes on the community very clearly: *I prefer the peace and union that God may send, over all the money in the world*¹⁵⁶.

The fraternal reconciliation¹⁵⁷ must always be spiritually and theologically actualized, like any one of the other practices we have, so that without losing the value of its original inspiration, they may be in tune with the times we live in. It is one of the recommendations of the Church to all the religious communities – *the way of praying should be suitably adapted everywhere to the modern physical and psychological circumstances of the members (PC 3)*. Undoubtedly, fraternal reparation goes beyond the public petition of forgiveness for our external faults. In the measure in which our fraternal life is more authentic, simple and flexible, the small problems that may arise in common life can be dealt in our daily life, without having to wait for a concrete and established event. But to have a specific moment in which, every so often, we may help each other in a profound and sincere community discernment over our own personal process in relation to our life in the community can be a privileged tool to help us discover our own limitations and also the limitations of the other sisters, as a theological place where God waits and acts, teaching us another way to love and look at each other. It is not by chance that the Church entrusted to the communities of consecrated life, the special task of making grow, above all, the spirituality of communion; first within our communities, and then within the ecclesial community and beyond. *Christian peace is founded in God, Who sealed with men His peace alliance and which is wholly fulfilled in Christ. The final goal of peace is the abundant Kingdom of God, where we can live in connection and fraternity. To achieve this peace we are asked to compromise with the works of justice. Peace is lived in the service and solidarity with others, respecting the dignity of each and every human being and nation; breeding, little by little, with faith and commitment, universal fraternity*¹⁵⁸.

Undoubtedly, this is an urgent mission, opening the dialogue of charity, particularly where our world suffers the most due to ethnic hate or homicidal madness. That is why we must

¹⁵⁵ G. ARBUCKLE., *Strategie di crescita nella vita religiosa*, CinBals 1990, 77-93.

¹⁵⁶ Epistolary, to *Currius* (Carcaixent 04/13/1877) 290.

¹⁵⁷ Comment *Life of Prayer* (Const. 58).

¹⁵⁸ Letter from the General Superior, Soledad Galerón, regarding peace. 03/24/2006.

take care of our own self in order to recreate unity in our communities every time it is threatened. Thus not only do we help with universal communion, but we also participate in a journey of effective personal growth. There are communities of consecrated life, located in places dominated by passions and opposing interests whose testimony can be extremely valuable and motivating.

We want unity, but sometimes we are unsure about the path to follow in order to achieve it. We want to be signs of an always possible dialogue and of a communion capable of harmonizing the differences in which our brothers and sisters of different languages, cultures, ages and opinions participate (*VC 51. 92b; VFC 41*). That's why we speak of alternative communities. But, what do we understand by *alternative community*? It is a net of relationships grounded in the gospel located in the middle of a fragmented society, with inconsistent and weak relationships, which are predominantly functional but also often conflictive. In such a society, the alternative community is like the city built on the mountain; the salt of the earth; the candle on the lamp stand; it is the light of the world (*Mt 5: 13-16*). The alternative community, a sinner also, is an ideal of fraternity in conversion, that wants to show a divided society, that there can be free and honest relationships, and not only relationships born out of convenience and interest; and that the primacy of God means letting the best in man's and society's heart emerge¹⁵⁹.

We can walk together with hope and rejoicing in being loved in our weaknesses. We can help one another to grow in trust, in compassion and in humility; we can help one another in living in thanksgiving; in forgiving and asking for forgiveness; we can help each other to open up to one another, to welcome one another, and to make an effort to bring peace and hope to the world. In this way, we take root in a community; not because it is perfect or wonderful, but because we believe Jesus gathers us there on a mission. The community is given to us like a good soil in which we are called to grow and serve. In fact, to be called to live in our Congregation, it is not enough to feel called to apostolic activities or be drawn by the Founders. It is necessary to feel a profound call to live the Claretian charisma with its particular life style. Therefore, someone not sociable, extremely passive and silent, if she does not reach a progressive and harmonic change, it is almost impossible to believe that she is called to this vocation. That is why it is so important to pay particular attention to the life in community during the initial formation period, so that the young women can be properly oriented and helped in discerning their path in life (*VFC 40c*).

40. *We fulfill our apostolic mission from the community and we always act as sent by it. Each one should support and appreciate as her own, the work that the other sisters perform.*

The apostolate has a special meaning when it is carried out and experienced from the religious community which is a special testimony of the presence of God's love in the Church. And love is, by its own nature, unifying and expansive. It is a strength that sprouts from our inner self and sends us, but it is also an external force that we receive to become stronger inside. Strength and tension that bonds and communicates; that pushes us to share with others the happiness of having found a sense to life and the joy of being happy:

"And above all these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3:14), love as it was taught and lived by Jesus Christ and communicated to us through his Spirit. This love that unites is also the love that leads us to extend to others the experience of communion with God and with each other. In other words, it creates apostles by urging

¹⁵⁹ C. M. MARTINI, *Ripartiamo da Dio*, Milano 1995, 33-37.

communities on their path of mission, whether this is contemplative, and proclamation of the Word or ministries of charity. God wishes to inundate the world with his love; so, fraternal communities become missionaries of this love and concrete signs of its unifying power.

Love, in all of its forms, is apostolic, because it cannot rest until it enriches the others¹⁶⁰. In effect, in the same way as the Holy Spirit anointed the Church in the cenacle to send her to evangelize the world, also each religious community, as an authentic community based in the Spirit of the Risen Lord, is, by its own nature, apostolic. Communion begets communion and takes essential shape as missionary communion. Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other; they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion (ChL 32).

Living together in our fraternal consecrated life does not have as its only goal the apostolate, but all our activities have as their only reason for being to proclaim, broaden and deepen the human communion:

...we are missionaries above all because of what we are as a Church whose innermost life is unity in love, even before we become missionaries in word or deed (RMI 23c).

For some, "building community" is felt as an obstacle to mission, almost a waste of time in matters of secondary importance. All must be reminded that fraternal communion, as such, is already an apostolate; in other words, it contributes directly to the work of evangelization. The sign par excellence left us by Our Lord is that of lived fraternity: "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). Along with sending them to preach the Gospel to every creature (Mt 28:19-20), the Lord sent his disciples to live together "so that the world may believe" that Jesus is the one sent by the Father and that we owe him the full assent of faith (Jn 17:21). The sign of fraternity is then of the greatest importance because it is the sign that points to the divine origin of the Christian message and has the power to open hearts to faith.(VFC 54)... the more intense their fraternal love, the greater the credibility of the message she proclaims, and the more visible the heart of the mystery of the Church, sacrament of the union of humankind with God, and of men and women among themselves (VFC 55b).

Our religious community is fraternal life in community for the mission:

Thus, religious life will be all the more committed to the apostolate the more personal their dedication to the Lord Jesus is, the more fraternal their community life, and the more ardent their involvement in the Institute's specific mission (VC 72d).

The Claretian sister goes to the mission in the name of the community, sent by it and always living the communion. As mirror of Trinitarian life (VC 41, 72) she cannot stop communicating what overflows from her inner self: that God is love (Jn 1: 13; 4: 8. 16) and therefore, by nature she tends to give itself not to close in on itself. As Claretians we are called to be visible signs of God's invisible love, which, in the words of our Founder, *impels us (2Co 5: 14) woe is me if I do not proclaim the gospel (1Co 9:16-23).*

¹⁶⁰ F. CIARDI, *Koinonía*, 251-261. U. SARTORIO, *La testimonianza carismatica dei consacrati nella Chiesa e di fronti al mondo*, 244-256. AAVV, *La Vita Consacrata, Un carisma da riscoprire nella Chiesa comunione-missione*, Padova 1994.

In the same way it is inconceivable that a community be closed in itself, we cannot turn the apostolic dimension into an excuse to neglect the experience of common life:

The needs of apostolic service cannot therefore be invoked to accept or to justify defective community life. Activities undertaken by religious must be activities of people who live in community and who inform their actions with community spirit by word, action and example (VFC 55d).

The love and reconciliation that we want to give testimony of in our apostolic mission must be felt in our communities.

In addition, our apostolate in itself, gives us strength to better experience communion. The pain and the suffering of many of our brothers and sisters; the struggle to survive of many nations are incentives to pray among us and with them; to deepen the importance of living in austere solidarity and in open fraternity. Their problems minimize ours, and their sacrifices silence many of the complaints that sometimes grow within us about unimportant things.

47. *When we go to another community or to visit our family, we should always strive to be bearers of peace and love. We must be welcoming, cordial and generous with those who visit us.*

The first Christians, when visiting one another, used a sign of peace and fraternity as greeting. Our Constitutions ask from us to behave in the same way with all we greet and deal with. Our presence must help us to show what is essential to Christianity: mutual love. These same attitudes of love and peace must be present when we visit our families or when they visit us.

The welcoming to all must be a symbol that distinguishes us. It is the complete opposite of complaints, gossip, and senseless talking. Our Foundress was happy to see that our communities were welcoming:

...I received with immeasurable joy the news about all of you, from our customer and neighbors, who returned in admiration with the kindness of the whole community, since they could have never imagined so much generosity¹⁶¹.

45. *We should use the media of social communication as an aid to know the reality of the world and of the human beings of our time, whom we must evangelize. Nevertheless, we should responsibly avoid anything that might harm our spiritual life, our work, the welfare of our community and the salutary use of time. Correspondence is one of the means for communication that helps us maintain our fraternity and the apostolate. Our correspondence shall be free. In order to publish writings that refer to questions of religion or customs we need the license of the respective superior.*

Mass media has greater power and influence each day, whether for good or bad. They decide, in big part, what we get to know about reality and how do we value the issues. That is why it is of utmost importance that our communities are informed of the reality of the

¹⁶¹ EP, *To Sister Raimunda Duran, sub-priory of the Company of Mary in Tarragona*, (Reus, 08/26/1870) 141.

world they live in, and they want to serve and evangelize. The more media we have access to, the better informed we will be and the more possibilities we will have to form a critical and evangelical opinion.

We must be open to reality and to mass media in order to grow personally, as a community and apostolically. But we must do this with love, inner freedom and evangelical prudence (VFC 34). The Code of Canon Law expresses this very clearly:

In the use of means of social communication, necessary discretion is to be observed and those things are to be avoided which are harmful to one's vocation and dangerous to the chastity of a consecrated person (CIC c. 666).

It is a mistake to live with fear and suspicion of mass media (Newspapers, TV, Radio, Internet, movies, theater), but it is also a mistake not to filter what is seen, read or heard. And this not only applies to the emotional-sexual field, but also in others that might be influencing us without our knowledge, consumerism, way of relating to others, value scales, or ways of using our free time... If our communities are called to be places where love must always be the logic of life and source of joy, we must be careful of everything we use and schedule in our free time, so that it helps to fulfill our goal.

The last two paragraphs were modified in the XV General Chapter (*Historical Introduction, 24*).

II – PRAYER AND EVERYDAY LIFE EXPRESSIONS OF OUR LIFE IN COMMUNION

37. Our life in communion is fully expressed and realized in the Eucharist, the centre of unity that obliges us to a daily conversion. It is also fostered by prayer, common work, community meetings, recreation, and friendly relationships and in our style of family life¹⁶².

Each human group stays together inasmuch as the goal that originally tied it and brought the members together, stays alive and updated. In a religious community this goal is God and His Kingdom. Since it is a supernatural aim, it is evident that it particularly expresses itself in community prayer, and essentially in Eucharist, starting point par excellence of every Christian community. But since God is present in everything that is human, His presence must be reflected in the most simple and daily things, living under the same roof, common finances, communication, rest, working together...

Eucharist is the *fountain and culmination* of life within the Church because everything comes from it and to it everything returns:

It is around the Eucharist, celebrated or adored, "source and summit" of all activity of the Church, that the communion of souls is built up, which is the starting point of all growth in fraternity. From this all education for community spirit must begin". (VFC 14f) By its very nature the Eucharist is at the centre of the consecrated life, both for individuals and for

¹⁶² Dir 51,52,55,79.

communities.(VC 95a) Members are to make every effort to participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice daily, to receive the most sacred Body of Christ, and to adore the Lord himself present in the sacrament(CIC c. 663 §2).

Prayer is daily nourishment for the person and the community. We cannot forget our sisters when praying. Our Foundress in her morning prayers said:

...teach me Oh Lord, what is convenient for the family you have entrusted to me, and especially for each one of my beloved sisters¹⁶³.

Life in community is also nourished by many other moments, as it is reflected in our Constitutions. Of no less importance are our times of leisure; it is not a time to be considered wasted, but privileged to allow the community to be together, not only in prayer and work, but also in the joy of being together. *Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!* (Ph 4:4).

42. *Participating in the penitential sense of the Church and in solidarity with those who are suffering from hunger, we must always have moderation in eating and drinking¹⁶⁴. We will practice fasting and abstinence, besides the days established by the Church, on those indicated in our proper law¹⁶⁵.*

In our community we must live, not only our ecclesial dimension of our prayer, but also the penitential dimension that bond us with those suffering.

Prayer and communion in a community cannot be an end in themselves. To the contrary, they must open up to the needs of men and women begging for help in the midst of painful and exploitation situations in which they are condemned to live. Our missionary reality compels us to act in solidarity with the poor, living our community life in austerity. The Claretian Missionary sister must never forget that there are still people dying from hunger and thirst, and far from improving, every day the number of those living in inhumane conditions keeps growing. If we do not pay close attention and stay vigilant, we might be helping with the injustices that divide the world in two: North and South; rich and poor.

It is important to give fasting and abstinence (which is more than not eating meat) the real meanings of solidarity and penance they have. Through them we participate in a very small way in what many humans experience every day. And, also, we make ours their needs, experiencing, in a very small way, in our body what their sufferings mean.

44. *We must distribute our community acts according to the demands of the apostolic works. We should bear in mind that, besides the time dedicated to prayer and work, we must have a suitable time for us, for recreation and rest¹⁶⁶.*

We try to live a life style that contributes to the well-being of each member, but also of the Church and of the world to which we proclaim the gospel. It is imperative that each community adapts the schedule of their common acts to the customs and needs of evangelization and of the place where they are. There may be times when not all will be

¹⁶³ Morning Prayers, in *Writings*, 194.

¹⁶⁴ cf. *Const.* 1869, Tr. I, ch, 18, n. 7.

¹⁶⁵ Dir 60.

¹⁶⁶ Ib 53-55.

able to be present for the liturgy of the hours, but each one must try her best to be there. This is particularly complicated in the communities where each sister has a different ministry, but when we value community life and mission, we try to organize ourselves the best we can. The generosity in our apostolic mission is not in at opposition with the search for times of rest. Mother Paris corrects the superior of the community of Reus:

...take good care, and do not make the sisters work during their time of rest, since such thing weakens the health ahead of time¹⁶⁷.

43. *The spirit of consecrated family requires that in our houses we always have a part reserved only for the sisters, where we may be able with greater rest and silence to help one another to keep alive the ideal of service and commitment which God demands of us, according to our own vocation. We will keep silence, in the assigned times and places, in order to favor the atmosphere of prayer, work and the rest of our sisters.*

It is necessary to balance the many aspects of community life in order to make visible the Kingdom of God¹⁶⁸. To welcome into our community other persons, is not against having a part of it reserved only for the sisters. The Code of Canon Law talks about this as cloister but always within the character and mission of each Congregation:

In all houses, cloister adapted to the character and mission of the institute is to be observed according to the determinations of proper law, with some part of a religious house always reserved to the members alone (CIC c. 667, 1).

In our Institute, there are many different ways of privacy in the section where we sisters live. It is essential for each community to establish what is most convenient, in order not to lose sight either of the missionary dimension, or the indispensable personal and community privacy.

It is fundamental to give importance to silence. In the past, it was one of the key points in community life, but nowadays, it is maybe one of the most forgotten realities, but also the most necessary. In our society, some people, believers or not, reserve a time for silence, because they know they need it as an alternative to superficiality. As to our charisma, let us remember a letter of Maria Antonia Paris, on August 1861, addressed to the Bishop, Dr. Jose Caixal, stressing the value of silence:

Blessed silence which brings so many goods to the religious Houses! I hold as true what Saint Bernard states about that virtue – that, in order to renew a Religious House (or even a whole Order), nothing else is needed but to re-establish the rule of silence¹⁶⁹.

Maybe we went from one extreme to the other. Obviously, it is not a matter of being silent as a sort of myth, because silence does not have a value in itself, but in relation to something else. The human being is created to communicate and relate, not to be alone (*Gn 26-28; 2: 18-24*), but we need the silence to give our word content and depth, so as not to fall into simple wordiness. If in the community there exists fraternity, happiness and friendship; a sense of responsibility, serious work, spirit of prayer, interest in ongoing

¹⁶⁷ EP, *To the Prior in Reus* (Carcaixent, 10/28/1877) 320.

¹⁶⁸ *Dir*, 57, 58, 63.

¹⁶⁹ EP, *To Caixal* (Trempe, 08/18/1861) 52.

formation...silence cannot be absent in some places and times. Our Special Chapter Decrees beautifully describe this:

*Silence has a real actual meaning. It is an ascetic and religious value. It is the best preparation for the word – any word not coming from and not leading to silence, not inviting to silence, is a hollow word. Silence favors the intellectual and material work, prayer and rest of our sisters. Silence is not inner life, but is a requisite for a true inner life*¹⁷⁰.

In effect:

...The first and foremost duty of all religious is to be the contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer (CIC c. 663, 1).

48. *Fraternal love maintains us in communion of prayer and remembrance with the sisters who have gone before us in the Lord. From heaven, they intercede for those of us who are still journeying with the pilgrim Church. This love extends to our departed relatives. For all of them the community will offer the suffrages established in our proper Law*¹⁷¹.

Our communion of life is not only earthly; we should not forget the communion of saints. We unite ourselves, with the whole Church, in the prayer for all the deceased faithful, as it already happened in the Old Testament, when the hope of immortality began: *Judas and his men went to gather up the bodies of the slain and bury them with their kinsmen in their ancestral tombs for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death (1Mac 12: 39-44).*

We hope in Christ, the first fruits of our own resurrection (1Co 15: 20): *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and that in the same way God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus (1Th 4: 14).* This is the reason to join the sisters that have preceded us and pray for them, remembering them day after day in the Vespers and in some other special occasions. Likewise it is also the meaning of our prayer for our relatives (who are our main benefactors) and for all those who have died with no one to pray for them.

LIFE IN COMMUNION IN OTHER POINTS OF CONSTITUTIONS

In the process of formation we learn more from daily life than from words. This which is true in other aspects of our life is even truer regarding life in communion.

From the postulancy, the young woman starts discovering and living the life style of the Congregation. She keeps learning how to live in the family she has been called to. This gradual process of belonging is marked by different stages: novitiate, first profession and perpetual profession, which marks the definitive commitment to God in the Congregation.

¹⁷⁰ DDCC 1969, *Religious Life*, 79.

¹⁷¹ Dir 70-72.

For the good of the sisters in formation, the formation director, the aides and superiors need to have a common vision on how formation should be, and to form a true family among them and with all the sisters.

The Congregation becomes a concrete reality in each community. The community welcomes, accompanies and stimulates the sisters in their first steps within our family of new apostles. In the same way, the community is meant to be, along the entire life, the customary place for our constant renewal and continuous formation.

Community experience per se helps in vocation discernment, showing the person her vocational possibilities, not only to adapt to but also to build community for the rest of her life. To live in a community not formed by *flesh and blood* means to have felt a call that brings with it some essential qualities, as we have extensively stated in the commentary on point 41 of the Constitutions.

Postulancy

76. For the young woman who enters our Congregation, the postulancy is a time for searching, for deepening their Christian life, for discerning their vocation and for making a transition to a new lifestyle.

Novitiate

80. The novitiate is the time prescribed to prepare oneself for the religious consecration. During the novitiate, the novice tries to discern the will of God and joyfully embrace it, to further deepen her Christian life, to know and assimilate the Claretian life, and to acquire the necessary virtues. The novitiate is under the governance of the mistress of novices, whose responsibility is to help the novices throughout their process of formation and discernment.

83. The novice must experience the following of Christ, “to whom she proposes to resemble.” In order to attain the perfection of charity, she should exercise herself in the practice of the evangelical counsels of poverty, obedience and chastity, which one day she will profess, and in the community life. Let her be simple, cheerful, friendly, condescending and honest.

85. The community where the novitiate resides should endeavor to be true witness of the Claretian life, which serve as a stimulus to the novice that begins her religious life. In this way she will assimilate the spirit of the Institute both in the communion of life and by the doctrine.

90. Finishing the period of the novitiate, during which the novice must have verified the certainty of her Claretian vocation, in loyalty to Christ who has called her, she will ask with freedom and responsibility to profess in the Institute.

Juniorate

97. Encouraged by the community and guided by the mistress of juniors, they will devote themselves to a work compatible with the preparation they are acquiring. “They shall join

action with contemplation, the most necessary point for our Institute.” During this time they should exercise themselves in the practice of prayer, in accepting day by day the vicissitudes of this life, as coming from the hand of God. Thus they will not depend on times and happenings, but they will fix their souls in God, who never changes.

Perpetual Profession

99. *With the perpetual profession, the junior sister realizes her definitive surrender to God in the Institute. This act of major transcendence should be immediately preceded of a sufficiently long preparation, in quiet and silent prayer. She will also make the spiritual exercises.*

Ongoing Formation

102. *For all its members, our religious community should be the habitual place of renewal and ongoing formation, creating an atmosphere of prayer, spiritual freedom and fraternal help, being attentive to what the Lord expects of her in each concrete situation, specifying objectives and evaluating them.*

CONCLUSIONS ON LIFE IN COMMUNION

The community dimension of our life is the result of theological charity. It is fundamental in our Congregation from the beginning. Life in communion and mission are (to say it in some way) the concrete experience of our, Claretians vows. Not all Congregations have this point as an essential one, which for us is fundamental since our origins: *one family and one heart as the Lord expects from us (Const. 35)*. That is why it requires a continuous process of conversion and acceptance of God’s gift which calls us to be an apostolic family in the Lord.

Family life and fraternity are also symbols and signs of transcendence, because our ties do not hold by the flesh or blood, but by our faith in Christ. The community is a prophetic and mysterious proclamation of the divine agape we expect, and from which we also receive the apostolic strength and energy. Therefore, to live in community brings about the wish to build new relationships and an open communion with all human beings – a new Humanity:

We re reminded that one of the tasks of consecrated life today is that of spreading the spirituality of communion...indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling within us and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the faces of the brothers and sisters around us... it also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body and therefore as 'those who are part of me'...". Some consequences of feeling and doing derive from this principal with convincing logic: sharing the joys and sufferings of our brothers and sisters; sensing their desires and attending to their needs; offering them true and profound friendship. The spirituality of communion also implies the ability to see what is positive in the others, to welcome it and to prize it as a gift from God, and to know how to make room for others, sharing each other's burdens. Unless we follow this spiritual path, the external structures of communion serve very little purpose...The spirituality of communion is the principle highway for the future of life and witness. (SaC 28-29)

PRAYER LIFE

INTRODUCTION

Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed (Mk 1:35).

It seems that our Lord would look for hidden moments to talk to my soul; and enjoy with it intimate communication (Aut. MP 48).

The first means I have always employed and still do is prayer (Aut. FC 264).

Maybe it is prayer that differentiates radically a believer from an unbeliever whether in theory or practice. We might believe in the Christian God, but without prayer, our faith is reduced to a group of customs, rules or moral codes. All that a sister does is in fact, performed by many other non-believers, or belonging to other religions. To offer our own life for a just cause; to give ourselves to the poor; to live in community with others; in poverty, in obedience or in chastity, may be seen as understandable and praiseworthy options. But to pray will always be part of the innermost, intimacy of the mystery, that unexplainable place known only to those who have been there. It is maybe precisely why *it is both our fundamental responsibility and vital right (Const. 50).*

Show me how you pray and I will tell you which God you believe in. Using this common saying, our prayer not only represents the person but also the One with whom we enter in dialogue when praying. That is why it is impossible to make a clean cut separation between the life of prayer and the rest of the life of a person. It is a purely functional or didactic distinction, because in the end if what we say about our prayer does not match our actions and way of life, we only keep what we see, which, in turn, is only expressing what is in our hearts (*Lk 6:45*).

There are many books on prayer and about prayer. The theory, like with love or friendship, may help us to understand what are we talking about, but in the end, the only valid reference will be our own personal experience and the experience acquired by those who have walked this way before us. Therefore, before the commentary of the points of our Constitutions, we must put on the table some simple basic principles about prayer. They are for sure not the only ones available, but they are the ones we consider most important:

- We talk about praying to the **God of Jesus**: Not every prayer is a Christian prayer, even though any prayer can become a Christian prayer. Is it not true that Jesus spent a very long time reminding his disciples how God really was, and how men and

women had distorted, with good or bad intention, the image of God? (*Mt 6:5-13*) That fact is important to remember every so often, not only by reviewing the way we pray, but also the way we treat others; our goals in life; our means; our work; our rest, our commitment with those who have the least.....Thus, we must be aware of and open to our surrounding reality and ready to discern the truth in our life, because the idols and fictitious deities are commonly the true God substitutes!

- **Without personal experience of God, there is no prayer, and therefore there is no faith.** This experience is a journey, a process of encounter face to face (*Ex33:11*), just like in any other human relationship, even those relationships less deep. As long as prayer does not make me experience it internally¹⁷² and deeply feel it, I will only be turning my prayer into a mental or religious exercise, but I will not enter into a relationship with God. That is why to initiate and animate the life of prayer implies to help to experience God, to discover God himself in our inner being and in the ordinary of our history. As so many believers have testified to, once you find the living presence of God dwelling in you, it is very difficult to forget it. Then you begin to grow in the desire of a greater union with Him and of Him in you. You grow in thanksgiving, in petition and in a love which cannot but build his kingdom.

- The God of Jesus is **God** - is **mystery**. God **is** completely transcendent and intimate. God creator of everything is a personal God. We can experience Him, but only within the incomprehensibility of the mystery of faith: invisible, impalpable, not controllable. He gives himself to me gratuitously and I can only welcome Him and be attentive to Him. The experience of God is not something which depends on our effort nor does it respond to our plans. Prayer reminds me that I am not, that He is the only one who is and the one who leads my life. God makes him present and acts in a clear but mysterious way, on his terms, not my style; on his time, not my rush; according to his principles, not my priorities.

- The God of Jesus is the **incarnate God**. God the Trinity. God the Father is not an idea, but a presence, just as the people of Israel experienced and testified to. God the Holy Spirit is the source of all prayer, always to the aid of our weakness (*Rom 8: 26*) recreating our life. God the Son, who has made his dwelling among us; has made his own our flesh, our limitations, our humaneness, all that we are and will be. That is a point of no return. Since then we are, as the hymn prays -*diminutive incarnation*. God is part of each one of us, and God is not complete, to express it in some way, without humankind with Him. The human word has been assumed in Christ's heart as a continuous prayer to the Father (*SC 83*). He prays for us so our faith never grows weak or fails us (*Lk 22: 32; Heb 7: 25*), and in his prayer is ours. Therefore there is neither distance nor rupture between the divine and the human; there is no need to achieve merits or to multiply our prayers to reach God; because in Christ all have been incorporated as members of his body. Moreover, if our salvation depended upon our works, we would nullify Christ's passion (*Ga 2: 21*). Do not look for Him in the highest; do not praise Him in this or that place but in spirit and in truth within yourselves (*Jn 4: 21-23*).

- A God **committed** with **history**. That is why He will never take us away from our world nor will he ask us to separate us from our brothers and sisters to have a relationship with Him or consecrate ourselves to him. On the contrary if in order to pray I

¹⁷² It is important not to mistake the experience or the sentiment – which are always present in prayer, with the emotions or feelings which sooner or later will vanish because we will not need them anymore for praying, or God wants us to do without them.

need to forget the world, society or my own personal experiences, then I am most probably not praying to the God made flesh in Jesus. The way I feel after praying – be it consoled or desolate – must not be the guide to know if I am doing it right or wrong. The best measure of my progress should be the continuous conversion of my heart, which is shown through my profound commitment to the world. One of the most continuous traits of the spiritual experience of the people of Israel is its faithfulness to history and to the promise of God. God loves history because in it his children live, suffer and rejoice. In history, the loved work from his hands, God is present, in the events, in those that strengthen our faith and in those that seem to weaken it. It is the best sign that we may look to the future with hope and commit ourselves with the Kingdom which is coming, because He is with us. It is the same experience of the first Christians: we are called to live our faith in this very same world, in which God has become one of us, has died and has been raised.

- **We pray according to who we are.** I am the same when I pray, when I interact, when I work, or when I rest.....Sometimes, we tend to separate what we are from our relationship with God. Evidently, such thing is a mistake or a deceit¹⁷³. Our relationship with God in prayer is the same kind of relationship we have among ourselves (*DCE 18*). We look at reality in our prayer, with the same prejudices and the same values we look at the world outside of prayer; we hope, we feel, we think and we analyze from the exact same place from where we get angry, we rejoice and we rest. We know from personal experience, how hard it is to look at oneself truthfully but at the same time tenderly. The more we keep in touch with our inner self, the better equipped we will be to listen to ourselves, and hence to become listeners of God's will over us. When praying means to realize and accept who we really are deep inside, under the light of God's design for me, we can then say that more than praying, we are prayer¹⁷⁴. In a word, it is the person herself or himself who prays with her or his obsessions, weaknesses, lies, kindnesses and gifts. My relationship with God is exactly the same as my relationship with others and with myself. How can you say that you love a God you don't see, if you hate those around you? (*1Jn 4:20*). How can you say that acknowledge and value the works of God when you put your rest, your body, your inner self which is the temple of the Creator over everything else or you neglect it? (*Co 6: 19*). In as much as I get to know myself better, sincerely and transparently, I am also getting to know better the God who dwells in me, and I will have more and better tools to prevent my own weaknesses, wishes and unawareness's coming out of me. This conviction constitutes the inner core of Mother Paris' morning prayer:

*I beg you to make my path clear so I can get to know you and Me, and to know everything you want me to do to serve and to love you*¹⁷⁵.

- We also **learn** to pray. Lets remember the request made to Jesus by His disciples: *Teach us to pray (Lk 11: 1)*. But, have we not said that the work of the Holy Spirit in us is pure grace, given to us by God's initiative? Certainly! But it also requires certain attitudes from us and, most of all, our awareness. It is not a reflex, no matter how deep it might come from us. Let us imagine we want to speak a certain language - our native language comes to us gradually but easily, and the more we speak it, the more it becomes our way to express ourselves and to grasp the meaning of life through it. But if we want to learn a new language, in the beginning, it sounds and looks strange in the sounds, as well as in the structure or in the meaning of the words. What looks familiar and obvious when we know it, can become a combination of sounds and characters, without meaning when

¹⁷³ Cf. M. ESTRADA, *En torno a la oración*, Madrid 1977.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. A. GARCÍA-MONGE, *Pedagogía de la oración*, from: AAVV, *Diccionario Teológico de la Vida religiosa*, 1242.

¹⁷⁵ Saint Augustine stated this clearly and strongly: *to know me is to know him; to know him is to know me*

we do not know it. The same can happen with prayer. Being a dialogue, prayer has its own rules and clues, which we will gradually understand and master to the extent that we practice it and to the extent also that we allow ourselves to be taught by those who already know how to pray and can teach us: mystagogues, spiritual guides, and spiritual directors, those who have experience and knowledge to teach others to understand their own journey toward God¹⁷⁶ Without any doubt, our world asks those in Religious Life not only to master prayer, and to pray (prayerful communities and individuals), but also, to know how to teach praying. To learn to pray is to learn to live from God's perspective, and to learn to recognize his life in mine and to welcome it as a gift. It is a learning process which has to begin before we pray: when we learn to give a place to silence in our schedules; to be humanly grateful; to have the ability of listening and admiration; to recognize and express our experiences; to commit ourselves with the calls from our world....

- As with any other relationship, **it must be taken care of.** Posture, the place, and the time do matter. What I do and what I listen to also matters. Life itself, in its entirety, is prayer whenever I live it as a personal and constant relationship with God, but no less true is the fact that when we have an intimate and ongoing relationship with someone, we want and look for the appropriate place and time for the encounter. We can live under the same roof with someone, but that does not mean we are sharing our life with that person. By the same token, we might know that God is present in everything we do, but we might not pay attention to His invitations or not use the necessary means to accomplish them. Usually it will not be out of meanness, but for not dedicating enough quality and quantity in time and space. The same little things that nourish any human relationship are the ones that make our life of prayer grow. It is not a matter of either a better or a worse prayer, but to weaken or strengthen our bonds with the God of our lives. On this particular point our Foundress says.

It seems that Our Lord had my soul inside in the most sacred of his heart, and there he was communicating his eternal dispositions, with so much grace and love, like a best friend treats his equal; and if these two friends have not seen each other for so long, they have many things to tell each other; and they need time to talk alone. It seems that Our Lord would look for hidden moments to talk to my soul and enjoy with it intimate communication (Aut. MP 48).

- **We pray by the Kingdom and for the sake of the kingdom,** because we live by the Kingdom and for the sake of the kingdom. It is as difficult to talk about the following of or configuration to Christ without prayer, as it is to separate Jesus from His kingdom. To the extent that our relationship with God is shaping us into the image of Christ, to the same extent his worries, desires, sorrows and joys become ours... that is his Kingdom. To believe that action, itself and by itself, can transform the world, is to deny God's grace and our essential poverty without Him. On the other hand to separate our personal and community prayer from our evangelical and generous effort to make this world a more human, and just place for all, is simply, incoherent and contrary to the God of Jesus. "*Thy kingdom come,*" were the words Jesus taught us in the Lord's prayer. Every single Christian prayer is always asking for the kingdom, and therefore we are committed to make it happen¹⁷⁷. To pray to and with Christ make us always listen to the Father.

¹⁷⁶ In relation to that it is very enlightening what Carlos Cabarrús calls *Theography* (what God writes in each one of us) and Mystagogy (the meaning of those words or marks of God in me, they will guide my life if I learn to read them properly). It has much to do with what we call countersign, personal vocation, foundational vocation... (cf. C. CABARRUS, *Cuaderno de bitácora*, 199).

¹⁷⁷ *The experience of God does not happen outside reality by hiding in a spiritual bubble. We live in a broken world... Our challenge is to pray in this broken world because... God's work, His kingdom as the most profound piece of reality*

- **We pray with the Church, for the Church and as a Church.** It is a logical Consequence of the life of any Christian. In our particular case it has a special meaning – to downgrade prayer to something purely personal goes against the God of Jesus Christ. To pray to the Father makes us sons and daughters; it brings us close to Christ and also to our brothers and sisters. It would be extremely difficult to understand that the members of a religious community, gathered around Christ and through Christ, could pray individually but could not share their prayer with their community. Let us remember that we are talking about praying, not only reciting prayers together. On the other hand, part of our charisma is to *pray continuously for the Church*. A Claretian Missionary Sister lives, prays and commits herself as Church, even when her line of work, her environment or her relationship have little or nothing to do with it. To pray as Church calls for a certain harmony (not uniformity) in its external ways, particularly as to the Liturgy of the Hours. Moreover, beyond this necessary formal unity, our ecclesial constitution is what makes of us who we are. Such type of prayer encompasses harmony among differences, openness, listening, and fraternal sharing...Everything falls within the depth of the Mystery, not only of prayer but also of the Church, that being One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, is also sinful. God’s Church – our Church.

COMMENTARY TO POINTS 49-60

49. *Jesus Christ, our most perfect model, prayed intensely to the Father and commands us to pray. We should “pray with the praying Christ” and put all our care to conform our life to his. If the words of Claretian Missionary sister “do not come from the forge of prayer, they will not soften the hearts.*

It could not be otherwise, the first point of this section takes us directly to Jesus. He himself and his prayer are our model and our companionship. We learn to pray from Him but we also pray with Him who also prays with us. It is this togetherness what constitutes a privileged journey of christological configuration. In the end, this is the longing of every disciple of Christ and therefore, also of any consecrated person. In fact, it is from this configuration with Christ that we should look at our vows and our particular vocation as Claretians.

Const 49	AM Cross references
Jesus Christ, our most perfect model, prayed intensely to the Father and commanded us to pray.	Jesus Christ our Lord, our most perfect Teacher, by day dedicated himself to the mission and prayed by night (II, 20).
We should “ <i>pray with the praying Christ,</i> ”	May the missionary pray with Christ praying (II, 31)
And take every care to conform our life to his.	May the main goal of every missionary be to conform his/her life to Christ...He must not lose sight of his/her divine Model if he/she wants

and of every human being, also grows through this troubled situation...We encounter Him in the intimate contemplation and in the transforming action. (B. GONZALEZ BUELTA, *To pray in a broken world*, Santander 2002, 14-15).

	to fulfill the mission God has entrusted him/her (II,30).
If the words of a Claretian Missionary Sister “do not proceed from the forge of prayer they will not soften the hearts”	If the words of the missionary do not proceed from the forge of prayer, they will not soften the hearts (II 22).

This point is full of quotations taken from the *Apostolic Missionary*. Is it not of utmost significance that the first sentences in our Constitutions regarding prayer are taken from the recommendations that our Founders, gives to anyone wanting to genuinely become an apostolic missionary? One more time, the inseparable tie between action and contemplation that shapes us is obvious.

According to the Bible one of the most noteworthy aspects of Jesus prayer is its frequency and the continuous reference to the Father. This filial characteristic of his prayer is not something exclusive of the Son, but a central experience of every Christian. For many centuries, the Church did not allow that the prayers from the altar be directed to anyone else but to the Father. In Jesus it is something natural to address the Father –the Abba- in all the moments of his life, be them happy (*Lk 10:21*), or tragic (*Mk 14:36*); when He was about to make an important decision (*Lk 6:12*); or in everyday life, as it is taught in the Jewish tradition (*Mk 1:35; Lk 5:16, Mt 14:21-23*) Reading any of the Gospels we perceive the constant intimacy in which Christ lived with the Father who mysteriously inhabited Him. Because he has lived it, he invites us to pray in the same way (*Mt 6: 5-8; 7: 7-11; 26:41; Lk 11:11-13; 18:1-8; 22: 46; Jn 16:23*).

Thus, our prayer, our life and our mission are called to merge into one single source and goal Christ.

50. *Faithful to our charism, we must “occupy ourselves in the silence of holy prayer, praying to God for the needs of our holy Mother the Church, to whose end we should direct all our prayers and works”. Prayer is our fundamental duty and our primordial right.*

This quotation from our First Constitutions shows how the needs of the Church occupy a central part in the life and prayer of our Founders, and thus also for the New Order which the Lord wanted. To M. Paris, such concern was evident; she wrote it in any places. As to Claret, his missionary urge was always directed by the obedience to the church. In Cuba being bishop of the Diocese of Santiago, he lives with special emphasis the love for the Church. This love would continue to increase, even in the time he was confessor of the royal family.

To direct all our prayers and works toward the needs of the church does not reduce or narrow our vision. When we are invited to offer our entire life we are not asked to look inwards, but to bring God’s holy law to every creature and to contribute toward the permanent renewal of the consecrated life. *We commit ourselves with full availability to the service of the church, in order to assist it in whatever is most needed, appropriate and effective in keeping with our charism (Const. 7).*

This ecclesial orientation is not a matter of more or less contemporary fashion or sociological situations. To the contrary, it is at the root and foundation of our Institute:

since the origin of our Institute, the Holy Spirit has urged us on to renew the Church (Const. 2).

To *occupy ourselves in the silence of holy prayer* invites us also to live habitually in quietness, serenity and inner silence (Const 43) which go well beyond not speaking. It is in fact, a prophetic and significant form of presence in today's world. In our daily noisy societies, it has become harder and harder to teach these values. Those who look for them settle for other isolated spiritual movements, often separated from reality, like yoga and relaxation exercises (New Age or Oriental practice types that have been taken out of context).

The last phrase comes from CIC (c. 663, 1):

The first and foremost duty of all religious is to be the contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer.

The fact that the Church considers it a duty and the specific right of consecrated life shows the importance given to it and the central role it plays in our specific vocation. It may look like such thing should not be legislated upon, but at the same time, it is important to remind ourselves the commitment we have made and the right to a daily prayer time that is given to us when we profess our vows. It is also a continuous call to the discernment, in such a way that we have a committed, missionary and audacious life, which is at the same time balanced, healthy, humanizing and rooted in faith. (Const. 44-45).

51. *Every day in the Eucharist we celebrate the paschal mystery. In it we participate actively, receive the Body of the Lord, acquire new vigor for our apostolic tasks and attain our full realization as a fraternal community.*

Very often we tend to correlate liturgical prayer with more or less complex rites. We cannot forget that every liturgy is, always and foremost, prayer. Any human rite is the expression of a concrete experience in the form of gestures and/or words. The liturgical rite articulates and enables the human experience of communication with God. The liturgy will lose its reason d'être, in the measure in which it stops being prayer for all those who participate in it, or stops serving as the means to enter into dialogue with God. Let us remember, for example, those times in history when the Eucharist was understood as an occasion for the faithful to do their personal and private prayers, while the celebrant had to put all his attention to perform with precision the sacramental rite. After the Vatican Council, and particularly in the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC)*, the Church wanted to situate again the liturgy within the frame in which it was born— the experience and joyful expression of our relationship with God. This will be true of the celebration of any one of the sacraments and of the liturgy of the hours.

The Eucharistic experience is one of those aspects that can easily turn mechanical and worn out in our Christian life. Whether because of the routine; maybe because the liturgy is too far apart from the reality of the celebrating community or maybe because of the situation of the ordained ministers. It is obvious that the daily experience of the Eucharist demands that the Church and every one of us puts forth a bigger effort to make it what it was meant to be: a thanksgiving and a celebration of the living memorial of the risen Christ in our own life.

According to Scripture the deep meaning of the Eucharist does not apply only to the Last Supper, but a valid clue to understand Christ's whole life. Let us remember that according to Jewish faith every meal is a blessing from God, and therefore a time for thanksgiving not only for the food, but for the opportunity to be and to share it with others. It is always a prayer of grateful remembrance. But it is also a reason for hope, because the Jewish people knows that God's promises will be fulfilled and that there will be a day, when He will prepare for us an abundant and everlasting banquet where we will drink and eat freely, without sorrow or differences amongst us (*Is 55: 1*).

Jesus chose to eat with all kinds of people – rich, poor, friends and enemies – to the point of being criticized for doing so (*Mt 11:18*). Jesus' ways and meal companions were not random. That is why the *Prayer of the Missionary* of our Foundress has such a deep and prophetic meaning: *may he eat with Christ eating; may he drink with Christ drinking (MA II, 31)*.

Jesus, in the Last Supper, adds a great innovative element. Around the bread and wine, around Himself, arises a new you in history: the community formed by all of those who decide to live in the world as the living memorial of Jesus Christ. Thus, every time we celebrate the paschal mystery in each Eucharist, we insert ourselves actively into that first apostolic community. In fact, it is the Lord Himself who urges us to be participants, not observers – *come eat, drink....do this in memory of me*.

Theologically, to immerse ourselves into the deepest sense of Eucharist, it is necessary to take into account the revelation of the four gospels, the narrative in the synoptic as well as the washing of the feet in John. With the bread and wine, Jesus gives himself up, *since having loved those who were his in the world; He loved them to the end (John 13: 1)*. And it is a simple surrender, without big displays, from the bottom, taking off his tunic and being with them, like one that serves (*Lk 22:27; Jn 13:4-15*). In this way our own surrender and service does not generate divisions or leading roles, but fraternity and missionary commission. What would it mean to remember the mystery of our faith and eat his Body if we do not allow that his grace continuously to insert us in this Eucharistic surrender of our own life towards our brothers and sisters?

May God grant that the quality of our Eucharistic experience might be seen through the effects it produces in our personal life, in our apostolic vitality and in our fraternal life. Eating the body of Christ gradually makes us what we already are, one Body, as the patristic adage stated: *Take what you are, the Body of Christ, and be what you take, the Body of Christ*.

Thus until the day, when God will be all in all (*1Co 15: 28*), His spirit will be consecrating our life and our heart, along with the bread and the wine. He will transform us, making us other Christ's, so we can in turn Christianize the world around us (*Const. 37, 20, 11, and 38*). The Eucharist is the real sign of God's commitment to lead creation to the new heavens and the new earth, bringing everything together under Christ (*Ep 1*).

Canonically the Church is aware of the diversity that thrives in the world, hence it cautiously conveys the duty and obligation every consecrated person has: to make every effort to participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice daily (*CIC c.663, 2*).

52. *The Liturgy of the Hours has a special importance for us because of the ecclesial dimension of our charism. We unite ourselves to the praise of the universal Church and give thanks with Christ to the Father in the Spirit, for his work of salvation. We pray in community Lauds and Vespers. Complines may be recited personally.*

If the Liturgy of the Hours did not have this ecclesial dimension, then probably it would not have any particular importance to us. Therefore, the morning and evening prayers¹⁷⁸ without communal or ecclesial connotation, loses much of its reason for existing. And this, without ever forgetting, that creativity must always be at the service of the church and prayer; not due to pure aesthetic sense or our personal taste, since it is, as its meaning implies, the Liturgy of the Church, not mine. Another extreme might be to make the Liturgy of the Hours another task in our lives, and thus, to reduce it to short timings and ways not in accordance with what the Church or the community is going through at the time. Such thing would only make it an empty and stereotyped prayer with no meaning.

The Liturgy of the Hours compiles a vast tradition, partly shared by the Jewish community, but it is also a Christological prayer (since we pray with Christ) and Trinitarian (because we pray to the Father in the Spirit). Every single ecclesial prayer is, in some way, a prayer stemming from the Body of Christ as a whole. For as little as the praying community might be, the whole Church is gathered in prayer like the first disciples in the cenacle, sheltered by Mary and the Spirit of the Risen Lord. I think the best way to explain it is to paraphrase the words Saint Agustin used to explain the mystery of both communion and participation in Christ's life:

When the body of the Son prays it does not detach from the head. Let's identify our voices in His and His in ours. We recite within Him and He recites within us the prayer of this psalm. Don't try to say anything without Him, since He does not say anything without you (...) you here, the other one somewhere else, the Body of Christ cries out all the time, while members leave and replace one another. A man extends over the end of times. The members of Christ cry out, some already rest in peace in Him, some others cry out now, others will cry out when we rest in peace, and then all will cry out¹⁷⁹.

We have already pointed out how Christ, following the Jewish tradition, would go the Synagogue on Saturdays, and how He would pray at different times. The first Christian communities kept the tradition paying special attention to the night prayer, so much liked by Jesus (*Heb 16: 25; 12: 12*). After some centuries as Christianity spreads through the Empire, they added to the numbers of followers, but lost in the quality of life of its faith. And then, the first monks, trying to regain the spiritual radicalism of the first Christians, spread the prayer through different hours of the day.

Once again, it is the Church that keeps this tradition for the entire Christian world. The clergy, according to the qualities of each Institution, *are to devote themselves to the reading of sacred scripture and mental prayer, to celebrate worthily the liturgy of the hours according to the precepts of proper law (c.663.3).*

¹⁷⁸ Our XV General Chapter modified this point. We pray in community Lauds and Vesper. We may pray Complines individually, each one according to her rhythm of prayer, so that the last moments of our day continue to be dedicated to the Lord, with the personal examination-discernment, the prayer of Simeon and the Marian antiphon... (Historial Introduction, 24).

¹⁷⁹ Quoted by J.M.CANALS, Oración Litúrgica, in AA.VV, *Diccionario Teológico de la Vida Consagrada*, 1231.

The contribution of the liturgical prayer differs from the experience of personal prayer. Therefore, if we pray together but not collectively, we might be adding personal prayers, but losing the source of grace that God conveys to all of us through liturgical prayer. The didactic value of the liturgical prayer is very extensive, but only if we immerse ourselves in it, meaning that, in an ecclesial way, regardless of our personal experience at any point in our lives, we are required to step out of ourselves and join the common experience of the Church. Thus, every community and every praying person is called to individualize the liturgy welcoming in their daily lives the actual meaning being offered.

As we said in speaking about the Eucharist, our Liturgy of the Hours can also become an empty and meaningless routine. It is our responsibility to use the right tools to prevent it – preparation, care, renovation in formation, introductory explanations to the psalms, appropriate songs, and diverse ways to recite them according to their own structure¹⁸⁰.

53. *In our personal prayer, the joyful contemplation of the holy law of the Lord helps us to shape our life according to it, so that we may be able to proclaim it in our apostolic action, in which also the Lord makes himself manifested to us. “Let all the sisters understand well this point: through the peace of mind which they can attain with the grace of the Lord, they will join action with contemplation, which is the most necessary point for our institute.” To this end we will have one hour of personal prayer every day.*

We unite here the joyful contemplation with prayer. Maybe, it is important to stress this particular definition – *joyful contemplation* – and analyze to what extent is my prayer contemplative and joyful my experience of the Good News of God. To contemplate implies some sort of passive attitude, or at least that other matters do not distract us from what we need to contemplate. The joy comes from what we are contemplating and from the feeling it stirs in us.

It is obvious that there are moments (even entire years) in which we will not feel the joy in our prayer. Moreover, it is possible that the mere fact of praying requires a supreme effort and self-discipline to do it. But such thing cannot be confused with a lack of a joyful experience of God and its Kingdom. Prayer, like any loving relationship, has its times of fire and water; sun and rain; words and silence; action and contemplation. And always, if it is a mature, free, and authentic relationship, it will blossom from the same stem: love. Whether its feeling overflows us or when we need to make efforts to keep it going¹⁸¹.

On the other hand, the expression *Holy Law* is extremely especial and charismatic among us. If anything refers to this Law, it will be touching a critical chord in us. In the points of the Constitutions which are mentioned below, we can read between lines the Goal and the Means. If the *Principal aim of the religious of this order is to work with all diligence in the Lord, in keeping the God’s Law and the utmost fulfillment of the evangelical counsels, and, in imitation of the Holy Apostles, to work until death in teaching every creature the holy Law of the Lord (Const. 3)*, then anything that helps to shape us according to this law, will be considered a powerful tool to take into account. In the first point we talked about prayer as the great means to make us Christ like, now we are talking about forming us according to the Holy Law, to His Word, and to the redeeming plan of His Kingdom.

¹⁸⁰ There are many books that may help us, but it is already a good formation the reading of the General Introduction to the Liturgy of the Hours (GILH, 1971).

¹⁸¹ In the words of Br. Roger from Taizé: united with Christ you know that fighting and contemplation have one and the same source: if you pray, is because of love, if you fight to give back the human face to the abandoned one, it is also because of love. (H. Roger of Taizé, *Amor de todo amor*, Taizé 1991, 13).

Apostolic action and contemplation are inseparable for us and they feed from each other. They are our mission and the way we want to live it (*Const. 4*). The most important point of our Institute. Therefore, the balance between both does not depend on the distribution of our time between them, but in the quality of performance we give to each one.

*Regarding the jobs and tasks....you will perform them **with diligence and application, but not so much as to make difficult** your contemplation of Holy Law of the Lord; because the bread of the just depends more on the Divine Providence than on our wordily efforts* ¹⁸².

It is necessary to not only to organize the different tasks, but to seek through them the will of God, no matter whether they please me or not.

Like everything that constitutes our inner backbone in life, it must become a natural thing from the beginning, not as something that we learn in our early days of formation and then can be forgotten. It is crucial for our entire life regardless of our age. But is it also normal not to know the exact measure, your precise balance between one and the other, until you become independent in the use of your time and your strengths (after the novitiate and/or junior year). That equilibrium gives you piece of mind and allows you fully commit to your apostolic goal. The same amount of activity might be construed as too much for some or too little for others, depending on our personal competence, the purpose of the Lord for each one, and the gifts we were bestowed. As usual, all these matters are better discerned when we have a strong personal commitment regardless of the phase we are going through.

Mother Paris addressed the *young followers* about this issue in the First Constitution, knowing that some things must be mastered in the beginning or they would hardly be accomplished later, but she also makes very clear that such thing must be taken into account by all sisters. The main issue is to remember that inside or outside our home, alone or accompanied, in the school or parish, doing errands or making meals, studying or doing house chores....everything can be work, but also an opportunity to forget and lose the essentials. Both issues are mentioned in the First Constitution with the same idea: *To get tired thinking of what must be done only squanders our bodily strength and drowns the retreat spirit so indispensable in our Institute. Experience teaches that to have many tasks at once, not only prevents perfection, but also distracts us from the work that has to be done.*

Oddly enough, the paragraph incites us to follow our *Holy Founders, who within their great courage, always maintained their serenity and calmness*¹⁸³.

Last but not least, this point reminds us that to merge action and contemplation, we must dedicate an hour a day to prayer. We have already seen the charismatic centrality that this has in our daily prayer. Sometimes, when we try not to separate the spiritual experience from the daily chores, we may turn into prayer anything we do in the name of the Lord. But not always one thing leads to the other; prayer, which is an entity, but other necessary actions, whether evangelical, are not prayer. We are talking about getting our life in tune and dialogue with God, allowing his Word to touch each reality and to imprint on it his as a seal, transparency and hope that everything coming from Him has. It is from there, from that *subtle touch*, that we avoid the danger to put in God's mouth our own words and desires saying that He is everywhere and speaks to us through everything. Even Saint

¹⁸² First Const. I,c.2,n.22.

¹⁸³ First Const, III,c.6, nn.9-10.

Therese, master of prayer, knew well that God was among the pots and pans but she warns us of this danger:

*What happens in these times frightens me in these times of ours, when anyone, with little consideration, if he feels during a retreat some inner words, they then baptize it as coming from God and they believe it is so, saying: God told me, and it will probably be not so, but as we have already said, they say those things to themselves*¹⁸⁴.

Language is our main tool to express ourselves, but it also confines us. Do we pray? Do we *make* prayer? ... Beyond the game of words, we can explain two things: First, we must make our life this issue: we publicly acknowledge our commitment to, at least, one hour a day of prayer. Circumstances, time... many things might make this commitment difficult to fulfill, but such instance would be exceptional, since one hour is the least we commit ourselves to do. Until our XV General Chapter our Constitutions said one *hour a day of prayer in community*¹⁸⁵. With the growing apostolic and communal diversity, we cannot rely on community schedules to have this daily hour. Each one of us on her personal schedule must decide on the best time and place which are compatible with her responsibilities. Second, it sounds odd that we must force and encourage ourselves to do something we declare is a necessity and a natural trait in us as believers and consecrated women. But, remember, even the most joyful personal relationship will have its rough times and detachment, and not because of that it must be forgotten. The same happens while praying: it is not worrisome to live God's silence or distance (which is usually a purifying experience), but to abandon prayer or reduce it to a task to be completed, and from which I will be free as soon as I am done with it.

54. *Every day we have a time dedicated to the spiritual reading, in order to nourish our prayer life and apostolate. We should frequently read Holy Scripture.*

To our Founders, the importance of the Scriptures is clear, as much in their personal experiences, as in their quest to perform their apostolic missions. In both cases reading and reflecting upon the Bible was a daily food of their human and spiritual growth. Moreover, if we take into account that back in those days the Church not only did not make it easy, but restrained the reading of the Bible; their passion for the Word was more amazing still. Therefore it is an inheritance we must cultivate and spread to the world. Every single reading that might feed our lives of prayer and apostleship are important, but it would be a shame if those overrode the most important spiritual reading: the Bible. Even Claret, in his autobiography, in picking the most stimulating passages of the Bible to his inner life and to his mission, adds:

I am also pressed by the example of the prophets, of Jesus Christ, of the apostles, of the all the saints, whose lives and biographies I have often read, and the most useful passages I wrote down for my own usefulness, and to stimulate myself more and more (Aut. PF 214).

It is important to remember that spiritual reading, although an important aid cannot be mistaken or coupled with the time for prayer per se. Classical Spirituality speaks of *remote preparation* of prayer when referring to this reading that tunes us to start praying.

¹⁸⁴ quoted by A. GUERRA, *Aspectos teológicos de la oración*, in: AA.VV, *Diccionario Teológico de la Vida consagrada*, 1216.

¹⁸⁵ cf. Historical Introduction.

Following this same path, we realize that praying requires a minimum human effort, solely a human being is capable of praying. Besides, any fine tuning we might achieve with such spiritual readings will be worthless unless we acquire a coherent attitude in regards with our discipleship option in Religious Life and with a growing sensitivity in recognizing the presence of God in the world and His presence in the weakest (*Mt 25*) and thus discover the seeds of the Kingdom which are growing all around. This inner tuning towards renovation and change, that wherever the Lord wants to take us every day of our life, is key to feeding our life of prayer and apostleship, and hopefully, the outcome of the readings we select.

55. Mary, who believed in plenitude, is a model of trusting prayer for us. We unite ourselves with her through the liturgy of the Church, which continually includes the memory of the Mother in the mysteries of the Son. We have to celebrate in a special manner the most traditional Marian feasts in the Institute, and remember her every day with the recitation of the Rosary or other Marian practices. At noon we will greet the Blessed Virgin with the Angelus or the proper antiphon of the time.

If Mary is the *greatest beacon on our paths and our role model as consecrated women* (*Const. 9*), she will also be present in our prayer.

In this particular point, Mary's dimension as a believer, as a woman who trusts completely in God, and as the role model of trusting prayer, are stressed. Mary the Immaculate, who *urges us to fight evil in any of its shapes and forms, opening ourselves up to joy and hope* (*Const. 9*), also impels us to be women of faith and trust. Trusting women that *have experienced the need of God and as such come in front of Him with a humble and needy spirit, like those who have nothing and expect everything from their Savior* (*Const. 13*).

What are the clues in the Scriptures to get closer to Mary in her role as a praying woman? On one hand, the first communities stressed her faith and unconditional trust as much during the Annunciation and Magnificat, as all along Jesus Christ's infancy, in Cana, and during the crucifixion. Mary is the invitation to live faith through happiness, not through discouragement (*"Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." ...Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."*). From the openness to grace and not from our own will (*"How can this be...?" "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." ... May it be done to me according to your Word!"*) From depth and not from shallowness (*Mary kept all this in her heart*). But most of all, Mary's prayer is coherent with her way of looking at the world; prophetic when telling others, and profoundly grateful because she never forgets the fountain of good and joy: my spirit rejoices in the Lord that hath made wonders in me.

Mary's prayer is the prayer of a woman who knows the history of her people; a woman who recognizes her values and does not deny them, because she does not experience them as her own merits but as God's work. Acknowledging herself looked upon by Him; she is able to look at the world through his eyes and to recognize that the divine logic is different from ours.

Thus, the modern woman, anxious to participate with decision-making power in the affairs of the community, will contemplate with intimate joy Mary who, taken into dialogue with God, gives her active and responsible consent... The modern woman will note with

pleasant surprise that Mary of Nazareth, while completely devoted to the will of God, was far from being a timidly submissive woman or one whose piety was repellent to others; on the contrary, she was a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God vindicates the humble and the oppressed, and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged position (Paul VI, MC 37).

Mary's prayer places us close to our brothers and sisters when things go wrong, when even God seems to be absent. And there, she is holding us close to the Cross, like she did with the beloved disciple so being with us at the Cenacle, helping us with our fears and discouragements, Mary strengthens our prayer.

As for the concrete prayer exercises, maybe this issue should be more appropriate for the Directory than for the Constitution, but what is important is the experience of prayer it expresses. To give a special place to Mary in our prayer it is something contained in the Canonical Law (c.663, 4). It is proper of our charism not only to enhance and prepare specially the Marian moments and the Feast days that the Church and tradition dedicate to Mary, but also our personal and communal prayer, as well as everything that is Claretian, be permeated by her presence. There is no need to add much since the prayer of the Church already has this Marian dimension in many ways including the Eucharistic prayers. The prayer to the Virgin Mary, par excellence, is found in the prayer of Vespers, with the Magnificat.

Any particular practice must never override the liturgy or much less oppose it. For example, what is the idea of praying the sorrowful mysteries on December 24th, only because it falls on a Friday, when the Church is eagerly and joyfully preparing to receive the Son of the Lord who became man by the Virgin Mary? The Vatican Council is very clear as to this subject:

*Popular devotions of the Christian people are to be highly commended, **provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church...** But these devotions **should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons**, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since, in fact, the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them (SC 13).*

The biblical foundation of our prayer helps us to stay close to the core of our faith and the Church. In fact, we know that certain devotional practices came to be in order to fill the lack of contact with the Word. As Maria Antonia warns:

It is of utmost importance to instruct them in the practice of a solid and true virtue, making them understand that the virtue that is based in many oral pleas and some devotions practiced by praying a lot and receiving the Holy Sacraments alone, is worth very little or nothing at all. The true and solid virtue is that taught by Jesus in his Holy Gospel ¹⁸⁶...He who entertains himself with some flowers of false virtues, honoring the Saints and even the Queen of Saints with some sensitive devotions, but forgets to fulfill the divine Commandments, does not love God more than anything else nor does he love his neighbor as himself.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ *First Constitutions*, IV, ch 3, nn. 11-13.

¹⁸⁷ EPMF, 515. Although it is published among the Letters, it is not a letter as such, but a writing of Maria Antonia, that if not included here would go unpublished. The title is The Devotion to Our Lady.

56. *As the spiritual centre of each community, we have in our houses a chapel with the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. We should assiduously visit the Lord.*

Speaking of the religious houses, the Code of Canon Law considers the existence of an *oratory in which the Eucharist is to be celebrated and reserved so that it is truly the center of the community* (c.608). This is the profound meaning that the CIC gives to the Sacramental presence of Jesus in our communities. Let us take care of him as a gift from the Church to the Congregations, so we truly make Christ the center of our lives.

Nowadays there might be some communities where it is not always possible to have the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and not even a chapel. It is a joyous privilege to which we have sometimes to give up due to the organization of the community in which we live, but in any case, the spiritual center of the community must always be the Lord. Obviously, that presence, carefully taken care of, hidden but visible at the same time, helps us to become more conscious of the Mystery that calls us together and keeps us as one and the same family for the mission; thus, we must seek the fraternal union with tenacity and sensitiveness. The more we live this Christological centrality in our life, the easier it will be to bear with simplicity, hope and fraternity the difficulties and meaningless situations that arise sometimes. Our center is the Lord.

57. *We need the solitude and silence of our whole being in order to receive the Word of God and to prepare ourselves to proclaim it suitably.*

Once more, the Word of the Lord. To welcome it and proclaim it properly is not something that comes naturally. We must actively sharpen our hearing; we must get in tuning with God and prepare ourselves so that we will be able to notice when He comes to us. It is fundamental for us to receive the Word since our mission is to proclaim it. But besides that we need to listen to it and distinguish it from thousands of other voices which also call us, and for this we need to continuously sharpen our sense of listening. The Word of God is given to us in the Scriptures, but also through Tradition (beyond the diverse traditions), in the sings of the times; in the personal and collective history; and also through the fate of those less fortunate... (*GS 4*). To seek his will together (*Const 24*) allows us to know it, and then once understood, nothing will stop us from giving it! (*Aut. MP, 7*).

Although the intensity of life might vary according to the latitudes, for a dehumanized, agitated and global world like ours, solitude and silence lived as a choice and conscious search, and not as a punishment or a misfortune, are also signs. Moreover, for those who would like to be able to pray, and even believe, the silence or the lack of a tangible answer from God is one of the main obstacles they find¹⁸⁸. The solitude and silence that we desire the most, can become a strange and uncomfortable place in which we need to remain and listen, without filling it with more words or reflections:

If you sit in a room and you tell yourself: "I am in the presence of the Lord"; after an instant you will be asking yourself how to fill in that presence with an activity that will drown your restlessness. In the beginning, you will feel good, because you're tired and sitting down implies rest; you are comfortably seated in a chair, and the silence around you gives you a sense of peacefulness. All this is true. But after passing that moment of natural rest, and must stay in the presence of the Lord; when your nature has been

¹⁸⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *God is love* 38.

*replenished by rest and there is no more need to stay put, you will see how difficult it is not to start wondering what to do next; what to say to God; and not to ask yourself if He is really there?*¹⁸⁹.

58. *Aware of our frailty and urged by love, we should receive frequently the sacrament of reconciliation. In this sacrament we are united with Christ, who died for our sins, and we are reconciled with our brothers and sisters. Through our continual conversion, we contribute to the renewal of the Church.*

This particular point reminds us of the means we have to continuously renew our life – the sacraments. Maybe it would be helpful to remember the theological framework in which the Second Vatican Council speaks of the sacraments within the life of the Christians. The sacraments are not closed rites through which the grace of the Lord is granted in an almost magical, and/or automatic way. SC 59 says: “*the sacraments are meant to sanctify men* (because through them and by them we receive the grace that will make us holier at a time); *to build the Body of Christ* (because they only make sense when we live them through the Church and as Church); *to give glory to God* (in a way that expresses our faith and our life, while at the same time it keeps feeding them).

Jesus Himself forgave and invited His disciples to live in a dynamic of reciprocal forgiveness (*forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*). God’s grace is not divided or distributed in first or second class categories. It is one and unique – God Himself- and even though we might be experiencing an especially intense moment in this free and overflowing relationship with God, it is always there. Specifically, the grace we receive through the sacrament of reconciliation goes beyond the forgiveness of our sins. If it was not for that and it only depended on the sanctity of our lives, we would only be able to cry, like the psalmist: “*who can stand firm?*” (*Psalms 129: 3*). We can always count on God’s forgiveness, but it is always important to often receive the sacrament of forgiveness.

The Christian journey is always one of conversion (*Mk 1: 15*) and reconciliation with God (*Lk 15:18-21*). Every human being, whether a believer or not, has this need of forgiveness and reconciliation. Human life consists of growth, and we can only achieve it if we consciously acknowledge our successes and our failures; our shadows and our light. The more we know ourselves (*Morning Prayer, MP*), the more we will be able to be reconciled with our personal history and with our environment, leading ourselves towards the type of person we want to be.

It is through this path that the sacrament is most effective in discovering our attitudes towards God, towards others, and towards ourselves. In fact, we can distinguish three phases:

- *Confessio laudis*: to recognize and give thanks for the grace God has bestowed on us.

- *Confessio fidei*: our trust and faith in God urges us to be aware that we are sinners, capable of sin, and prone to sin. Only from this honest position will we be able to be converted. But, to dare *confess ourselves this way and beg for forgiveness*, without

¹⁸⁹ BLOOM, quoted in J. LAFRANCE, *La oración del corazón*, Madrid 1983,22.

being crushed by guilt, can only be accomplished through the strong and solid assurance that God loves us.

- *Reforma vitae*: that same love and forgiveness we receive, brings out in us the desire and the decision to change, to convert. *In effect, to become reconciled with God presupposes and includes detaching oneself consciously and with determination from the sin into which one has fallen. It presupposes and includes, therefore, doing penance in the fullest sense of the term: repenting, showing this repentance, adopting a real attitude of repentance- which is the attitude of the person who starts out on the road of return to the Father*(RP 13).

This is a general law and one which each individual must follow in his or her particular situation, for it is not possible to deal with sin and conversion only in abstract terms.

Realistically speaking, it will not always be possible to find a priest whom we can talk with this level. But what we must do is prepare for the sacrament, so it will honestly be a strong moment on the path of our conversion.

The Church has molded and shaped the way to understand and live the sacrament. Thus, up until the 5th century, penance was reserved for those sins that radically broke one's unity with God. For personal failures or negative attitudes, different resources were available, like the moment of confession before the Eucharist. That is why it was very unusual for anyone to relive the penance more than once in his/her lives. There was a complicated public process not only to confess the sin, but to little by little, regain the broken spiritual union with God, and therefore with the community. Only after that long process, the final absolution was granted and the community would welcome the estranged brother or sister. Latter on as this process was applied to every failure or sin, it was simplified, until the order was changed, and the absolution was given prior to completing the penance, like we have it today. For this reason also, the importance was stressed on the confession of sins, rather than the penance, and therefore it became known as *confession* instead of *penance*¹⁹⁰.

After the renovation of the Second Vatican Council, the Church wants to regain the communitarian element in every sacrament including this one. Personal sin affects and weakens the community, as much as any rupture with ecclesial communion harms the person. For us that live in a community, this sacrament is more important - It is a journey of personal and communal acceptance, because in becoming aware of my personal frailty, urged by love I accept my limitations and those of the concrete reality. Than I open myself to the miracle of forgiveness which transforms me and gives me back my wholeness. Besides, it is at the core of our charismatic spirituality, because the renewal of the Church, as it was perceived by our Founders, begins always with our own personal and communal conversion and renewal.

Fraternal reparation (*Const. 41*¹⁹¹), a tradition in our Congregation, must feed from the same spirit.

¹⁹⁰ To know more about the history of this sacrament and its theological and pastoral interpretation, see F.Millán Romeral, *La penitencia hoy. Claves para una renovación*, Bilbao 2001.

¹⁹¹ Commentary on the chapter "Life in Communion" (*Const.41*), p.159.

59. *The monthly retreat and yearly spiritual exercises will be for us days of prayer, silence and special reflection on our fidelity to our consecration and on the attitudes toward our brothers and sisters.*

The monthly retreat has a meaning in itself to enjoy a time that we want ourselves to make it special because we know we need it. Clearly, the human being needs to spend time in meditation in order to acquire a more holistic health; a more peaceful, restful, and prayerful time to live life consciously, without letting it go by without even noticing it. No wonder many persons try to maintain this practice, even outside religious life. Moreover, many non-believers practice meditation and silence in regular daily, monthly and annual sessions, as an *exercise* to *organize* themselves *internally*. To turn these times into a routine or something else to do, without much care for the preparation, actual carry out or even their existence, is to waste a privileged opportunity and the fruits it could bear us.

To our Founders the Spiritual Exercises, so highly considered by the Church, were the essential means for their own spiritual life, as well as to evangelize others. Both of them practiced regularly the spiritual exercises and they both recommend us to do the same. Claret, in his *Autobiography*, dedicates an entire chapter to show us how the exercises were one of the essential means in his life and mission:

As I have already mentioned elsewhere. I have made the Spiritual Exercises every year of my life since I was a student (...) When I had to leave the Jesuits because of illness I was given a copy (...) and afterwards I always gave them (...) And I have noticed that the results have been more solid and lasting than those of missions. For this reason I published a book entitled The Exercises of Saint Ignatius, explained by me, which has been very popular and has produced and still is producing marvelous effects (...) May it all be for God's greater (Aut. FC 306-309). Besides parish missions, I gave retreats to the clergy, nuns, students, laymen, and boys and girls preparing for their Holy Communion (Aut. FCt 305).

Maria Antonia Paris used to practice the exercises since she stayed at the Society of Mary. In fact, it was during one of those exercises that she realized she had to leave and found the *New Order* (Aut MP 99-198). This practice has been in place since the beginnings of our Congregation, not only as our Founders' clear recommendation, but also, and with a prophetic nuance, our Foundress wanted that some sisters prepared themselves to be able to give them as an effective means of their apostolate. Maybe, such idea came originally from Claret, considering the scarce apostolic opportunities given to women back then. But in any case, what is evident is that Maria Antonia made it her own idea and dedicated an entire chapter of the First Constitutions to design all the details, in the practice as well as in the attitude that who gives the exercises must have¹⁹² Later on, the special Chapter of 1969, in its efforts to go back to our more genuine charism states:

*Sisters, prepare yourselves to give them. This is a means of apostolate very dear to our Foundress*¹⁹³.

¹⁹² First Constitutions, IV, c.11

¹⁹³ DD. CC, Decree on Apostolate, 22d.

60. *When we feel seriously ill, we should receive on time the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. The faith of the Church, looking toward the death and resurrection of Christ, will strengthen our faith and prepare us for our final encounter with the Lord.*

A Christian is not spared from old age, deterioration, sickness or death. Nevertheless, a Christian knows grace has been granted to him/her; called to life, and a life of abundance, so when *our physical body deteriorates, the inner self keeps renewing day after day* (2 Co 4:16).

The church keeps recommending that we receive this sacrament when we are still in fully aware; as Second Vatican Council says (SC 73) to go from *extreme unction to the anointing of the sick person*, who is aware that the time of death might be near and wants to live it in a sacramental way (not in a magical way) with Christ. By strongly experiencing our human limitation, we remember that the Lord himself bore our *sickness and carried our diseases* (Mt 8:17), but did not eradicate sickness or death from the world. He went through it in Passover, and each one of us must go through our own personal one. Finally we are daughters with the Son, completing in our own body what is still incomplete in His Passion (Col 1:24) and being risen with Him. To die merrily cannot be improvised at the last moments unless it is God's wish it be so. It takes a whole life lived through Christ. As Teilhard de Chardin once said- *it is not enough that I die taking Communion... teach me to receive communion dying*¹⁹⁴.

The prayer and the communion of saints, of our brothers and sisters, accompany us and help us to profess once more our faith, especially when our strength is weak and there is nothing else but to hope in God.

A child's prayer or the prayer of a teenager is not the same as the one of a woman in the middle of her life or at the end of it. Moreover, our prayer is not the same in times of peace, worry or fulfillment. But one way or the other, as stated at the beginning, we can always live the uncertainty and the assurance that we are in the presence of the Lord - in the midst of the Mystery. The sole fact of being aware that we are stepping on sacred ground, allows us to experience life in a different way:

*"Do you hear me Lord? (...) Is my life ultimately one single plea repeated over and over and all my prayers only human words to express it? ... My God, I know that praying does not necessarily mean enthusiasm and ecstasy, but that it nevertheless can put me entirely at your command and disposal, in order that nothing is kept back from you (...) I like the fact of being able to pray to You in this or that way, if, with it, I could give You the only thing you want: not my thoughts, feelings and resolutions but myself"*¹⁹⁵.

PRAYER LIFE IN OTHER POINTS OF THE CONSTITUTION

Prayer for vocations is something widely present and normally lived in our communities. We are reminded that we are not to separate two invitations –to prayer and to commitment. In other words, the new vocations that enlarge and revitalize our Congregation are a gift from the Lord, but we must also commit ourselves with the young persons that are just discovering and trying to make sense of their vocation. We will join prayer and

¹⁹⁴ Quoted by B. SEBOUE, *La Resurrección y la Vida*, Bilbao 1998, 82.

¹⁹⁵ K.RAHNER, *Palabras al silencio*, Estella 1988,35-37.

contemplation when we pray for vocations, and we will give simple and credible testimony through our personal and community life.

Once a young woman starts her formation process in our Congregation, prayer becomes the central point through all the stages of her life until the end of it.

Formation

74. Each and every one of us must pray and commit ourselves to a careful promotion and selection of vocations for the growth of our Congregation and the good of the Church. Wherever the Congregation will expand let us foster and dedicate a special attention to the native vocations: “ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest”. The best recommendation of the Institute and the most effective invitation to embrace the religious life is the witness of our own personal and community life.

75. Let us begin with the young woman, who feels called to share our Claretian charism, a process of mutual knowledge and experience, leading her to discern her vocation, through prayer, contact with the Word of God and dialogue.

Postulancy

76. For the young women who enter our Congregation, the postulancy is a time for searching, for deepening their Christian life, for discerning their vocation and for making a transition to a new lifestyle.

Novitiate

84. Through prayer, the liturgy of the hours and the Eucharist let her journey towards the identification with Christ. Let her learn to enlighten her life with the Word of God. And like the Immaculate Virgin, who was ever docile to the Father’s will; let her be ready to give her generous and faithful “fiat”.

Juniorate

97. Encouraged by the community and guided by the mistress of juniors, they will devote themselves to a work compatible with the preparation they are acquiring. “They shall join action with contemplation, the most necessary point for our Institute.” During this time they should exercise themselves in the practice of prayer, in accepting day by day the vicissitudes of this life, as coming from the hand of God. Thus they will not depend on times and happenings, but they will fix their souls in God, who never changes.

Ongoing Formation

102. For all its members, our religious community should be the habitual place of renewal and ongoing formation, creating an atmosphere of prayer, spiritual freedom and fraternal help, being attentive to what the Lord expects of her in each concrete situation, specifying objectives and evaluating them.

CONCLUSIONS REGARDING PRAYER LIFE

If as women we are called to personally grow and mature, as believers and consecrated women we are also called to spiritual growth and maturity. Nothing that lives can be stationary, inflexible, not even stuck to structure, no matter how good this structure might be. The experience through the Bible shows it to us – every time the people of Israel thought they had achieved their goal or security in their relationship with God, it was God who revealed himself in a different way, making the people of Israel change, in order to keep on journeying looking for, wishing. Ours is, somehow, a nomadic spirituality, not a sedentary one. If Christ is alive in our journey as followers, His presence will mark our lives and our prayers, personal as well as a community. Our world is looking for praying individuals and communities that share their prayers the same way they share their food or their work.

If prayer as a profound relationship with God is born from the core of the individual, it is obvious that the conception we have of the human being and of religious life will shape, in some way, our experience of God. The community is spread throughout the world and it is formed by many races and cultures. In Eastern civilization, cradle of the biblical culture, the heart, the center of affection, constitutes the core of every human being. In Western cultures, the core is the head, with its entire quest for truth and reason. In the Middle East, the core is in the abdomen, within the entrails, in the silence of breathing, in corporality. The dialogue between cultures and religions will help us to get closer to God in ways that a narrow mind will never attain.

Just remember one more time that only God is God. The rest, including prayer, is only creation. It is not God and therefore it is not the meaning of our life and it cannot fulfill it by itself. But it does look like the normal breathing of one that is alive, or like the spontaneous love of a lover. If you don't pray, you don't believe in him; you don't breathe in him; you don't love him. And your prayer, not better or worse, as far as it goes, will always get you in contact with the deepest part of yourself; with the origin and the end of your life; with the principle and measure of your actions:

With the strength of prayer, the Lord will enlighten your senses to recognize his will and the meaning of all doubts you might encounter, because He will not refuse his light to those he has chosen to encourage his work (PR 81f).

APOSTOLIC MISSION

INTRODUCTION

The Mission pervades all our reality as Claretian Missionaries: *Our reason for existing in the Church is that God; the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ might be known and loved by all peoples (Const 10)*. And our principal aim is *to teach all creatures the Holy Law of the Lord (Aim and Goal)*. For this reason, before analyzing each point which in our Constitutions treats expressly the mission, we are going to take a panoramic vision of the whole.

The creation project of God is that we all form a great family in love. This project was cut short by sin (*cf. Gn 3*) and thus we broke communion. Nevertheless, God kept his project and his promise that at the end good would defeat evil and the sin of humanity (*cf. Gn 3, 15*). This victory is achieved in Christ, the Son of God, the Word made flesh, the especial missionary, who at the same time sends us. The whole Church is depository of this mission and, therefore, every Christian has a part in this mission. And our Congregation participates in that mission. For this reason we are reminded that we always accomplish that mission sent by the community, although we may do our work individually.

Therefore, we begin with the clear affirmation that the apostolic action belongs to the very essence of our consecrated life, something which has not being so clear through history. At this time, the Church expects from religious life credible witnesses of the Word that we proclaim, especially in our own life. Besides, this is in the deepest root of our Claretian charism: Our very own call is to teach the Gospel like the Apostles and, therefore something in which we has to insist especially during the whole process of formation.

As in everything else in our life, Mary is our key person. If Christ is the fountain of all Apostleship, his mother is the strength and model of evangelization. We want to announce the gospel rooted in her fruitfulness and availability in order to give life and life to Christ in our own flesh. Apostolic and missionary fruitfulness which is not limited to the diverse actions and apostolate, but which is part of our own personal and congregational being until death. Sickness, old age and other forms of limitation will not curtail our missionary fruitfulness if we have lived united with Christ and in Christ, fountain and origin of our whole life.

In this way, the points of the Constitutions dedicated to our apostolic mission go through the different aspects and dimensions which we could group in the following way:

DIMENSIONS PRESENT IN THE POINTS OF THE APOSTOLIC MISSION

Trinitarian: 61, 70

Theological: 61, 65, 66, 67, 70

Marian: 62

Christological: 61, 79

Anthropological: 67, 69

Ecclesial: 61, 64

Charismatic: 61, 62, 63, 64, 65,

Biblical: 61, 62, 63, 65, 68, 69, 70 , 661

Now we are going to comment in detail each of the numbers. Of course, these dimensions will not always be identified separately, since they will crisscross harmonically with each other, which will allow us to evaluate the theological and charismatic richness of our Constitutions.

COMMENTARY TO THE POINTS 61-70

61. *Christ, sent by the Father, is the source and origin of every apostolate. Our Institute has received in the Church the mission to proclaim the Gospel. . The apostolic activity belongs to the very essence of our consecrated life.*

Christ, sent by the Father, sends the Congregation. It is made evident what are the origin and the fountain from which the mission springs, with a strong Trinitarian dimension: the Father, Christ and although it is not mentioned explicitly, the Spirit is the one who makes possible the mission in the Church, because *the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has sent me (Lk 4:18-19; cf. Is 61:1-2)*. Thus each one of the dimensions, theological, Christological and pneumatological, are made present for this triple presence of the Father who sends, the Son who is sent and the Spirit who makes possible the sending of each baptized person.

The Constitutions could have said only that Christ is the origin of all apostleship, but by saying *fountain* there is an insistence on the dynamic of the sending: we are not sent once and for all, but that we are been sent every day, like everyday the love of the Father flows towards the Son sending him to the world as Savior.

We also find a strong ecclesial dimension: the Church is the depository of Christ's mission and she entrusts it to our Institute. Mission which embraces all dimensions of the person, the whole person, what she is and what she does. That is why ...*the apostolic action belongs to the essence of our consecrated life*, without separating our being from our doing, since the *apostolate of all religious consists first of all in the witness of their consecrated life, which they are bound to foster by prayer and penance (CIC c. 673)*.

This canon of the Code of Canon Law is also behind #63 of the Constitutions: *the proclamation of the Word demands of us a profound living of our consecration*. Apparently, in some ecclesial documents and in certain ways of understanding religious life, it would seem that there is an opposition between religious spirit and apostolic action, something impossible for us and something that is overcome already in the theology as well as in contemporary spirituality. In PC 8 an effort was made to end that false dichotomy by affirming that *apostolic action belongs to the very nature of consecrated life*. And VC 72-73 reminds that if in the vocation of every Christian the duty to dedicate him/herself *totally to the mission* is included in the call, *how much more in consecrated life*. This assertion was necessary to clarify some distortions throughout the history of Religious Life. As an example, let us say that since the VI century until the XX century, it has been considered that the nucleus of religious life, mostly the feminine one, was the choral prayer and the papal cloister. The institutes of men, like the Society of Jesus, had great difficulties to have the Church accept the apostolate as the center of their charism. But of course, it has been the feminine congregations the ones that have found more difficulties to be able to express their consecration as a complete and total giving of themselves to the apostolic life in any of its forms, according to their own charism¹⁹⁶. Nowadays no one doubts the undeniable apostolic dimension of our consecrated life. We are a unity in God's plan, so we cannot accept being only the announcers of the Gospel, but we need to live it in such a way that the first form of evangelization be the testimony of our own life.

The unity between action-contemplation appears already in this first point, dimension profoundly charismatic and central to the experience of our Foundress.

*They will join action with contemplation, the most important point of our Institute*¹⁹⁷.

Our Founder lived also the call *to be a contemplative in the mission*. No doubt this Inheritance of both Founders is something that characterizes us. It leads us to a contemplative observation of reality: we listen to God to commit ourselves to our brothers and sisters and at the same time this apostolic commitment is the source of contemplation.

It is a short number, but very rich in theological, biblical and charismatic dimensions. Therefore, very well placed as an opening to this chapter on the Apostolic Mission.

62. *The Immaculate Virgin Mary, who's "yes" to God became a service to human beings, should be our strength and our model in the evangelization of peoples, because Christ chose to come among us through Her. We must make her to be loved as mother and lady who guides all to her Son.*

It is the Marian number of this chapter. The Marian dimension is presented from the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. In God's plan, evil and sin do not have the last

¹⁹⁶cf. C. PALMES, *Nueva espiritualidad...* p.30.

¹⁹⁷ *First Constitutions, Vol.III, c.6, n.11.*

word. It is a Marian and charismatic dimension which we have received from both Founders.

If Christ is the fountain, Mary is the strength and the model of evangelization. The Good News is Jesus Christ, and God wanted him to be born of a woman, Mary. She begot him and gave birth to him then and continues to give birth to him now. To give birth woman needs strength, mothers do know that. She is today our strength, our motivation. We, Religious of Mary Immaculate, are instruments in her hands, her extension in this giving birth to the works of light against darkness, to that Child who will pass through the world doing well and fighting against evil in any of its forms (*cf. Rv 12:2.5*). She is also our model in the mission of evangelization, because she knew how to listen and be open to accept the Word in her heart and in her mind before than in her body, and thus gave him to all. Her attitude as a disciple evangelizes us, so we can evangelize others. In our apostolic action we must make her be loved as the mother and the lady who leads us to her Son.

The fact that the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception of Mary was proclaimed a few months before the birth of our Institute has had a decisive influence in our Marian spirituality. The central truth of the dogmatic definition is that Mary was *full of grace*, full of God, since her conception. Evil had no place in her. On God's part, it brings up the completely singular and exceptional nature with which Mary enters in God's Salvation Project. And on Mary's part it brings up the magnitude of an opening to God that was total from the very instant of her existence.

That Marian dimension, received from both Founders, makes itself present in each one of us with peculiar shades what we find in synthesis in a very complete way in the Fundamental Constitution (*cf. Const 9*).

Mary is present for our Foundress since the Initial Experience shaping the way of the life of the New Order and the behavior of her apostles:

....yes my daughter, I want a New Order, but not new in doctrine, rather new in practice. And here our Lord gave me the traits of the whole Order, and told me that it should be called: Apostles of Jesus Christ in imitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (cf. Aut. MP 2-11).

Throughout her life, Mary appears many times, always united to moments of strong experience of God and the Church.

Claret, from what we could call also his Initial Experience (*cf. Aut. FC 95-98.101*), sees Mary as the woman who with her offspring –Jesus–, defeats evil. As his life goes on, he has the experience of Mary as the impulse that throws him to fight the evils of his time: heresies, vices, errors, ignorance.... Mary is the Mother of the beloved disciple, the teacher in discipleship and in the following of the Master, the one who formed the Apostle. Claret sees himself like a prophetic *arrow* given to the powerful hand of the Virgin and Mother of God thrown against evil (*cf. Aut. FC 270-271*). Mary is for him the model of self giving to the service of God and men; she is also the victorious woman in the fight against evil (*cf. Rv 12*).

Mary made of her “yes”, at the annunciation, a service to humankind because she made possible the Incarnation of the Word and hence the presence of God in our history: she was, at once, first disciple and announcer of Christ. That is why getting close to Mary we will always be close to her Son. She teaches us to take the Holy Law of the Lord to every

creature. She is the force and model of what we must do in evangelization: to make present the Kingdom, from the incarnation throughout history. An incarnated spirituality, inserted in the reality of the world, finds in her its foundation. Mary, as first evangelizer and evangelized—leads all to her Son, for that reason, in our ministry, we must make her to be loved as a Mother and as Lady.

63. *He proclamation of the Word requires of us a deep experience of our consecration. The more intimately we are united with Christ and with the people that we evangelize, making ourselves available to all through the donation of ourselves, the more fruitful our apostolate will be. To preach to religious in their Churches or oratories we need the license of the superior of the community.*

This call to *proclaim the Holy Law of the Lord to all creatures* is a fundamental charismatic dimension. There has to be a unity in our life: the proclamation requires from us to live deeply our consecration, since you cannot announce what you do not live.

If we were saying that Christ is the fountain and origin of all apostleship (*cf. Const 61*), the more we get united to Him the more fruitful will our apostolate be. It can be noted here a reference to *Jn 15:5: whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing.* From that union sprouts our donation like in Jesus: *I lay down my life, to take it up again. No one takes it away from me, I lay it down of my own free will (Jn 10:17); the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give away his life as a ransom for many (Mc 10: 45).* Just like the apostles, we are called to be with Him and to preach the Gospel (*cf. Mk 3:14*). He is the source and the origin of the mission.

This fruitfulness comes to us from Him, but also from our union with our brothers and sisters. Union with Christ which presupposes a configuration with Him, with his attitudes, with his life style and making present the Father. A union with the people we evangelize because this mission we cannot do it from the outside but from the inside, feeling ourselves as People of God with the people called and sent by the Risen Lord to take his Word to the ends of the earth. From the configuration with Christ and the incarnation, we enter wholeheartedly into the culture of the people, trying to understand, love and becoming part of it and thus our proclamation makes complete sense. It is also a Christological dimension.

We prefer to talk about fruitfulness because it is something alive which depends on our continued conversion and formation. Conversion is going back to the true God, to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; we return to Him when we realize that we are going through the wrong path, behind other gods who do not give life. Conversion is to reestablish the communion with Jesus, to give fruit, to be fruitful. In order to be believable witnesses of the Word we proclaim, we need it to be confirmed with the testimony of our own life. Our consecration to God does not close us in ourselves but sends us, free and open to the mission.

The last sentence of this n.63 respond to the juridical demand that the Holy See applied to our constitutions and for that reason it had to be added at this point. Before that it was not necessary to clarify it because the sisters could not preach (*cf. Historical Introduction, 21*).

64. *We carry out our mission in the Church through our insertion into the local Churches. The works that the Church entrusts to the Institute, even when we do them individually, we*

exercise them always from the community. Any activity done in obedience has apostolic value.

In this number the ecclesial dimension appears above anything else, also deeply charismatic. The love to the Church above their own life itself was a distinctive trait of both Founders. The vocation of both is a vocation for the Church in its wholeness, although lived by each of them with a peculiar and complementary nuance.

Nevertheless, this love of the Church cannot be lived only in general, because the Church does not exist in abstract, but concretely in communities: the Church that meets in Corinth, in Ephesus, in Bogotá, in Madrid, in Rome.... We are sent, we do not go on our own, and neither do we receive an abstract command. In each place where we are inserted, where we do our mission, we are sent to proclaim the Good News with our lives and with our word, without looking to be the protagonist, without power or ambitions, making possible the communion and the mutual belonging of all in Christ.

We accomplish the mission sent by the community, even though we might do it individually. In fact, if we were not sent, we could not properly call ourselves apostles. The works that the Church entrusts to the Institute, in the person of some of us, even though they may be done individually, are done always from the community and sent by it. This dimension of being sent in real life and not only in theory is something very Claretian.

This need for being sent to a particular place by the Bishop was something that God himself helped me understand from the very beginning. Thus, no matter how evil and demoralized the towns I was sent to, great fruits were always obtained, because it was God who sent me to them and prepared them and predisposed them...Missionaries may rest assured, then, that they should go to no town... unless they are under obedience... . Have no fear: God has sent them through obedience and He will take care of them (Aut. PC 198).

This ecclesial vocation is present in us assuming the main traits of both Founders with peculiar shades. We say in the Fundamental Constitution:

We must feel the weight of the Church's burden on us, which impels us to bring God's holy Law to every creature and to contribute to the continuous renewal of the consecrated life. We surrender ourselves with entire availability to the service of the Church, in order to attend in whatever is most urgent, convenient and efficacious, in accordance with our charism. (Const.7)

As much in Claret as in Paris their vocation for the Church is translated into a constant preoccupation for the evils that afflict it and for the constant need of renewal. As far as M. Antonia is concerned it is reflected in the Plan for the Renewal of the Church which Claret read on his trip from Cuba to Spain. He reworks it in his Notes to Restore the Beauty of the Church, which is a beautiful Program of Leadership for the use of the Bishops in their churches. What he writes in those Notes comes from his experience as Archbishop.

M. Antonia, from her Initial Experience feels herself called to pray and offer her life for the Church. But it is in her religious profession when she lives it in a more radical way, feeling on herself the weight of the renewal of my Church (RC 9). A weight that she lived in many different ways throughout her life. One of them, having to write the Plan, against her will because she had to criticize the Church and all who had a greater responsibility within the Church.

Without any doubt, M^a Antonia lived in all reality and with strength what she was asking from others and that later she wrote in the Constitutions of this New Order. But she also lived the burden of the Church as a missionary requirement even to crossing the seas, for the love of Christ and his Gospel. She lived it in obedience to the Church even when she felt that her superiors were wrong or did not understand what God was asking: unjust criticism, clashes, disdain from the communities and people as close to her as Currius or Caixal.... Without a doubt, God wanted her to live a dimension of pain and abandonment that would identify her even more with the sufferings of Christ himself seeing the reality of his Church. But always, a suffering that would be redeeming in union with the Lord and offered for the Gospel.

Claret also suffered persecutions, calumnies and even physical violence against his life and he wanted to live all of this in union with Christ and his Church. Like Mother Paris, he understood that the needed renewal of the Church should begin in his own life, in the administration of his dioceses, and in his untiring missionary availability.... Everything with the objective of restoring the beauty that the Church was losing.

Our apostolic mission enters into the great torrent of the mission that the Church has received from the Lord and we accomplish it through our insertion in the local churches. And it is the Church, that accepted and made official our charism, it is the Church that entrusted the different missions to the Institute. This ecclesial dimension is the reason that anything we do, even if it is individually, we always do as a community and has the value of apostleship.

65. *The charity of Christ impels us and commit ourselves to announce the Gospel “in any part of the world,” with creativity and boldness, attending to the signs of the times. We must be open and available to be sent on a mission of obedience.*

The biblical-charismatic dimension of this point is given by the background text taken from: 2 Co 5: 14 (cf. Aut. FC 494). Paul was impelled by the love of Christ which made him aware that Christ died for all. That love of Christ, as a love given to us, impelled Paul and also our Founder (he put it in his Episcopal shield) to evangelize without sparing any fatigue or any work as long as the Gospel be announced. This is the same love that urges us and must impel us to proclaim the gospel throughout the whole world, to the zeal for the salvation of people, to creativity, to audacity and absolute availability. Thus to proclaim the Gospel until death is what is more profoundly proper of our Congregation.

On the other hand, we perceive the dimension of universality so much present in our Congregation. In the first Constitutions, the formula for profession put especial emphasis on obedience to the Pope for the *teaching and salvation of my fellow human beings in any part of the world*¹⁹⁸. It is the love of Christ itself that moves Mother Paris to make this offering. The proclamation of the gospel requires creativity and audacity being open to read the signs of the times. This last expression has, no doubt, many resonances. It implies, in the first place, the urgency to live in continual discernment in order to be attentive and open to the newness that God is putting on our lives to let us know how and where do we have to build the Kingdom.

¹⁹⁸ *First Constitutions, Vol.I,c.37.*

It is a statement that started being used very frequently in the Church since Vatican Council II (cf. *GS* 4). Although John XXIII had already spoken of the *signs of the times* in the papal bull *Humanae salutis* (1961) announcing the celebration of the Council, it was in the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963) when he took it as a basic category to tell that certain events that were happening in the world were means that God was using to move us to action. God would reveal his will through some historical, social or political situations. And that means that any sign is in itself ambiguous, needing a discernment and needs to be contrasted with the Word of God and with the Church to give it one meaning or another.

But this is an expression that already appears in Mt 16: 1-13 in the context of the petition by the Pharisees and the Sadducees of a sign in heaven (*semeion* in Greek). It is not rare that they asked this because there are many passages in the Old Testament where God is asked to give signs to confirm his words. Nevertheless, the answer of Jesus is abrupt: the present generation, hypocrite and unbelieving, will not receive other sign than that of Jonah, because they know how to distinguish the aspect of the heavens, but not *the signs of the times*.

Also in Lk 12:54-56 the hypocrisy of those who distinguish the signs of nature is recriminated because they are not able to distinguish *this time* (using the Greek word (*kairós*)). But it is not spoken about the *signs of the times*, but only *this time*. And curiously, it is not about temporality or about chronological time (*cronos* in Greek) but of the present time as an opportunity, to a decisive moment for human intervention and that of God (*kairós*). This is the time to which Jesus referred. A decisive time, that his listeners were not getting advantage of, wasting hypocritically in asking for signs.

On the other hand, Jesus himself offers at the beginning of his mission signs and signals of God's action, of the coming of his Kingdom, the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear.... He does not give the signs the majority of his people were asking for. He is not a Messiah king, a triumphant leader... Thus when the miracles he performs are read from this angle, as is the case of the multiplication of the bread and fish, he withdraws, disappears. Even at the end of the Gospel, just before entering his Passion, the simple people of Jerusalem waited for him at the entrance of the city with palm branches and acclaim him as King; but, without stopping from entering the city, he decides to do it riding a donkey.

That is to say, Jesus asks us to be attentive to this time (*kairós*) and its signs, to discover the passage of God and his will upon us. But possibly, these signs may not be the ones neither us nor our society are waiting for. They will not be found in power or in domination; they will not be found in any political or ideological regime; they will not be found in violence or division.

The Fathers of the Church used to talk about the *seeds of the Word*. This expression helps us to better understand the theology of the signs of the times. Each reality, each culture, carries hiddenly in itself, the presence of God who acts in it. The preacher has to discover, wake up and discern those seeds to accept, purify and make believable what the Lord planted beforehand. In each place, in each time, in each person, the Spirit is already there even before the evangelizer arrives, because *God loves all beings and nothing of what he made he hates; because if he would hate it he would not have created it. And how could anything subsist if he had not wanted? How would it stay if he had not called it?* (*Wis 11:24-25*).

The evangelizer has to take the seeds of God as an unavoidable reference to announce the

Gospel Our job is to give light with the Gospel to the deep values of each reality and to help freeing them from what is not evangelical. Looking at it in this way, it is important that we take it into account in the process of formation, because each Claretian Missionary Sisters has to know how to look to different contexts with enough openness, to learn and to love the reality to which she is sent. We learn more than we teach. That is what the Church asks all of us and to the consecrated more concretely.

Institutes of Consecrated Life are thus invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world (VC 37).

Maybe we could bring up here one of those signs of the times, each time more consolidated, not only in our Congregation but in the whole Church. It is about the “shared mission”. That is to say, each one in her or his own vocation or particular form of life has to keep on taking conscience that we can and must live the mission in communion and co-responsibility. We cannot deny that as in many other situations, we sometimes make decisions pushed more because of apostolic needs and lack of religious personnel than from the real awareness of having to depend on one another. We are still a long way from assuming the more universal model of “shared mission”, in agreement with Vatican II: as a Claretian Family, as Church creating a participating style, authentically communicative, co-responsible and dialoguing with others so that together we can open roads to the Mission, in the midst of this world which invites us to be witnesses of communion.

And always, all of it moved and sustained by Love. This is the theological dimension of our lives. An active love, self giving and burning which pushes us to a mission of obedience. Being available for any appointment or apostolic work is not a thing of the past, when the dialogue with the superiors did almost not exist and there was nothing to think about except to carrying out the orders. Fraternity, the wish to share and dialogue, to discern as equals, does not eliminate the obedience as asceticism and as a privileged means, that we have freely chosen when we made our vows, to obtain a greater apostolic and missionary capability.

66. *In the Claretian Missionary sister, “the virtue which should shine the most must be a fervent zeal of the salvation of souls. For this reason she should not avoid any work, hardship or tiredness, imitating our divine master Jesus Christ. Striving to copy in her heart those virtues that are so necessary for our Institute, namely, charity, humility and meekness”.*

We discover here the charismatic dimension of our Foundress who sees the missionary urgency as a virtue that the Claretian Missionary Sister has to practice, expressed as *zeal for the salvation of souls*. This text is taken from the First Constitutions¹⁹⁹ in reference to the sisters directly in charge to care for the mission. Our actual Constitutions say the same thing for the whole Congregation, since each sister is a missionary and the apostolic action itself belongs to the essence of our consecrated life (*cf. Const 61*).

We see also, in the mentioning of love, the theological fundamental attitude in the Congregation, called to live in fraternity through the proclamation of the Gospel. Only Love will give us true humility and meekness, virtues so loved by both Founders because they imply the closeness of the persons and the simplicity in the relationships.

¹⁹⁹ *First Constitutions*, Vol.IV,c.2,n.10.

67. *The effectiveness of the ministry depends largely on our continuous conversion and training: “Each religious will Endeavour to perfect herself the best she can in everything related to her responsibility in the congregation, without seeking new positions or honorable jobs. Rather, she should be much more appreciative of the humblest occupations, striving with the utmost care to fulfill with the greatest perfection the one that has been assigned to her, not seeking her own interest in it, but rather the greater glory of God our Lord.*

To be fruitful in the apostolate, two indispensable things are asked from us: conversion and formation. In Mark’s Gospel, in regards to Jesus preaching, it is said: *the time is up. The Kingdom of God is near, convert and believe in the Good News (1s, 14-15)*. Conversion and faith are two faces of the same coin. Conversion is not given without faith, understood as unconditional adherence to Jesus; adhesion which is not possible without conversion, without change. From there, if we want to be fruitful in the proclamation of the Gospel, conversion and faith are unavoidable. We have here, although implied, the theological dimension from which conversion emerges.

Formation appears as an element united to conversion to be fruitful, because formation is much more than the acquisition of knowledge. It is before anything else the acquisition of some attitudes that make the Gospel believable. This number is based on the *First Constitutions*²⁰⁰ which ask for the greatest possible perfection in what we do. It is also part of what the Vatican II expressed as *call to holiness* of each Christian person, especially in every day tasks.

The continuous formation in the task that each one has is an ethical demand in the society. In which we live today, which so much demands and values adequate formation. But besides that, the Constitutions present it as part of our spirit of poverty:

.....not to covet jobs and positions more honorable, but to wish the most humble ones and accomplish them with the highest perfection possible, not looking for our satisfaction, but for the greatest glory of God our Lord (cf. Aim and Goal)

This language is strange at first sight; nevertheless it regains all its sense if we remember the saying of St. Ireneus of Lyon: *The glory of God is that man may live*. In a world in which human dignity is trampled on and in which terrorism and violence kill and destroy without sense, to affirm the glory of God is to recognize and bet for the dignity of men and women, it is to affirm life in the midst of so much death. Thus, what apparently begins simply as asceticism gets to a strong theological connotation: we search for the glory of God? And also social connotations: to recognize and to bet for the human person, his/her dignity and liberty, finally for his/her life. This underlines an anthropological dimension: God wants us to live.

It is also a kind of poverty not to ambition, not to look for our own interest in the mission or for success or for our own satisfaction, but to look in everything for the Kingdom of God.

68. *Our primary means of evangelizing is the personal and community witness of fidelity to Christ, poverty and detachment of the material goods, and of freedom from the powers of the world.*

²⁰⁰ Ib. Vol. I, c.8,n.15.

The first way to evangelize is the personal and communal testimony of fidelity to Christ and together with this, poverty, letting go of material goods and freedom from the powers of the world. It was a great truth at the time of the Founders and it is even more so today, if possible, that we live under the dictatorship of consumerism while a great part of humanity is dying of starvation. As consecrated we have the mission to proclaim with our lives that Jesus Christ is our only Lord, we do not have any other one, neither theoretically or existentially.

Today more than ever our world needs believable witnesses of what it is being announced. The credibility will always come more from our own lives than from our words. And not only in the personal but also in the communal aspect of it. Communion in a broken and divided world as ours has the strength of convocation. This personal and community testimony implies fidelity to Christ and to his Gospel, the communion of faith and hope in the Good News that we announce (theological dimension), and the poverty that is explicit with the letting go of the material goods and the freedom in front of the powers of the world. Our way of understanding poverty, fighting against evil in all its forms is the charismatic dimension (*cf. Const 9*). A poverty that makes us indifferent and free in front of things, people and all powers, be they what they may be in each time and place. We want that the human dimensions of power and possession start changing in us into freedom and letting go, because they are attitudes that humanize us. Only in this way we become not only active collaborators in the transformation of the world, but also offering other alternatives of living for our brothers and sisters.

69. *We express our apostolic mission through Christian education, missions, hospitality centers and other pastoral activities, which should always respond to our principal aim: “in imitation of the holy Apostles, work until death in teaching every creature the holy Law of the Lord [...], looking in all things and through all things the conversion of all persons consecrated to the service of God and the conversion of the whole world.*

Again we find the charismatic dimension when we quote our main objective: the proclamation of the Holy Law of God. The word “all” is repeated four times in the last sentence. In that way we reinforce the strong sense of universality, inclusion and criticality of our missionary charism, which sends us to *every* creature without distinguishing race, color, social condition culture, gender..... And thus our anthropological dimension is underlined.

We find in this number some lines added by the Holy See in 1982 (*cf. “Historical Introduction” 21*). Without a doubt the numbering of concrete apostolic works can restrict and make poorer the wide aspects of the mission that we are called as Claretian Missionary Sisters. It is convenient therefore to read this number from the holistic spirit of our Founders, knowing that the most *urgent, timely and effective means* have to be discovered in each place and time.

70. *The serene acceptance of pain or illness also makes us useful for the spreading of the Kingdom. Through our sufferings we make up “what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ on behalf of his body which is the Church.”*

Let us bear our sufferings with patience, charity and peace: being grateful to the sisters who care for us. Death accepted with generosity is the supreme act of surrender to the Father. It is the fulfillment and consummation of our missionary consecration like Christ.

And finally, very much in connection with the whole chapter, we affirm that in accepting pain, sickness, old age and all kinds of limitations, we continue to be fruitful for the extension of the Kingdom (cf. Const 63.67). As consecrated persons all the human dimensions of our life participate in the evangelization: all that we live and all that happens to us can be converted into Good News for us and for others, including sin, when it is recognized and placed under the merciful sight and embrace of the Father. When the testimony of our own life confirms the words that we proclaim, the Pascal Victory of Jesus will have been fulfilled. And this will happen completely in death, as the definite moment of fulfillment and the consummation of our missionary consecration in the likeness of Christ²⁰¹. The Constitutions say that death accepted with faith and generosity is the supreme act of surrender to the Father.

It is a beautiful and profound conclusion for this Chapter. All our life is apostolic, including limit situations. It is based biblically on the quotation from Paul: *we complete what is lacking in the tribulations of Christ for his body which is the Church* (Col 1:24b). The text reminds us the vocation of the Church in Ma. Antonia Paris. Therefore, a dimension deeply biblical and charismatic.

Sickness and death identify us with the pain and suffering of Jesus who was savior and takes us to identification in the Pascal mystery. Death is not only the end of a life, but above anything else *it is the supreme act of giving oneself to the Father, of fulfillment and consummation of our missionary consecration to the likeness of Christ*. We know that death does not have the last word; resurrection has the last word. Once again the Trinitarian dimension is manifested – the surrendering to the Father in the likeness of Christ. And although he does not appear explicitly, we feel the discreet presence, like a soft breeze of the Spirit which makes possible the consummation of our missionary consecration. And also the theological consecration: faith helps us to throw ourselves trustingly in the hands of the Father, through charity and hope; it encourages us through the journey toward the Father.

The dimension of asceticism is highlighted in this stage of life as patience, serenity, charity, peace and gratitude.

APOSTOLIC MISSION IN OTHER POINTS OF THE CONSTITUTIONS

Formation prepares us to assimilate the identity of the Congregation and from our insertion in the world, discover in history, under the light of the Gospel, the reality of humanity to whom we wish to proclaim the Good News of liberation.

The Congregation has to discern if a postulant has apostolic spirit or at least the capacity and desire to acquire it. That is why it is important that from the beginning the sisters do an apostolate which might be compatible with the stage of formation in which they are.

Progressively, they will be initiated also in harmonizing the apostolic action with contemplation, preparing for the Profession where they will express their commitment to proclaim the Gospel as the apostles did with the help of Mary, uniting always action and contemplation, the most important point of our Institute.

The community must help the young professed to harmonize their community life, prayer and apostolate. Before devoting themselves completely to the proclamation of the

²⁰¹ cf. DDCC 1969, Decree on Apostolate, 4

Kingdom, the young professed need to continue their religious and academic formation, knowing that it is something that must continue throughout life, keeping them in the process of continuous conversion. We need to recognize the voice of the Spirit which leads us every day to look for the most adequate forms so that the Gospel may reach all may be understood by all.

In Mary, the formatters' will find the strength and light necessary to accomplish their mission: to accompany that process of the sisters. Let them encourage their creativity and initiative, stimulate to discover and to develop the gifts received and to see the signs of God in history. Let them help the sisters in the early stages of formation to be courageous and risk-taking in their duty to work for a more human and fraternal society.

Formation

71. Our Claretian vocation is a gift to which we must respond day by day, living in a total availability to the will of the Father, joyfully committed to teach the Lord's holy law to every creature, in a lifestyle that is laborious, simple and poor.

72. Our formation is organized in such a way that, from a growing experience of faith, hope and love, we may understand and assimilate in all its depth the identity of the Congregation as a concrete way of being in the Church: let us feel solidary and responsible of the vocation and training of the other sisters: and let us learn to read in the light of the Gospel, the situation of the people we have to evangelize.

73. Formation must be progressive, integral and continual, in order that our life and mission may be more effective in the Church, and will take place at different stages. In programming its formation, the Congregation must bear in mind the characteristics of the young women who will enter it, the milieu in which they are going to live and the type of insertion into the world that the Church expects of them.

74. Each and every one of us must pray and commit ourselves to a careful promotion and selection of vocations for the growth of our Congregation and the good of the Church. Wherever the Congregation will expand let us foster and dedicate a special attention to the native vocations: "ask the master of the harvest to send out labourers for his harvest." The best recommendation of the Institute and the most effective invitation to embrace the religious life is the witness of our own personal and community life.

Postulancy

77. It is the responsibility of the Institute to discern the suitability of the candidate for our life and mission. If she has the necessary human and Christian qualities, honesty of intent, free will, spiritual, moral and intellectual fitness, suitable physical and psychological health. If she is animated by an apostolic spirit.

Noviciate

82. "The mistress of novices should found the novices from the beginning in the three virtues of faith, hope and charity, from which are born all the other virtues and evangelical perfection and without them, all the others are like a body without a soul" "Faith enables them to walk without stumbling in the darkness and night of ignorance; hope teaches them to live always in the arms of divine providence [...] and charity

encourages them to undertake the most arduous and perfect works, and enkindles within them living wishes to work for the sanctification of their neighbors, without neglecting their own."

85. *The community where the novitiate resides should endeavor to be true witness of the Claretian life, which serve as a stimulus to the novice that begins her religious life. In this way she will assimilate the spirit of the Institute both in the communion of life and by the doctrine.*

86. *During her novitiate, besides studying the Constitutions, she should be initiated into Sacred Scripture, theology, Church history and the doctrine and apostolate proper of the Institute. She will likewise receive the theoretical and practical formation required for the development of a life of union with God. She should work at gradually harmonizing the time of prayer, work and apostolate, in accordance with the life which she is going to profess.*

91. Our formula of profession is:

"In response to God's call, I Sister N.N...., desire to consecrate myself to God the Father, through the Son in the Spirit, and with the help of Mary Immaculate, to follow the footsteps of Christ our highest good, in imitation of the Apostles, teaching the holy Law of the Lord to every creature..."

92. *The Religious profession is a reciprocal and public commitment. The professed sister remains consecrated to God is incorporated to our Institute and participates in its mission within the Church. The Congregation receives her, welcomes her and assumes the responsibility of helping her to be faithful*

93. *As a sign of consecration and a witness to poverty, we wear the habit of our Institute. Where valid apostolic demands require it, we may wear also a simple and decent dress with a crucifix, so that our consecration may be visible. The major superior will give that permission.*

Juniorate

96. *The young professed should not be assigned immediately after the novitiate to any work of apostolate. Rather, they should continue in appropriate communities that will help them carry on their religious, doctrinal, apostolic and technical formation.*

The Junior sister cannot ordinarily be admitted to perpetual profession without first having exercised for a year some activity proper of the Institute.

97. *Encouraged by the community and guided by the mistress of juniors, they will devote themselves to a work compatible with the preparation they are acquiring. "They shall join action with contemplation, the most necessary point for our Institute"*

During this time they should exercise themselves in the practice of prayer, in accepting day by day the vicissitudes of this life, as coming from the hand of God. Thus they will not depend on times and happenings, but they will fix their souls in God, who never changes.

Ongoing Formation

101. *The fullness of the spiritual and apostolic life proper of the Congregation demands of us an ever renewed impulse and constant search, stimulated by the unceasing calls of the Spirit, the voice of the Church and the signs of the times. Therefore, our formation must continue throughout our life.*

103. *After some years of perpetual profession, there should be a stage of greater dedication to personal formation which will give a new impulse to our religious-apostolic life.*

Formators (Formation Directors)

109. *With filial trust let them love the Blessed Virgin Mary. Her life and example of maternal love must animate all of our formators in their mission of preparing new apostles for the extension of the Kingdom of God. Let them ask “Mary Most Holy, the most perfect teacher of all virtue and knowledge, the grace to fulfill their mission with sound knowledge, for the greater glory of God.”*

110. *They will train the sisters “with all care and diligence in the Lord’s service, teaching them, with words and deeds, the perfect keeping of God’s commandments and the exact observance of our Constitutions, in order to plant in their hearts a pure and perfect love of God, from which arises the love of neighbor and zeal for the salvation of souls, the only object of our Institute”*

111. *Let them train the sisters in the truth, justice, freedom and solidarity. Let them foster creativity and initiative in the young sisters, trying to develop as much as possible the qualities and gifts that God has placed in them.*

Let them always bear in mind the profound apostolic dimension of our Institute, and train them to be brave and daring in their commitment, to go forth into the world which they must transform by the Gospel.

CONCLUSION ON THE APOSTOLIC MISSION

The charism of our apostolic religious life (neither contemplative nor monastic) entails that consecration and mission are two aspects of the same reality. We want to live united with Christ, not only in prayer with him, but also traveling, eating or drinking, sleeping and resting, suffering and preaching (*cf. MA 31.30*). Like Jesus we want that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God be the center of our mission. Thus, like him, we live in the trust of knowing that we are loved by the Father and always led by the strength of the Holy Spirit, main agent of the new evangelization (*TMA 45b*).

Thus, willing to incarnate the gospel in our life, we know that the first means of the proclamation of the gospel in the world is the witness of our own personal and community life:

- living in the freedom of the spirit (*cf. Rm 8:21; Ga 5:13; 1P 2:16*) with the audacity proper of the children of God (*cf. Ep 3:14-17; Heb 3:6*)

- living in simplicity, without any malice, falsehood, envies (*cf. 1P 2:12*) because when we choose God as the center of our life we are asked to live in truthfulness and in evangelical simplicity. Our vital interests will not be those of the world (*cf. 1 Th 2:5*)
- living in evangelical joy, that joy that nobody nor anything can take away from us (*cf. Jn 16:22*) and that, at the same time, impels us always to commit ourselves to alleviate the suffering and pain of so many of our brothers and sisters; because it is true that He is risen (*cf. Lk 24:6*)

All of this, even being proper of any baptized person, becomes a total requirement for us consecrated persons²⁰² and takes on peculiar shades as it is lived from our Claretian and missionary charism. We profess publicly that in anything and anywhere we will seek the Kingdom of God and its justice as the only necessary thing. This public and historical commitment, cannot be reduced to concrete actions or specific activities, but at each moment of the day, at any age and situations in which we find ourselves, people might see in us if the God of Jesus is truly good news or not. For this reason, in us, consecration and mission is the same thing.

If Christ himself chose the incarnation to do the mission that the Father had entrusted him, we ourselves want to continue that mission taking on ourselves the same attitudes as Jesus (*cf. Ph 2*) Becoming one with Christ and with the people we evangelize (*Const.63*), without excluding anyone and dialoguing with all the cultures (*cf. VC 79*) since in all of them the incarnate Word of God dwells, thus we will make easier the journey of all the peoples.

Since the whole world has to be homeland to the missionary of Christ (*MA 10*) we will always have to make the effort to adapt ourselves to the socio-cultural world of those to whom we have been sent (*cf. RMI 53-54*), with a positive and at the same time critic gaze, to value and assume their own values and at the same time renew them, from the inside, with the gentle strength of the Gospel. That is to say:

The need for such involvement has marked the Church's pilgrimage throughout her history, but today it is particularly urgent (RMI 52).

Sometimes, we accept the criteria of the Church on the mission but applying them only to the young churches or to countries so called mission countries. And however, we need to take these criteria into consideration always and everywhere in our globalized world, immersed in a cultural atmosphere more and more far from the Church. Also in a very especial way in our old and aging Europe. To condemn any culture or considering as a waste any society will make impossible for us to approach it with the necessary simplicity, mercy and dialogue so that our world will be able to welcome God in its life.

The mission as everything in our life needs a continuous and deep discernment. As our Founders did, we need always to be attentive to the signs of the times, to the will of God, who very often surprises us and calls us to change, to renewal, since our apostolic initiatives and our works will make sense only if they respond to the needs of our world and to the building of the Kingdom:

²⁰² C. PALMES, *Nueva espiritualidad...*, 147-151

May we, as members of the Church, discern the signs of the times, grow in fidelity to the Gospel, share with love the grieves and the anxieties, the joys and the hopes of all men and women, and thus be able to show them the way to salvation (Eucharistic Prayer V).

Since our foundation, the mission requires availability to be sent to any part of the world (cf. *Const. 65*) far or close. This is one of our charismatic traits and this entails indifference in regards to places, persons, traditions, languages..., giving in every place the best of ourselves.

The whole life is mission. *To work until death to teach the Gospel to every creature* requires that at each moment we do whatever we can accord our energies, health, capacities... and that we offer our daily life for the missionary activity of the Church. The entire life of Christ is mission which culminates in his death and glorious resurrection; this end gives meaning and effectiveness to his entire life and thus we also hope that our death and resurrection confirms and makes culminate our giving of ourselves to and for the Gospel. It will be the moment in which the Lord will take our life into his hands as the ripen fruit of our missionary consecration:

*I will tell to my words: I was not lying when I shouted
God will say to my friends: "I certify
That he lived with us waiting for this day".
Suddenly with death,
My life will prove to be true.
At last I will have loved!*

*And I will come at night
With the joyful dread
Of seeing
Finally
That I walked
Day after day on the very palm of your hand"²⁰³*

²⁰³ P. CASALDALIGA, *Clamor elemental*, Salamanca 1971, 99-100.

EPILOGUE ON FIDELITY

The realities which are truly important for the human person and which in some way shape his/her life style, are present in every culture and in all ages, but they are not always defined in the same way and different aspects are underlined. Fidelity is one of those human realities. Maybe nowadays fidelity is not understood in the same way as it was 50 years ago; or maybe it does not have the same nuances in an American or Asian, or European or African culture... However all of us consider it a value for us as well as for the persons with whom we relate.

In the Bible, the fidelity to the word given has a great value. There was no need of papers, signatures or witnesses (*cf. Gn 12: 1-9; Dt 32: 1-43; Ex 33: 12-23*). God's promises deserve full trust in the moment they are given, but we have the surety that God will be faithful from generation to generation because he has been faithful in the past (*cf. Lk 1:46-55*). It is a fidelity that does depend neither on the changing circumstances, nor on the persons, times and places although it is never indifferent to it. Moreover: the journey of the people, its joys and obstacles give a deeper and greater trust knowing that the faithfulness has its foundation on him more than on us.

Nowadays, in our post-modern societies, disenchanted with the great speeches and ideals, people of all ages demand a real fidelity, here and now, they do not consider neither necessary nor possible to make a commitment beyond the present and beyond what is unpredictable in our life. It might seem that, being more conscious of the human weaknesses and without recognizing any meaning to the historical memory, we make us unable to do a commitment which might go beyond ourselves and we forget that it is God, the Lord and Master of time and of history, who watches over us and who goes with us through the uncertain roads of the future.

This change in the anthropological and social vision of our time, does not only affect the meaning of fidelity in religious life. Any human commitment becomes relative, but not so much in its present intensity or demands (at least in the intention) as in the ability to seal something for ever. Not even in the most functional or practical things. Clothing, tools, homes, contracts... everything tends to be temporal. The things are not making anymore to last for ever, but with the certainty that they will only last for a given time. Thus, even when we start something, being open to a perpetual fidelity (many marriages, priestly ordinations, religious professions...), in the moment when the circumstances are not the same, the feelings change or other options which did not exist, appear, we have the tendency to abandon the former commitment, *to be faithful to oneself*. The

problem here is to identify our own self and the fidelity with our changing feelings, when in reality the person is more than her/his feelings.

Probably other characteristics proper of our times, have an influence on this, as for example: access to multiple and diverse informations (sometimes contradictory), the technological era of communications, the unequal distribution of the material goods, the capitalist structure which continually offers to us new possibilities (apparently every time more complete) and where our own wellbeing has the priority. In such a context it is logical that we come to believe that faced with any difficulty we need to seek something else that would satisfy more and that we have the right to live the best we can being ourselves the ultimate criteria for the discernment. So many things are offered to us that sometimes we do not even know what to choose. We have such a high desire for pleasure and wellbeing that we would like to be able to enjoy all the possibilities, without renouncing to anyone and without suffering the adverse things that any good event has.

These “messages” have an influence over us, having we made an option or not in our life and without regard to our age. But the fear to make a mistake overtakes the persons especially the youth since logically they are at the time to take decisions in their lives. They have believed in a society which does not give guidelines or does not make them to be implemented, under the flag of freedom and autonomy. They have believed without anybody helping them to put boundaries and to distinguish between what can be done and what cannot be done; they have not been taught to wait and endure frustration as an unavoidable part of the greatest joys in life; they have not been taught that part of a greater good or even a greater pleasure may entail a renunciation to partial and instant goods and pleasures... All of these is made manifest when the hour, to make an option for a given project in life or to carry on what we have chosen, comes.

It may happen, then, that in our communities (as in any family) there might be at the same time situations which undermine our fidelity. Some sisters *stay* in the Congregation, but they are filled with bitterness, laziness and automatism... Other sisters –even young women who plan to enter the congregation- they reject the community, they criticize the Church, they personally undertake actions without the consensus of the community...

However, beyond the different generational parameters in which each one has been educated, when the fidelity is real, deep and rests on a deep faith, based on a real experience of God, it leads us to a commitment lived more and more with a greater coherence and joy. This way of living is visible on the exterior, it is handed on and it always leaves serenity and peace, even when this fidelity takes us to adopt positions or take decisions which generate conflict. It is the case of the prophets and of many founders.

Fidelity means neither to remain anchored on what we have reached nor in making of the present an absolute. It is not either the inflexibility of he who wants to perpetuate what we have lived or we are living today without any change. It is also true that the fidelity grows with the person who is faithful and this is why it keeps being deeper everyday, even if nothing is the same within two years, fifteen or three month. Precisely in times of crisis the motivation becomes more profound

and more authentic in its responses. Fidelity is something alive, always new, with creativity to live today with the surrender of the first day but made deeper by the ongoing maturity.

Moreover, no doubt that we commit ourselves in a different way when we know that in our commitment to something or to somebody our entire life is bound and not only a part of our life or a period more or less long. The fidelity and the commitment for our entire life deepen the sense of belonging because we know that our destiny is tied forever to what we want. Thus, to be faithful means to take care of it, to protect it, to keep it because in doing so we are taking care of ourselves. This sense of fidelity and belonging helps us to grow also as human beings and especially when it is the case to be faithful to a person.

Now, since we cannot give our whole life in an instant – because neither do we have it in our hands- nor can we live it at once- but step by step-, nor are we totally the owners of the future, the only way to surrender it completely, is to commit this whole future and hand it over to God by means of a perpetual and irrevocable vow²⁰⁴.

Christian fidelity rests on the faithfulness of God in Christ. Jesus of Nazareth has been the total “Yes” to the Love of the Father for humankind and also he is the “Yes” of humankind to the Father. Christ has a descending and an ascending movement of fidelity. This “Yes” in Christ was a daily “Yes” –not only in the great occasions- it was radical – it included the heart, the mind, and the will. In this same way he calls the Christian to be faithful to the Father and to the fellow human beings. Thus fidelity cannot mean only to stay in the Congregation but to renew the willingness to live every day the fullness of our vocation. This demand from us a faith renewed with care and tenderness.

And since we do our profession in a concrete community, in the same way each sister becomes solidary and responsible of the vocation and fidelity of the other sisters. (*cf. Const 72*). This is not only for the beginners, but for all of us, who walk day by day doing an effort to keep our flame alive.

Also, the whole Christian community is committed to help, to encourage the vocational journey of each one of the members, be what may be their vocation. Also, any Christian response is a commitment before the other believers. In our situation, it is the consecration to God with public vows in the Church. The theological approach of the Council made clear that all the different ways of Christian life are equally worthy and are roads to holiness.

But this does not have to lead us to a indetermination of the call, as if everything would be indistinct. The Council’s message is clear and guides towards an active fidelity: God is the God of the future, he opens up for us opportunities to work in the Kingdom and he is also the God of the past and of the present. He has worked on the history of humankind and on that of each concrete human being, opening for him or her concrete space of salvation and sanctification²⁰⁵. What is important it is to discover it and commit ourselves to it with generosity, knowing that the opportunities to which we renounce are real, but they will never be greater than

²⁰⁴ cf. Saint Thomas Aquina, *Summa Theologica*, 2-2, 186, 6, 2

²⁰⁵ cf. DDCC 1969, *Formation Decree*, 6

the opportunities that each one gets choosing the concrete way of his or her personal call which give meaning to his or her life. And in order to discover it, we need to look to our past, the way in which God has acted in it and from there, situate ourselves in the present and in the future, with the personal experience knowing that in the same way he acted in the past, he will continue to act for ever.

Our commitment as Claretian Missionary Sisters consists in the continuous witnessing to our surrendering of ourselves to God for the sake of the Kingdom, living and proclaiming the Gospel, in the style which the Lord inspired París and Claret. The other groups of the Claretian Family have their own particular way within this call to proclaim the Gospel. Together we form an apostolic group (*cf. PR 61*) with diverse commitments. The peculiarities of the different life styles enrich the whole family.

This demands that we live our daily life with the intensity given by the knowledge that in every decision we gamble our life, since it is there where we do or we do not do the will of God, where we lose or gain the authentic fidelity. Moreover, it is the only appropriate means to make real “they will join action and contemplation” All of this requires wisdom and also to have someone to journey with us and who may confirm or correct the way we live our life²⁰⁶.

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²⁰⁶ cf P. TRABUCCO, *Sobre la fidelidad*, en: Revista VR (julio-agosto 2005) 4-12; DDCC 1969, *Decree on Formation*, 1-23

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