

E. G. C. 2015 (Loreto, 1-10 October)

OPENING REMARKS BY FATHER GENERAL

My dear confreres,

Once again: *you are all welcome to our Extraordinary General Council....*

We wanted to have the experience, before our EGC meeting, of this three-day session on leadership and service in our entities, to take a clearer look at our mission of accompaniment and as guides for the life and mission of our presence in the various countries. We thank Father Lavigne from the bottom of our hearts for his support and also for his engagement with us up to the next General Chapter.

Our meeting is taking place at the crossroads of several paths of life and deepening:

- *the Year of Consecrated Life* which will end on 2 February 2016,
- *the tercentenary of the death of our Holy Founder*, officially inaugurated on the Feast of Pentecost 2015 in Saint-Laurent, and due to close on 11 September 2016 in Pontchâteau,
- *the Extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy* which will open on the feast of the Immaculate Conception this year,
- and *our EGC meeting: “Together, passing through Loreto”* which is taking place at a turning point in the life of the Congregation, after the example of Father de Montfort’s pilgrimage, as he went to Rome, passing through Loreto, to meet with Pope Clement XI and discern the will of God for his life and mission.

THE YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE

The fact that Pope Francis proposed a year of Consecrated Life, has been a call to speak to the whole Church, on the one hand, of the importance of this vocation for the mission to be witnesses and to serve evangelisation in the world, but also, from another point of view, it has been an invitation to discernment and to become courageously aware, so as to press onwards at this moment of crisis for the consecrated life in various countries around the world. I have no intention of presenting here a treatise on consecrated life, but allow me to underline a few aspects that I consider important in our progress as religious and in our service of leadership of our entities:

- **A life lived in fraternity:** one of the aspects that characterises consecrated life is the bond of fraternity that calls us to live as a sign of the mystery of communion in the love of the Trinity. In our concrete experience, sometimes we are tragically far from presenting this sign of fraternity in our world of today.
But our being in fraternity is the first mission to which we are called. In a divided and unjust world, that builds walls of separation, that refuses anything different... our mission as religious is to be witnesses of a dialogue that is always possible, of a communion that is capable of harmonising differences, of a welcoming of mutual aid for growth in the life of the Lord. Our service of authority has as its first aim to build fraternity with a sense of belonging, in the full knowledge that it is the Superior who must be the first to put that into practice. It is necessary to be constantly listening to the Spirit, in silence, in prayer, in humility, and in listening also to others, so as to come to a true interior liberty in obedience to God our Father, who will give us the gift of his Spirit to build up each day fraternity in Jesus. And I would like to emphasise that fraternity without frontiers is going to become, each time more, a prophetic sign for our world which is becoming global.

- **The prophetic dimension of consecrated life:** I feel that another characteristic that we must develop so as to give meaning to our consecrated life is to be called to proclaim to our world of today “God’s point of view” in every situation and in all the decisions and directions that have to be taken.
This requires us to give time to listening deeply and fruitfully to the Word of God which leads us to pay attention to God himself and to contemporary history. When people meet us, they must sense that we are people who proclaim the Gospel in history, who are able to denounce with courage everything that prevents the building of the Kingdom of God, and especially people who risk their own lives in this project. Sometimes we struggle to not be conformed to the world and the secularised culture of our time. However, we are called to live in the world and to take account of different cultures, so as to evangelise them. The prophetic dimension of our life must cause us to seek to explore new ways to be faithful to our mission of evangelisation.
- **Collaboration with lay associates:** one of the elements to be looked at and made to grow in religious life today is collaboration and living together with lay associates who are recently called the “charismatic family”.
This is a new chapter, rich in hope, that can help us to establish new paths of communion and collaboration. My personal contact with a number of groups who share our spirituality and our mission has given me fresh wind as I see the spread of our spirituality and the possibility of a renewal among ourselves if we share the enthusiasm and the coherence of life in line with the spiritual path of consecration proposed by Father de Montfort with our lay-people.
- **Consecrated life must be open to the world of communications:** I would like to present this challenge for your attention; it is an area in which I feel myself something of an “immigrant”, but it is becoming a new anthropology for the young people of today, and it demands our attention and our presence. This path is not clear, nor an easy one, because we see how numerous are the forms of computer-based and digital dependence that can become temptations. But the risk involved must not paralyse us, but, on the contrary, must give us, too, a wake-up call to be signs and witnesses so that, through these means, we might proclaim the Gospel of the Lord.

TERCENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF FATHER DE MONTFORT

Vatican Council II, in the document “*Pefectae Caritatis*”, 2, invited Consecrated Life to a renewal, beginning with a return to the sources and to our primary inspiration, but at the same time, it invited us to adapt ourselves to the changing conditions of our times. We too, are called to look at our origins, the history of the great characters of holiness and missionary endeavour over these 300 years of our history, so as to experience today a genuine renewal not based on statistics, but taking up again a fully evangelical existence beginning with the Charism of our Holy Founder. This is why I invite you, during this time of celebration of the tercentenary, as well as other initiatives that you may have planned in your entities, to enter with intensity into three experiences:

- **the use, both personally and as communities, of the animation tool for 2015-2016**, that Father Georges Madore, in collaboration with others, has prepared (for which we truly thank him), to help us in a return to the sources as we approach the life of St Louis Marie, with Scriptural lights, ways of personal integration, moments of prayer and commitment in our lives.
- **from 7 to 10 September 2016 we propose a course on our Charism**, which is going to be run in Saint-Laurent, so as to provide a strong experience of the living out of the charism for today in our story. And I hope that that might enlighten us on the path of preparation for our next General Chapter in 2017. After this course, we will have the chance to participate in the closure of the tercentenary, on Sunday 11 September, in Pontchâteau, as the Montfortian Family.

- **to experience the tercentenary as we fortify our sense of belonging to the Congregation and the Church.** The love and docility that Father de Montfort had for the Church of his own day, often enough lived out in difficult and obscure situations, should guide us today to “work together” among ourselves, with the Montfortian Family and our lay associates, in the mission of evangelising and building the Reign of Jesus through Mary, as dreamed of by St Louis Marie.

THE EXTRAORDINARY HOLY YEAR OF MERCY

In the same year as the Tercentenary, the Church, through Pope Francis, invites us to experience a Holy Year of Mercy. Perhaps our first reaction might be to say: that’s too many things at the same time. But I invite you to link these two events and to experience the Holy Year as an opportunity and a path that adds to the fruitfulness of the tercentenary celebrations. I want to emphasise three proposals that the Pope presents to all Christians, but that can be very strong stimulants for us in the renewal of our commitment as Montfortian religious.

- ***the first:*** is that Pope Francis wishes to open this Holy Year on 8 December, in connection with the 50 years since the closure of the Second Vatican Council. He reminds us that the Council Fathers had clearly perceived the need **to speak of God to the men of our times in a more comprehensible way.** Celebrating the tercentenary of the death of Montfort leads us to recall, after the example of this great missionary, this need to know how to present to the human race at all times a God who manifests his love in Jesus, in whom all is compassion and for whom everything is guided by mercy. And Mercy, as the Pope tells us in the Bull “*Misericordiae Vultus*” (no. 9), becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are. As He is merciful, so we, too, are called to be merciful towards one another.
- ***a second proposal*** comes from the invitation that Pope Francis makes to us (no. 15): **to be able to open our eyes and see the misery of the world,** the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, so as to recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help. Father de Montfort, by his own life-style, teaches us that, as we contemplate the mercy of God in listening to his Word in silence and meditation, we become capable of assimilating this mercy and of devoting our hearts and lives to welcoming those excluded by our societies: migrants, the poor, aged people, those who cannot find work, those who have suffered failure in their life’s plans...
- ***the third orientation*** for having a good experience of the Year of Mercy is taken from the Pope’s affirmation when he says that: “When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy” (no. 3). And later in the Bull (no. 17), he invites us to **place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the centre once more, for it is the true sign of the Father’s Mercy.** But this means that we ourselves must, first of all, be penitent in our seeking forgiveness. And the example of our holy Founder pushes us to welcome all those who ask for forgiveness from God, to help them to experience true interior peace in joy and serenity.

TOGETHER, PASSING THROUGH LORETO, 2015

We chose Loreto as the venue for our Extraordinary General Council meeting, both to be near a Marian shrine so as to ask the Blessed Virgin to accompany us in our discernment of the path to be taken by the congregation that belongs to her, and also because Loreto is a symbolic place in our history. Montfort, at a moment of uncertainty in his missionary life, made the decision to go to meet with the Pope in Rome, passing through Loreto, to be confirmed in the mission the Lord was asking of him. At this period of our history, we also are living through a turning point that challenges us on the directions we must take to continue the mission in creative fidelity to that which Father de Montfort received in his pilgrimage to Italy.

After the period in which the Provinces had all their own strengths and possibilities for advancing in the mission, now we are experiencing a weakness in the entities that raises questions for us.

That is why, in the last two General Chapters of 2005 and 2011, we received orientations for acting more TOGETHER, beginning with international and inter-cultural experiences in formation, mission and financial support. We have made our first steps in this direction, but it is very important to have a moment of evaluation to look at the progress we have made, to see the positive aspects, the difficulties, the challenges to be taken up, and to go forward with respect for differences, while at the same time emphasising the richness of “working together” and the sharing which will allow us to be signs of fraternity in a divided world, which, unfortunately, is seeking more and more to build walls of separation.

This really is a turning point for our congregation.

Today, let us be able to make a discernment in the light of the signs of the times and the general orientation of the 2011 Chapter which issued us with an invitation:

“During the next six years, we want to let God come into us, among us and, through us, into the world.”

So we will be able to come to decisions that will help us to move forward as a single congregation capable of sharing its human resources, its financial possibilities, and its dreams in the mission. May our charism and our Montfortian spirituality incite in our hearts a return to our mission with confidence, courage and enthusiasm, just as Montfort did on his return from Rome.

The road will be neither easy nor clear throughout the period that God alone can see, but the security of placing ourselves in his hands and in the hands of Mary, our Mother, will give us the strength to go forward, to be aware sometimes of the slowness of the road, to be always on the look-out for the signs of the times and the cries of the poor, to be seekers who clearly see the horizon: the building of the Reign of Jesus through Mary in our own concrete time.

In this period when we are going to experience many significant events in the Congregation and in the Church, we are called also to begin the preparation of the next General Chapter fixed for May 2017.

- We have already worked, starting with the last Chapter of 2011, on the tools we need for the protection of minors and vulnerable people, and we want to look at where we are in this matter today and how to move forward.
- Also you have had an invitation to look at a proposition for a change in the Statutes of our Constitutions. Now, we are going to receive your suggestions and see how to prepare propositions for the next Chapter.
- At the same time, we will look once again at the possibility of a change in the terms of office of the Superiors, so as to see if we wish to present this idea to the Chapter or not.
- And above all, we will look at how to organise ourselves, with the help of Father Jean Lavigne, so as to come to the point, through a solid and fruitful preparation, of celebrating the next General Chapter as a time of grace and of the presence of the Lord in the life of the Congregation.

I invite you to live these days in full fraternity,

*“looking at our past with gratitude,
experiencing our present with passion
and embracing the future with hope.”*

- in sharing which enriches us,
- in welcoming one another, which creates deep bonds,
- and in the joy of being together, so as to let ourselves be guided by Mary towards her Son, the Wisdom of God.