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CIRCULAR LETTER FOLLOWING THE GENERAL CHAPTER OF 2023

Rome, June 29, 2023
on the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul
Prot. 149/2023

Dear Confreres,

It gives me great joy to address this first Circular Letter to the Congregation after my election as the new Superior General at the General Chapter of 2023. This is the Chapter that took place during the celebration of our 350th Jubilee of the origin of our Congregation. The General Chapter which took place six years ago was a historic Chapter as it made a number of important changes to our Constitutions and Directory with the aim of expressing our charism and identity more clearly. There were not as many changes made to our rule in this Chapter which was celebrated during our Jubilee. These changes that were made, mostly regarding formation and structure and government, continued the work of the last Chapter. However, during this Chapter, there were some historic decisions made regarding our patrimony and our spirituality and identity concerning the white habit. In this Circular Letter, I would like to offer some reflections on the General Chapter 2023 and then speak about the decisions that the Chapter made. I will explain what was decided, how the Chapter came to make such decisions and how they will be implemented.

Reflections on the General Chapter 2023

It is worth remembering what our Constitutions say about the authority of a General Chapter: Chapters, along with Superiors, “possess ecclesiastical power of governance for both the internal and external forum.” (C 234). “Supreme and immediate power in the entire Congregation is exercised, in an ordinary manner, by the Superior General with the assistance of his council and, in an extraordinary manner, by the General Chapter.” (C 235). So, during the two weeks that this Chapter met this past February, it exercised, “supreme and immediate power in the entire Congregation.” There was a process, leading up to the General Chapter, of choosing delegates to represent the Provinces and General Vicariates. Those delegates, along with the ex-officio members of the Chapter, exercised their authority in the decisions that the Chapter made. In his Circular Letter of December 8, 2022, Fr. General Andrzej Pakuła, MIC reflected on such decisions taken by a General Chapter. “Any decision taken in accordance with our Constitutions and subsequently approved by the Holy



Father is always an expression of God's will and an act of Divine Providence... Of course, there are times when decisions may not be in line with our expectations, perceptions, or emotions, but if they are decided by the Holy See, we ultimately recognize them as actions of Divine Providence.” We received the decree of approval from the Holy See on June 6, 2023 for the changes that we made to the Constitutions during the Chapter. It is now my duty as the Superior General, along with my General Council, to carry out the decisions of the General Chapter.

Participating in the Chapter 2023 was a great blessing. At the beginning of the Chapter, we had the opportunity to make an act of entrustment of the Congregation to our Immaculate Mother and Patroness. We did this at the end of a Mass which was celebrated in the Basilica of St. Mary Major by Cardinal Stanislaw Ryłko. The whole Congregation will repeat this act of entrustment of the entire Congregation and of the individual members to the Immaculate Mother of God on December 8th of this year, the conclusion of our Jubilee celebrations.

During his homily at that Mass, Cardinal Ryłko called our Jubilee a special *Kairos*, a time of Jubilee grace. He stated that - like in a seed, everything can be found in the act of the *Oblatio* of our Founder. “This is the secret of the extraordinary power of the founding charism of your congregation. The founding charism of the congregation is a bottomless mine that hides a great wealth of graces and inspirations of the Holy Spirit, which each generation of members of the congregation must constantly rediscover. The charisms retain an extraordinary dynamism and spiritual potential capable of rebirth in situations where it humanly seemed to be the end. Your congregation experienced this power when it was reborn through the efforts of Blessed George Matulaitis-Matulewicz.” He went on to tell us that our congregation’s charism is our spiritual capital which we must guard carefully. We do this by living it every day. What Cardinal Ryłko said to us struck me deeply. We should ponder our charism to continue to rediscover its newness and power to give us the gift of rebirth in every generation.

We had a very friendly and inspiring meeting with Pope Francis at the end of the Chapter. He encouraged us to follow the example of St. Stanislaus, who “charted for your congregation paths of spirituality and action, well embodied in the concrete history of the men and women of his time. And it is important for you to ‘take up the torch’; continuing to respond creatively to the challenges that our age also presents.” He also reminded us of our rebirth and the role of Blessed George. “He was able to restore vitality to the community, updating the Constitutions and promoting its work fearlessly, even to the point of having to act clandestinely and risking arrest, without ever giving up promoting charity and unity among religious and among the faithful.”



Both Cardinal Rylko and Pope Francis spoke to us about rebirth. Let us pray for this grace that it would be ongoing in our lives. Perhaps we rediscovered some of those hidden graces and inspirations of the Holy Spirit of the founding charism during this Chapter.

What Was Decided

The Chapter approved a beautiful Jubilee Message of the General Chapter of 2023 - that we are all called to be holy and without blemish (Eph 1;4). I would like to thank the Jubilee Committee for their efforts in preparing the proposal of this message as well as for the plan of the Jubilee. We know that we were not able to live the Jubilee as we had planned. But it surely bore fruit in our lives and will continue to do so. I urge you to reflect on this message. We are now coming to understand the gift of the Marian Fathers' school of the spirituality of the Immaculate Conception. We need to continue to reflect on the meaning of this gift of God to us. The Jubilee calls us to be faithful in our service to Christ and the Church. The pandemic and the events of the last several years have revealed more clearly the spiritual battle that the world is always in as we strive for holiness. Proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world of today is more challenging than ever. The mystery of the Immaculate Conception can show us the way forward.

Along with some changes to the Constitutions and Directory, the Chapter approved some decrees regarding formation, and made some recommendations regarding a Convention on Vocations, and retreats on our charism.

Constitutions #17, on the attire of the confreres has been changed. The new point speaks about the white habit which our Founder wore, having been inspired by the Holy Spirit to do so in order to honor the Immaculate Conception. It is now called the solemn garb of the confreres. The rest of the point is largely unchanged which speaks about the usual garb of the clerics and religious brothers. They each may wear ecclesiastical garb according to local norms and their attire should be simple and modest.

Directory #8 has also been changed. The old title, **Safeguarding the Patrimony** has been changed to **Principles regarding the Solemn Garb**. The first sentence remains unchanged. It speaks of the white habit as belonging to the inalienable spiritual patrimony of the Congregation. The point then states that the confreres would normally receive this solemn garb during perpetual vows. It is described as a simple white cassock with a fascia (band cincture). The General Council will approve the pattern of the habit, the manner for its reception and when it will be given in various jurisdictions. Some jurisdictions may wish that it be given at a time other than at



final vows. The confreres are then encouraged to wear it at least on 8 days which are listed which are important feasts for the Congregation.

The Chapter also approved a declaration on the white habit which will be printed along with the Acts of the Chapter. This will give the context for these decisions of the Chapter - the 350th Jubilee along with some of the history. It then explains the implications and how the decisions will be lived out.

How did the Chapter come to make these decisions?

There are various resources on padrimariani.org which give the history of the use of the white habit in our Congregation. Briefly, after the Founder donned the habit in 1671, it was worn by all who entered the Congregation until 1909 - 238 years. For our Founder, it was a symbol of the Immaculate Conception and an essential sign of our identity. Blessed George along with two others wanted to don the habit and enter the Congregation however State authorities didn't allow it and they had to join clandestinely (cf: *Request by Rev. George Matulaitis to General Vincent Sekowski for admission to the Order together with his friends*, St. Petersburg, 8/9 September, 1908). Due to the persecution of religious orders at that time, Pope St. Pius X was very supportive of religious communities without the habit. In almost every General Chapter since 1924, the possibility of returning to the habit has been discussed. During his lifetime, Blessed George thought it inopportune to return to the habit. Yet he also once said that we should have but one goal, to restore all things in Christ. "In order to achieve this, we should make use of any lawful and worthy means available to us: the cassock of the priest or the habit of the religious or, if need be, the clothes of the layman" (Journal, 27/X/10). The present position of the Holy See is that the world needs the witness of religious and their consecration. St. John Paul II strongly recommended that religious wear their proper habit in *Vita Consecrata* 25. Blessed George had encouraged us to follow the spirit of the times 100 years ago. We sought to do so during this General Chapter.

Former Superior General, Fr. Andrzej Pakuła, MIC said at one of the plenary sessions of the General Chapter that he had felt a moral imperative to do something about the question of the habit during his term in office. He prayed about it and the persistent thought would not leave him. He therefore consulted the Holy See twice, including with the Prefect of the Dicastery, Cardinal João Bráz de Aviz, on the same proposal, which was accepted without any changes by the General Chapter and finally approved by the Holy See. Consulted experts of the *Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* even said that they would be surprised if such a proposal was not adapted by the Chapter. At the same time, they



recommended giving the habit during perpetual vows as a sign of accepting forever the entire charism and patrimony of our Congregation.

The rationale provided to the Chapter members also made the valid point that the approval of the proposal would also have a formative function and would put to rest all of the voices inside and outside of the Congregation that have questioned the continuity of the Congregation for 350 years. This change further expresses the identity of the Congregation.

How will it be implemented?

What the Chapter members did was vote to restore the possibility of wearing the white habit, according to the norms of the Constitutions and Directory accepted during the Chapter. Since the Holy See has approved the changes to our Constitutions, we can now see this as the way that God has used the General Chapter and its authority to gently move the Congregation in a new direction. The declaration, which the Chapter approved, calls the white habit an external sign of our religious consecration and of our charism: the essence of which is the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The white habit has now become the solemn garb of the confreres which we can wear at our discretion. We are encouraged to wear it on important days for the Congregation. No one has to wear the habit. Priests and religious brothers who wish to do so, may continue to wear ecclesiastical garb. When confreres make their final vows, they will be given the white habit, unless the jurisdiction has made other provisions (Provincial or Vicariate Superiors may petition the Superior General and his Council if they desire to give the habit at another time). After it has been given, it may be worn or not, according to the discretion of the individual. Confreres who are already in perpetual vows may begin to wear the white habit if they chose to do so after the promulgation of the Constitutions and the Directory.

The General Council will issue a decree on the form of the habit. Jurisdictions may then have the habits made according to the form. We need to receive approval from the Holy See for our *Ordo Professionis*. We will insert into our Ritual a rite for the blessing and the giving of the habit during final vows. An announcement to explain the changes in our Marian parishes will be provided. Pastors will be free to use the announcement or not.

Conclusion

Understandably, many members of our Congregation feel very strongly on this issue. I must say that participating in this Chapter was very interesting. It was not a room



full of zealots seeking to impose their will on the Congregation. It was a group of elected delegates and ex-officio members who sought to be open to respectfully dialogue with one another and to honestly seek the will of God during the Jubilee. What is the Lord asking of us? What is our holy Founder asking of us? What would Blessed George say about this decision? The Chapter made the decision in 2023, the last year of the Jubilee. It will have implications for our lives. But we must also remember that the Congregation has existed for 350 years. Perhaps the Lord inspired these decisions in view of a plan for us in the distant future in countries where we do not yet work. The geography of our Congregation is shifting. This was evident by the elected delegates at the Chapter and the new jurisdictions which were represented. It was historic to have native delegates from Rwanda and Cameroon as well as delegates representing Viet Nam and India for the first time! Let us be patient with one another and allow the Lord's plan to unfold.

We can't expect instant unity during a time of change and transition. Let us respect one another and the choices of individual religious. The Lord calls each of us on a unique path to holiness. Let us also respect the last one hundred years of our history and all those who joined a community that did not wear its religious habit during that time. Let us not judge one another or let any divisions come between us. Blessed George wanted us to use whatever garb would allow us to most effectively preach Jesus Christ and to renew the world in Christ! Please pray for his canonization. Documents are being gathered and verified on a presumed miracle for him.

May the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary be our salvation and protection. May the intercession of our Founder, St. Stanislaus, of Blessed George, the Renovator, and of the Blessed Martyrs Anthony and George lead us all to a greater unity, to holiness of life and to a fruitful apostolate. Let us beg the Lord of the harvest to send us more workers! The vineyard of the Lord is in need! Be assured of my prayers for each of you!

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Fr. Joseph G. Roesch, MIC
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Superior General