

Centre Sèvres Facultés jésuites de Paris
Formation of Religious Formators (FFR)

**THE MISSIONARY COMMUNITY
AND
REDEMPTORIST IDENTITY
IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

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FOREWORD

During the year 2009-2010, at the University, I followed the course of religious formation (FFR), at the Jesuit Faculties in Paris. The first quarter, oriented towards human sciences, was held at Lyon. At the end of this formation period, I presented a paper on “*The missionary community and the Redemptorist identity in the African context*”. This work was first meant to be a reflection on community life with apostolic implications, i.e. the community and the prophetic and missionary dimension of the community and the connection which should exist between the witness of our community life and apostolic missionary work.

This orientation is based on the fact that I wanted to answer the following question: why the life of each Redemptorist Religious should first and foremost be prophetic and missionary, first for his confreres in community and then for the abandoned poor and the destitute to whom we are sent? An attempt to answer this question is included in a meditation on the theme of our sexennium 2009-2015: to preach the Gospel ever Anew (St. Clement): renewed hope, renewed hearts and renewed structures for Mission. I offer this meditation to my beloved Congregation, and above all, to Our African and Madagascar Conference to encourage reflections on this theme of the sexennium.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (C.Ss.R.) has entered a new phase, called ‘restructuration’, in order to meet the challenges of the world of the XXIst century. This is a change which is not without its consequences both for the internal and external structure, for the mentality of its members as well as for a new form of evangelisation, not forgetting its system of government. To attain these objectives, the last General Chapter of 2009 called on all Redemptorists and Redemptoristines as well as on the lay associates and the members of the affiliated Institutes ‘to preach the Gospel ever anew’ (St. Clement¹), with renewed hope, renewed hearts and renewed structures for Mission’. What will all this renewal mean concretely in our communities, especially in Africa and Madagascar? Can we find the Redemptorist identity and persons devoted to the mission through our community life?

My reflection is meant to be a modest contribution to the process of renewal, for the preaching of the Gospel in an ever new manner. Because of the special place of the Redemptorist missionary community in the Congregation, it is proper first to analyse community life. This analysis will lead us to see the reactions and the orientations of the higher instances of the Congregation in reforming Redemptorist life and the Redemptorist mission. Finally, I will try, within the African context, to make some proposals with a view to a renewed community for the apostolic life.

1. The Redemptorist community past and present

To the question ‘what is a Redemptorist’, we answer very simply by pointing to the work we do. The Redemptorist religious community signifies a missionary one. It presents itself under many facets in a Redemptorist spirit. It represents the Congregation in a particular place. We will try to make an analysis of today’s Redemptorist community in Africa and Madagascar, before scrutinising the past in order to understand how the original communities lived.

A. Analysis of the Redemptorist community of today

1. Communities faced with the daily realities

The face of Africa, in this post-colonial period, is still marked by the wrinkles of suffering. The missionaries, among them Redemptorists, who have experienced the transition from colonialism, are still witnesses of this suffering

¹ Saint Clement-Mary Hofbauer (1751-1820) was the first Vicar General of the Congregation beyond the Alps having brought the Congregation from Italy to the North of Europe, to Warsaw and then to Vienna.

of the Africans. In several countries, where there are Redemptorist Units, these still experience daily the painful realities of the people. In fact, this political and economic instability has led to both local and national conflicts². The consequences are huge: entire populations live continually on the move towards more stable zones. These are especially the poorest who always pay the heaviest price. Their conditions of life become precarious. They are gnawed by hunger and a prey to illness of all kinds.

We may note also that in certain countries like the Niger, people suffer regularly from insufficiency of food.³ And yet their principal source of income is farming and stock breeding. But, farming, stock breeding as well as gardening depend on the hazard of the climate. The scarcity of rain is the principal factor which prevents stock breeding and farming. In addition to these natural causes, we cannot ignore the bad management of the aid which the international community brings to these poor countries. Let us say with André Berthelot that there is ‘a bad distribution of food, embezzlement of assets, monopolizing by some and ignoring others, who are more and more neglected.’⁴

Africa is also particularly well known because of clandestine migrations. Migrants from West Africa (Tchad, Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin), and from Central Africa (Cameroun, Central Africa, Democratic Congo) pass through the Niger to reach Libya or Algeria in order to get to Europe. The sad reality is that some arrive or return to Agadez (Niger) – a crossroads absolutely impossible to avoid – bereft of everything, sometimes sick, humiliated and depressed, with psychological problems and even cases of rape (girls)⁵. In spite of all the risks of the road, confreres of Agadez and Tchirozérine try as much as possible to persuade the migrants to return to their own countries. Unfortunately, this apostolate has not much success because the final answer of these people is: ‘every one takes his chance’.

In addition to these human, moral and material needs, there is a phenomenon not less serious that creates new divisions in Africa to day. It is the growth of the charismatic and Pentecostal communities, the independent churches and the sects. ‘Their diffusion in the world increases and their vitality on the African continent is seen in the growing number of independent African churches, now united in an official institution, the OAIC (Independent African

² Congo RDC, Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Kenya, Côte d’Ivoire, Angola, are the countries most directly affected by this political and economic instability (cf. *Conspectus generalis* C.Ss.R., 2009, section ‘Région Afrique’).

³ Pascal Sorgho, *De l’Eucharistie au développement: Mémoire de Théologie*, Grand Séminaire Saint Jean-Baptiste, Ouagadougou, 2007, pp. 12-13.

⁴ A. Berthelot, *Hippolyte Berlier, Redemptorist, first Bishop of Niger in Muslim territory*, p. 197.

⁵ In the worst cases they are asked to bury the dead as the Muslims refuse to touch corpses ‘cafres’.

Churches), based in Nairobi.⁶ Some Christians leave the Catholic Church or practise a religious syncretism.

Facing these human and spiritual miseries, and the list is not exhaustive and concerned at seeing all these abandoned poor and neglected, the Redemptorists assist them as far as possible by bringing them spiritual, moral and material help. In this way, they have developed many initiatives to meet their various needs, such as education, health, food, security, etc. For example, in Madagascar, in addition to the alms given to the poor who come to their doors, Redemptorists take on themselves, free of charge, according to their means, – the schooling of thousands of children, youngsters and young people enrolled in their houses.⁷ In Zimbabwe, they must build houses for the homeless and feed more than 7200 children, the majority of whom are orphans with aids.

2. The joy of living the mission

We refer to three situations of local communities in the African context. The first one consists of missionary parochial communities that are the majority. Confreres are in close collaboration with the dioceses where they staff parishes. The second type of communities includes the houses of formation (postulate, noviciate and theologate) and finally there are the residential communities. It must be said that the missions or the apostolate, are not the same from one local community to another or from one country to another. Nevertheless, the Redemptorist spirit remains the same. It is this spirit which enables us to be close to and to easily identify the most abandoned poor: orphans, street children, unemployed, the sick, the handicapped, victims of aids and immigrants. This nearness allows to us to hear the ‘cry of the oppressed’ who feel powerless and without hope. The sons of Saint Alphonsus must honour their name of ‘Redemptorists’ in order to manifest revelation to the men of modern times. The cries of the Hebrews in their Egyptian misery did not fall on deaf ears but on those of God. Moses was the man on whom God relied to save the people in spite of his fears, his resistance and his cultural uprooting.

At the level of community life⁸ much effort has been made to strengthen the mission teams in the houses, thanks to the increase of vocations. This progress in one way or another improves the quality of community life and in

⁶ Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for the Unity of Christians, ‘Why so many Christians leave our Church? Intervention at the African synod, October 6, 2009.

⁷ Cf. *Conspectus generalis* C.Ss.R. 2009, section ‘Region of Africa’ pp. 508-509.

⁸ We must admit that the recent documents of the C.Ss.R. do not deal very much with the questions of community life. According to the general report on the state of the Congregation, and especially in the section ‘African Region’ the Vice-province of Luanda (Angola) is the only one to mention community life in its report.

this way eases the life of loneliness which certain confreres lived in the past in the mission stations.

The traditional Redemptorist apostolate normally consists in the giving of Parish Missions that seems to have disappeared in many countries. Nevertheless, missionary teams still exist in the Vice Provinces of Matadi, South Africa and Nigeria. Moreover, in addition to the parochial pastoral activities, a good number of confreres preach retreats, direct seminars, sessions of formation, give courses in Seminaries or other schools, not forgetting those who continue to do the apostolate of the pen or the radio.

There is a missionary awareness already in the houses of formation. Students do apostolic work in the parishes staffed by Redemptorists or the local clergy. In Nigeria, the students are involved in apostolic activities with the poor, orphans and prisoners. Likewise, in the theologate of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, the brother students accompany the sick or elderly at home, by taking communion to them every Sunday. All this variety of apostolic work which makes the mission a joy could not be done without a certain coordination and a coherent project of community life. However the trees should not hide the wood. There are difficulties, both internal and external in this *vita apostolica* of the Redemptorists.

3. African ‘provincialism’

In its Report to the last General Chapter, the African Region and Madagascar referred to the “internal” handicap which is an excessive ‘provincialism’ and decentralisation in the Congregation. Vice-provinces are “just simply not accustomed to collaborate within Units”. Reverend Father General, Joseph W. Tobin, former Superior General, has this to say “Provincialism, when it is combined with an exaggerated sense of nationalism or other forms of chauvinism, builds a barrier almost impossible to penetrate for the restructuring”⁹ of the Congregation. This difficulty shows that the Redemptorist apostolate is carried out in isolation and inside the Units. This can also affect the formation of candidates or their stages in a Unit other than their own. This spirit of singularity of “the Unit” remains in the future Redemptorists. Furthermore, with this handicap, instead of giving rise to a spirit of competition in the positive sense of the term between the Units and the sharing of experiences, the temptation would be to be satisfied with the opportunities, sometimes very weak, which the mission territories offer, regarding formation or methods of the apostolate.

⁹ *Report of the Superior General to the XXIV General Chapter*, 2009, no. 15, p. 4.

Even though we may be conscious that it is necessary to go beyond ‘provincialism’, certain more serious realities hinder good will. First of all, the geographical distances which are enormous, the difficulties of the journey between countries and even within the same country; and when it can be done, the expenses of the journey are exorbitant.

The continental handicap can also exist within the Units themselves when personal considerations outweigh the value of the mission. Most Reverend Father J.W. Tobin has insisted again on this fundamental difficulty in his last Letter to the Confreres. He remarks that the choices regarding pastoral methods, the efforts for community life, are at time guided by ‘beliefs, attitudes or opinions, which can have or may not have much link with the values mentioned in the Constitutions’¹⁰. It is evident that local communities are not exempt from eventual internal conflicts regarding the setting up of a project of common coherent life, that is both spiritual and apostolic, if we give more value to personal experience and to the capacity of each individual to encounter God and to accomplish *his* mission. All these difficulties can lead to diminishing apostolic effectiveness and limit the testimony of religious and of the Redemptorists, which various Units in Africa and Madagascar underline. From this arises the need to visit our sources anew, not only with nostalgia, but to be, in our turn, prophet-founders of the C.Ss.R. in this XXIst century.

B. Approaching the original Redemptorist community

1. The early missionary community

The *vita apostolica* of the early years of the Congregation of Alphonsus is marked by *Parish Missions*. The founder gathered around him real itinerant missionaries who preached missions and retreats from village to village, from parish to parish. He even let himself be enticed by Bishops to give retreats or spiritual exercises in their dioceses. The frequency of the missions seemed to deprive the companions of Alphonsus of rest. And yet, there were determined times to recharge the batteries. We even notice that each year, Alphonsus “brings back everyone to the monastery to be restored in body, soul and spirit, to strengthen the bonds of brotherhood in sharing and prayer and to give enclosed retreats.”¹¹ These moments of repose were therefore well spent in community. Various themes were considered in the conferences: “Either on ecclesiastical science, or on the way to advance constantly in well grounded, true, and positive imitation of the most holy virtues of His divine Majesty, or,

¹⁰ Cf. P. Joseph W. Tobin, A letter to the confreres, 8 September 2009, no. 29, p. 8.

¹¹ Th. Rey-Mermet, Saint Alphonsus Liguori. Tireless Worker for the most abandoned, p.

finally, on the way to bring greater spiritual benefit to other people and help the abandoned areas and the dioceses, lacking in spiritual assistance.”¹²

And in addition to the fruits of conversion of the faithful, the missionary journeys were also a means to get candidates for the new Congregation.

2. The first circular letter of Alphonsus to the confreres¹³

When the Institute was only five years in existence with pontifical approbation, realizing that “a good number of its members were acting well though others were not advancing and lacking in heart”, Alphonsus wrote a long letter to the Fathers and Brothers of the Congregation. Comparing the letter of the former Superior General Tobin, already quoted above, and this ‘primitive one’, we can discover similarities. In fact, situating the letter in its context of time and place, Alphonsus wanted to produce ‘fervour’ in his companions and gave serious recommendations regarding the observance of the rules, the study of theology, and various points of religious discipline. The Institute was already experiencing some laxity as well as the departure of some members. Many reasons according to Alphonsus, which it is not necessary to detail, explain this laxity.

He thinks of them as ‘weaknesses which affect the whole community’, such as ‘offences against obedience, against poverty, against humility, against charity towards the neighbour.’ He proposes five recommendations in order to stimulate them: renewed consideration of their religious Redemptorist vocation, obedience to the local superiors, avoiding complaints to others about the superiors’ conduct, the practice of the spiritual exercises to obtain the love of Jesus-Christ and finally observance of the Rules by the present and future superiors.

If this call has been heard by the members, we must recognize in it the action of the Holy Spirit who blessed this ‘work’ in favour of the poor and the abandoned. And this work is still going on today, relying always on the strength of this same Spirit to bring the Redemption of Christ to the men and women of our times. This apostolic work relies strongly on the witness of a community life that is missionary and prophetic. This explains the great reunions of the Congregation to clarify the Redemptorist essence in order to meet the needs of each epoch.

II. The contribution of some General Chapters

The *Secretariat for Apostolic Life* is the office that deals with questions of community life. This Secretariat, which exists since 1991 is the result of the fusion of the Secretariats for Pastoral Ministry and that for Community life and is a response to the unity of apostolic life required in Constitutions 1, 21 and 46.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 374.

¹³ Letter of Saint Alphonsus, T.1. DDB, pp. 300-311. This letter was written 8 August 1754.

The intuition of this fusion will mark the future life of the Congregation and will be felt in the themes of General Chapters.

A. Spirituality as the basis of the work of the new evangelisation

1. Continuity in an explicit, prophetic and liberating proclamation of the Gospel

The expression “to evangelise the poor and allow ourselves to be evangelised by the poor” has become almost a slogan. And yet it goes back to 1985, the year when the General Chapter chose it as the theme of the sexennium. Because of its depth and its richness not yet exhausted, this theme was taken up anew in the Chapter of 1991. The courage in the choice of such a theme has upset more than one Redemptorist. In fact, it is the reversal of missionary thinking because we know that traditionally, the missionaries are the ones who bring “something” to those who are evangelised and not the contrary. Some priorities became necessary to be able to live this theme. The capitulars wanted a deepening of ‘our apostolic community life, as a new prophetic force that opens new ways to incarnate our mission’ (Final document, 1991, no 3.2). To do this, it was necessary to underline the coherence between our inculturated evangelisation, our community life and our spirituality. The General Chapter of 1997, which is particularly important for us, desired to continue this theme with a new perspective by deepening spirituality.

2. Spirituality, an important challenge for all the confreres

At the General Chapter of 1997, ‘spirituality’¹⁴ was soon recognised as a priority for the whole Congregation. In fact, the Capitulars were convinced that spirituality is essentially ‘a personal and communitarian experience of God in Jesus-Christ, by the operation of the Holy Spirit’. They asked in their name and in the name of all the other Redemptorists “in what does our commitment for the poor justify our spirituality and help us to develop a more authentic spirituality? (Final document, 1991, no. 8).

There were many reasons that led the capitulars to the choice of this theme. First of all, the Congregation was aware of an ‘excessive activism’ in the apostolate. The real motives of this apostolate no longer led to the Person of Jesus-Christ, the Redeemer, and yet ‘the place that God occupies in our life should be our main preoccupation.’¹⁵ The second hypothesis which explains the choice of this theme is related to the world after the Second Vatican Council. The

¹⁴ The word spirituality being understood by the capitulars as a life style and a manner of being and not only as a practice of prayer at certain moments of the day.

¹⁵ Acta integra capituli generalis XXIII C.Ss.R., 1997, Rome, Final Message, no. 3. We have taken inspiration from this document and from the Communicanda 1 of 1997 to treat this part.

generation prior to the Council had been formed in great part inspired by the “norms and the values proper to observance”. Whereas the years after the Council saw ‘a new anthropology and a formation adapted to it centered on the person and his freedom’.¹⁶ These criteria of judgment between the different generations brought about a dichotomy which should not have existed. For community life, some were to fight against “observance without heart” and others (the elderly) saw a new generation embarked on a road of ‘unrestrained freedom’. Spirituality then should have become the element capable of reconciling the generations and giving a new sense to freedom in community. Another reason for the choice of spirituality concerns the shock of mankind at the constant innovations and the galloping technological and scientific progress. The religious man, failing to follow the same rhythm faces the difficulty of speaking of the *sequela Christi* to a world which no longer makes reference to the divine. In these conditions, the Redemptorist needs spirituality as a salutary “ballast” to prevent him from living constantly superficially and swimming with the current so to speak.

Because of all these difficulties, the Chapter was convinced that the “profound renewal of our lives is not in proportion to our widespread activities.” Above all, it depends on our spiritual capital. And this capital must be cultivated by the community and in the community. If it is not well organised to create a favourable climate for the full blooming or development of the confreres or does not offer them a human space to express their most profound desires, on the one hand, confreres will either go off in search of other forms of spirituality or on the other hand, they will abandon the Congregation. Similarly the community will not have the least attraction for young people to enter the Congregation. “The Redemptorist community should constitute the first sign of our missionary proclamation. It is not merely the place from which we are sent but also and above all the efficacious presence of the Kingdom among men and women who in their turn reveal to us the face of God” (Final document of 1991, no. 23). This is the reason why we need to rediscover the ‘foundations’ of our spiritual life both as Redemptorists and as members of the Church and, to understand anew the structure of a life of faith and the fundamental meaning of consecration”.

B. Called to give our lives for plentiful redemption

Conscious that community of life is the first form of evangelisation and the essential law for the members, the General Chapter of 2003 recommended that in the Congregation, we should study the causes of our difficulties and the crises in our communities in order to promote the conditions in which members could strengthen the bonds that unite them to the community by promoting a project of community life.

¹⁶ Communicanda 1, Spirituality, our most important challenge, Rome, 1998, no. 10, p. 6.

1. Restructuring for the service of the mission

The transformation of the structures of the Congregation might seem as an after thought when we consider it in the light of the general theme of the Chapter which is “give our lives for plentiful redemption”. But the theme of spirituality already studied above sheds more light and particularly because it ‘questions all aspects of our consecration for the mission which include the structures by means of which we carry it out’.¹⁷ In fact, the geographical situation of the Redemptorist communities and their closeness to the poor is one of the characteristics of the Redemptorist mission. The changing conditions in our world today must compel us also to reconsider our structures so that they may serve in carrying out our present mission. The transformation of our structures is justified then by the present needs of our mission for example the poor are not necessarily there any longer where we had originally built our structures in order to be near them and carry out our missionary aim.

Saint Alphonsus, our Founder, had himself to change his position in his theological, pastoral, moral and spiritual reflections in contact with the poor and abandoned. He was to share the image of Jesus which he has discovered with his Redemptorist community, because this was ‘the first sign of the plentiful Redemption and the place where the poor could come freely to make this discovery’¹⁸. It is in this regard that the General Chapter of 2003 drew the attention of all Redemptorists to the necessity of examining our life style, our community life, the witness that each one of us gives and to reconsider in what measure our structures serve our mission.

The steps taken on restructuring begun by previous Chapters could be seen merely as a process of administrative reorganisation if we only see in it the physical aspect of Houses, local governments, or (V) Provinces. What one could understand by ‘restructuring’, is that it ‘consists fundamentally in finding new ways to organize ourselves, establishing new structures, if necessary, to respond with greater fidelity to the charism of the Congregation’¹⁹. Faced with such a project, the capitulars were conscious that each confrere needed much courage and humility and likewise each Unit if we were to allow ourselves to be disturbed in our traditional way of life. Hence, the necessity of conversion, both personal and as a community and as a (V)-Province.

Restructuring is, of course, the word selected by the General Chapter for a reform of the structures of the Congregation during the sexennium 2003-2009. As regards Africa, it would have been better to talk first of ‘structuring’. In fact, the Redemptorists who have been pioneers on the missions in Africa always

¹⁷ Communicanda 1, Give our lives for plentiful Redemption, Rome 2004, p. 4.

¹⁸ Id., p. 13.

¹⁹ Id.

recall this dark period of colonisation. Even if the continent is in a post-colonial era, nonetheless a certain reorganisation of the mission is necessary. Let us recall that it was only in 2006, that for the first time, under the initiative of the General Government, an African continental meeting was held. It brought together Provincial Superiors, four Vice-Provincials, the Superiors of two Regions and of four Units, and the majority of the Major Superiors of the mother provinces. At the end of this meeting, strong recommendations were made to put new structures in place, as well as a commission for Africa and Madagascar. The participants did not hesitate to launch a call for greater cooperation in initial formation and for the establishment of a fund for Africa and Madagascar²⁰. Even though these recommendations still await their full implementation, we must rejoice that a start has been made for the structuring of the mission in the land of Africa.

2. The meaning of religious Redemptorist consecration

The real sense of our consecration provides a greater focus for understanding the theme of the sexennium, “to give our lives for plentiful redemption”. It is through his religious consecration that the Redemptorist gives his life following the Redeemer to bring the Good News to all those who have been forgotten in the social, religious and even political priorities.

The Redemptorists are the ‘apostles of conversion’ in so far as the major objective of their preaching consists in leading the people to radically question themselves about the meaning of life, about making a decisive choice for Christ and insisting strongly and gently on a continuous and full conversion (cf. Const. 11). To this end, the Redemptorist himself needs to begin once again to affirm his own relation with the Redeemer, the model to whom he always refers in evaluating his own attitude. The Redemptorist must rediscover Christ in order to better propose Him to his contemporaries. The Redemptorists, according to Father Tobin, must be convinced that to believe in Jesus-Christ means to hope and be the object of hope; following Jesus means to let ourselves be taken over by Him and to continue his mission in history, even to the giving of our lives. “Alphonsus invites us, he continues, to rediscover the God of Jesus-Christ, a God who loves humanity passionately; a God who hears the call of the poor and does not remain indifferent to injustice.”²¹ Alphonsus is the first to show us the example by his own conversion, of his understanding of the redemption in Jesus-Christ from the perspective of the ‘abandoned’ of his time. Inadequate pictures of God were offered to his contemporaries and in this way alienating them from God. To correct these false images of God, Alphonsus fought against these distortions of the Gospel, by the practising of a pastoral ministry impregnated

²⁰ Cf. *Report of the Superior General to the XXIVth General Chapter*, no. 9.

²¹ *Communicanda 2. Redemption, Romae*, no. 33, p. 21.

with prayer and contemplation. For the founder, it is the infinite love for men that has led God to send his Son to save them from the degradation of sin (cf. Jn 3,16-17). It is the person of Jesus as Redeemer who reveals Redemption.

The Capitulars in 2003 understood that the quality of our apostolic devotion to the Redeemer depended on our faith in Jesus our Redeemer. This is the reason why they decided that a Communicanda be issued by the General Government on the theme of ‘Redemption’. The gift of our lives for plentiful redemption is signified from a new perspective of the Redemption in Jesus Christ. This Communicanda should offer to the Redemptorists the necessary elements to discern the meaning of redemption and revitalize the apostolic life (cf. Orientations 7.3 of 2003). It is one of the ways which could enable us today to avoid all temptations to conform ourselves to the life styles of the dominant culture. ‘If this temptation’, Pope John Paul II said to the capitulars, ‘ever succeeded in entering your communities you would run the risk of losing your religious spirit and your evangelising zeal’.²² Likewise the Holy Father adds, ‘to confine oneself to pastoral methods that no longer respond to the need of redemption of modern man would prevent that missionary renewal so much desired by your whole religious family’.

3. Initial and permanent formation

One of the great concerns of the XXIII General Chapter was initial and permanent formation. It was stated strongly that it was one of the most important challenges to be dealt with during the 2003-2009 sexennium. In fact, with regard to the formation which is given to the confreres in all the Units of the Congregation and particularly in Africa, much effort has been made to improve the quality. But it is so diversified from one country to another that it lacks a certain homogeneity which affects Redemptorist formation as such. Hence the preoccupation of the General Chapter to target some priorities in the Orientations. First of all collaboration between the different Units of the Congregation is necessary to face the challenges in the sphere of initial formation. To do this, Units should help each other with qualified personnel and with financial resources. A *Ratio Formationis*²³, prepared by the General Secretariat for Formation and adapted to the situation of the different Regions, will serve as suitable material in all the Units.

The content of formation itself is presented from three viewpoints. On the one hand the majority of the candidates and the student brothers are formed in

²² John Paul II, Discourse to the participants to the General Chapter of the Congregation, Friday October 3rd, 2003.

²³ A first *Ratio Formationis* was published in 2003. A Manual of Formators has just been published in 2009, where there is a variety of methods for the evaluation of candidates.

Institutes of theological formation.²⁴ From our houses of formation they go to these Institutes to do their studies in philosophy and theology in view of the sacerdotal ministry. On the other hand, while admitting the excellence of these studies the capitulars were not fully satisfied and drew the attention of the Units to the special Redemptorist formation which constitutes our identity such as moral theology, the history of the Congregation, pastoral preaching, Redemptorist spirituality, the sacrament of reconciliation in the Redemptorist tradition and formation in view of apostolic work in community. All these elements specific to the Redemptorists would be lacking to the students unless they are helped in the houses of formation. Therefore, it is necessary to have sufficient personnel in the Houses, qualified and willing to assure these different aspects of Redemptorist formation. The General Secretariat has already produced a certain amount of very useful material for Redemptorist formation and for the formators. Now it remains to overcome certain difficulties such as “provincialism” and “improvisation” in order to foster a better cooperation between the Units.

These reflections considered particularly during the last six years on the theme “to give our lives for plentiful redemption” have given rise to much interest in the Redemptorist missionary life. But the priorities have not been delved into sufficiently. As Father Tobin remarked, in the mind of many confreres, the question of restructuring seemed to take precedence over the two other priorities, that is to say religious consecration and formation.²⁵ In fact, it is only a result of the gift of giving our lives for plentiful redemption.

C. To preach the Gospel ever anew

To preach the Gospel ever anew. This was the vision of Saint Clement-Mary Hofbauer (1751-1820), the Apostle of Warsaw and Vienna in an epoch hostile to the Christian faith. By his genius, the saint knew how to proclaim the Gospel to his contemporaries in a new way and above all he was a pioneer in transplanting the Congregation outside of Italy in the North of Europe. One hundred years after his canonisation, his message is still topical. The last General Chapter of 2009 retained his method in order that all Redemptorists, with a renewed heart and renewed structures, should bring renewed hope to our contemporary world.

²⁴ For English speakers: St. Joseph’s Theological Institute Cedara in South Africa, Holy Trinity in Zimbabwe, Hekima Theological College run by the Jesuit Fathers (Kenya), the diocesan Major Seminary of Ss. Peter and Paul (Ibadan, Nigeria). For French speakers: Théologat Eugène de Mazenod (RDCongo) and La Maison Lavignerie (White Fathers) as well as the Saint John the Baptist Major Seminary in Ougadougou (Burkina Faso).

²⁵ *Report of the Superior General to the XXIVth General Chapter*, no. 13.

1. Recalling the process of restructuring started during the last sexennium

The last General Chapter requested that a Central Commission be appointed to consider reflections on the question of the restructuring of the Congregation. The fruits of this reflection conducted in collaboration with the (V)Provinces and the Units show the common interest that all of us have in the future of our mission. It was understood that this restructuring had as its object for us Redemptorists, to place our present structures (General Government, (V)Provinces, Chapters, Regions and formation, etc) at the service of our mission. The basic reasons for this restructuring are at the same time both theological and practical. We live in a completely changed world with an exponential rhythm in every domain and in every milieu. This is the result of globalisation making the world a planet village. Today, the internet is evidently the principal method of spreading knowledge and of intercommunication between people. Clearly the new technologies of information and of communication change life styles, and the manner of acting and thinking of human beings. Even though all these changes open new opportunities, they also create disparities between people. Faced with such a situation, one cannot but recognize that ‘this universally globalised world has urgent need of evangelising in the strict sense’.²⁶ This evangelisation cannot be considered merely at a ‘local’ level, but at a greater and international dimension. In short: to think globally. Modern means of communications must be accepted as a blessing! Is not the Church catholic right from the beginning, meaning universal?

This new form of evangelisation requires internal changes that are particularly urgent in formation, as well as a spirit of cooperation, availability and efficiency on mission and ever renewed conversion.

2. A step towards a radical conversion

Conversion is first of all the work of God. He changes direction by turning to us as St. John says ‘It is not we who have loved God, it is he who has loved us and who sent his Son as an offering for our sins’ (1 Jn 4.10). God literally ‘turns himself’ towards mankind because of his infinite love. It is from him that we have the title of ‘apostles of conversion’ (Const. 11), because we proclaim the mystery of the redemption of Christ to mankind inviting them to the conversion of hearts. This invitation, however, is first of all a personal one, given that we entered the Congregation to ‘become saints’ according to the words of the Founder himself and therefore to be converted. The words and expressions regarding conversion abound in our Constitutions. We read of ‘*a continual and total conversion*’, ‘*conversion of heart*’, ‘*necessary conversion*’, ‘*interior conversion*’, ‘*conversion of the community*’, (Const.11, 41, 42, 54). As

²⁶ *Instrumentum laboris XXIV General Chapter, No 10*

a background to all these expressions there is a theological truth that shows that conversion is not only a stepping stone towards discipleship. Conversion is rather a compass for the disciple on his way to sanctity, a constituent element of his being. For us, Redemptorists, continual conversion should have a spiritual structure in our lives if we really wish by our ministry to lead others to take the same step. Furthermore our Constitutions give a community dimension to the concept of conversion. Our personal conversion will have an influence on the community of which we are a member. It is as a community working together that we are continually called to renew it from within by constant progress and the community as such must give effective witness in order to grow continually towards that total generosity with which it should respond to the Word of God (cf. Const. 40. 42). This continual conversion is in line with keeping an eye on the signs of the time so that we develop and adapt our forms of missionary activity to concrete situations. As the XXIV General Chapter declares in its message ‘the more radical our conversion the more prophetic will be our *Vita apostolica*’.

3. The prophetic renewal of apostolic life

Most Rev. Fr. General, Michael Brehl, in the Preface to the final documents of the last General Chapter wrote that ‘to be prophetic is to scrutinize the signs of the times both personally and as a community and then to live and act according to the call of God in the present moment and contemporary circumstances’. There have been many reflections made already to help us find new inspiration during this sexennium in our *vita consecrata*. It is up to us to scrutinize the signs of the times on a personal level and it is evident that each one in his own apostolic milieu is an observer of daily events such as situations of oppression, of injustice and of material and spiritual poverty. At community level each person reports on what he has experienced so that his personal concern becomes a community concern perceived and borne by all.

The first stage is to be an acute observer, aware of the alarming situations of the poor, the marginalized, those excluded from society, the abandoned. We share their pain and their suffering. We are following our vocation in the help which we try to bring them according to our means. We are close to the victims in love because we are known for our nearness to people especially the poor and the most abandoned. We give witness in our characteristic ministry of mercy, pardon and reconciliation. What is more difficult in this task, however, is to attack the root of this evil, to denounce injustice, the systems which oppress minorities and to educate people to a knowledge of their rights. In short to be in some way leaders of hope! Nonetheless we must remember that we are not competent in everything and the people of God do not expect this from us. What they do expect, however, is to see in us men of faith, hope and charity.

Then we must learn how to collaborate with those who are competent, priests or laity, since it is in union with those other workers on the Mission that we can support each other. If Jesus could say 'I send you like sheep among wolves; be therefore wise as serpents and as innocent as doves' (Mt. 10,16) it was because he himself had endured hostility. However he went forward among men with the wisdom of his Father. The competence of the apostle of Christ lies in the meditation of this wisdom. Supported by it and enlightened by the work of initial and continual formation (theology, moral, the bible etc) the Redemptorist should not be afraid because God so loved the world that he gave it his only Son.

III. COMMUNITY “RENEWED” FOR THE *VITA APOSTOLICA*

The *vita apostolica* is intimately bound up with community life. It is the community in which the confreres live which concretely carries on missionary work. To preach continually in an up to date manner today depends absolutely on the renewed community, the result of a constant renewal of hearts. It is in this way that each community, Unit, (V)Province of the Congregation and particularly in Africa and Madagascar can open its personal vision to larger horizons for greater collaboration with others. Some practical means would be necessary to carry out the decisions taken during the General Chapter for this sexennium 2009-2015.

A. Confreres together for an apostolic community

As an African adage says 'one finger alone cannot gather up the flour'. It requires several, provided that they get together to do it. The spirit of the apostolic community is to be considered from this point of view. Being together in a community, living the religious life and proclaiming redemption, Redemptorists must follow the way of personal conversion which makes the apostolic community credible. This harmonious existence is like an attractive perfume in the measure in which the search for God and innovations are the leitmotiv of each confrere.

1. From personal conversion to the community apostolate

a) Community witness by conversion

It is sometimes difficult to open up the question of conversion lest we challenge acquired rights or a lifestyle regarded as "untouchable". And yet it is the case of Alphonsus who was converted by the situation of the poor and the marginalised. Fr. John O'Donnell in his reflections on the Constitutions remarked: 'Conversion is not a hidden event; it should be expressed by the exterior conformity of our life and that of the world with what we believe to be

the design of God' (28). It is never an easy step to take but it is salvific always causing tension within us. The grace of this conversion is given to us by God who calls us to cooperate with him in his work of salvation. We cannot preach conversion unless we ourselves are converted each day.

Called to be guided by the essential law of life which for us as religious and Redemptorists consists in living and working as a community (Const. 21) it is clear that one develops certain personal attitudes which could build up a community, attention and mutual confidence. The community can only give to each one what he himself has brought to it. Cultivating good interpersonal relations is a sign of evangelical witness in community.

This of course requires much patience and detachment in order to overcome eventual tensions. We may regret the fact that we have to live with one or other confrere. As Simon-Pierre Arnold said, "the secret of that community happiness which we seek on entering religious life is to be found in a mysterious cocktail of love, truth and mercy seasoned with infinite patience."(29).

b) Called to be "good news"

The confreres with whom we live in community are, each one 'good news' for us. In the community we expect others to receive us such as we are, with our history, our culture and our whole person. At the same time we welcome in them as good news what makes them different from us, their culture, their history, their feelings, their different perception of reality and even their understanding of God. When choosing his apostles Christ did not take their relationships into account, even if there were brothers among them or that some knew each other intimately. This is proved by the differences that arose among them. However, it did not prevent them from leading the life of a missionary community. When it was question of preaching the Word, their personal interests took second place and gave way to the place of the Spirit who guided them. Thanks to them the Good News has come down to us through all the generations. The Good News has been confided to us to preach plentiful redemption. Is not this a prophetic sign for us according to the words of our new Fr. General Michael Brehl, 'when we stand in solidarity with peoples and confreres who differ from us in culture, language, race and ethnicity and we give this witness of solidarity in a world still divided by chauvinism, racism, tribal mentality and nationalism'(30). We are held in honour by the faithful who call us 'Father' 'Brother'. It is up to us to effectively honour this beautiful title so that the confreres with whom we live in community can recognise in us *their* brother.

2. Communities with the odour of perfume

a) Searching for God together

It is not easy to attempt a description of religious consecration since each religious vocation is unique. No call of God resembles another. However, every call is made to the Church and to a particular community. In company with others the religious begins his search for Christ, the centre of the community and the source of mission and fraternal union. Each one with his personal history, his image of God, meets Christ in contemplation in order to live his faith and relate to the others. In order to understand our relations in community let us attempt to analyse our belief in God (31). As a matter of fact we do not all have the same ideas about God. For some he is far away while for others he is quite close. God is for some the 'Saviour'; for others the great 'Organiser' or the 'Repairer' of the disorders caused by the sins of mankind. Other people see him as the God who is so concerned with the poor that he draws close to them (cf. 2Cor. 3, 14-18) and even merges with them. There can be tension in a community on the basis of faith due to an exaggerated idea of God. The modern world has other ideas of God – the silent God – the God who withdraws so that man may seek him like the disciples of Emmaüs. God is hidden so one may do what one likes. There are also those who can have the three ideas of God. Incidentally in our community meetings is it not the God of solidarity that unites us? When we make a retreat we search in solitude for the absent and hidden God. If he withdraws so that we may go in search of him he challenges us to respond to the question 'for you who am I'? The absent God leaving the tomb empty meets us in Galilee, in community, in our hearts, in the new types of poverty, in the new structures. He awaits us there. So faith is not lost; we admit that there is a change of ideas and the way people imagine God. We have sometimes even to evangelise our images of God. When we examine our own images it enables us to understand ourselves and others in order to get rid of our interests and personal sensibilities and of our religious manners in order to welcome the confreres. This is the way of sanctity following the Redeemer. Pope John Paul II was concerned about this when he said to us in 2003: "The search for sanctity should be the base of every pastoral programme and your communities should be seen as "oases" of mercy and welcome, as schools of intense prayer which at the same time are not detached from history".

b) Foundation communities

The community is the real place in which to found an Institute because its life is inseparable from mission. The mission is carried out concretely by the members who form the community. Gislain Lafont does not hesitate to state with other theologians that the community is a 'laboratory' where one strives to live new evangelical experiences (32). Are not restructuring or structuring new evangelical experiences just as the historical evolution of the Congregation experienced changes? When the missionary community is innovative it forms a new identity inspired by the patrimony of our Institute. Our innovations must be such that each community becomes a founding one in the sense that community

life is the place where one must envisage the future of our Institute and where one plans new beginnings and the contemporary identity of the Congregation in creative fidelity (33). The way we speak of religious life to those around us depends on the way we speak of God. We propose our Redemptorist religious life to those who desire to share it by the quality of our community life sensed like the odour of an attractive perfume.

Moreover our Institute like others has been the means of bringing the faith to many other lands and founding local Churches, where we are still actively present. It is clear that our presence is still indispensable especially in those areas where the faith is not firmly established. Whatever the status of our communities, (parishes, residences or formation centres), our presence plays a missionary role and is a stimulus for that local Church. This role becomes more specific for us Redemptorists in the African context where the last Synod invited the Church in Africa to be at the service of reconciliation, of justice and peace. Is not this theme one of the prerogatives of our charism? So far we have made a theoretical reflection on the prophetic role of community life in a new form of evangelising. Now in the following lines we provide some more practical reflections on our *vita apostolica* for the Conference of Africa and Madagascar whose impact will depend on our attitudes to conversion both on the personal level and on the level of community and vice-provincial.

B. The Africa and Madagascar Network (AMN)

At the last General Chapter the continent of Africa and Madagascar took priority among the decisions made. The General Government and all the other groups have particular interest in the future of the Congregation which is in full expansion in this postcolonial continent. Africa is delighted to be aware that we are not abandoned nor isolated but sustained and supported. As a Burkina Faso proverb puts it ‘when someone washes your back you clean your chest yourself’. It is up to us to encourage the good will of others by our personal involvement and that of both the Vice-Province and Conference in putting in place the new structures which favour the preaching of the Gospel in a manner always new.

1. Celebrating community

a) Feasts of the communities and Units

Our pastoral preoccupations make us forget sometimes some events in the Congregation or occasions marking the life of a confrere. Let us take for example the Feasts of our Saints and Beati or indeed the birthdays of confreres. Several communities have calendars marking these feasts and birthdays. This practice could be more widespread on the level of Vice-Provinces and on the

level of the Conference. There is no question here of establishing a cult of confreres nor of increasing expenses for these feasts. These calendars will have for their principal object the manifestation of a spirit of fraternity, of solidarity among confreres and of being mindful especially of them in prayer.

b) Inter-community visits or meetings

Fraternity could be expressed by visits or intercommunity meetings when the occasion permits. These could be moments for the exchange of ideas on moral theology, on biblical themes or on our Constitutions. There should be time as well for prayer and meditation and for sharing missionary joys and concerns.

c) Correspondence (write, read, reply)

Letter writing has become rather rare with the arrival of the Internet, except for those who have not electricity or Internet. The latter is a wonderful means for rapid communication. We should take advantage of it and be prompt in writing, reading and replying. It is inconvenient that some countries have frequent break downs in electricity. Of course there is also the telephone which serves us well on missions.

2. Learning languages

The establishment of the African and Madagascar Network brings up the matter of communication. We cannot collaborate if we are like deaf people, so we must study the languages of the people in our missions. It is indispensable today to have knowledge of English and French as well as Portuguese or Spanish if we are to have proper exchanges and communication.

3. Redemptorist communications

In four Vice-Provinces, there are Redemptorist publications and communications. These are the magazines; *Redemptorist publication* Zimbabwe, *Le Lien* in Burkina-Niger, *Le lien catholique* in South Africa and a radio station in the Congo – *Radio Vuvu Kieto* (Our Hope). These means of evangelisation give great service not only to the people but also to the Congregation. However, there are difficulties. There is evidently a lack of sufficient finance that limits their effectiveness. One of the bigger problems is getting articles for publication. Those who work in these publications solicit us to produce articles for the issues but very often we do not comply with their demand. It would be worth considering to what extent our different publications might be diffused in all the Vice-Provinces and Units in Africa and Madagascar and how all might participate in their production.

4. Web Site RAM

The African and Madagascar Network (RAM) could set up a Web Site which could provide access to news from the different Vice-Provinces and Units, and a lot of other information. It could be a useful tool for evangelisation and even for vocation promotion for young people who are familiar with the Internet. Competent confreres or specialists could be acquired for the inception, location and management of this Web Site.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

To preach the Gospel always in a new way. Such has been the leitmotif of the preceding lines. At first we endeavoured to analyse Redemptorist life today. This analysis led us to examine St. Alphonsus and the first Redemptorists on the ideal of the missionary community life they envisaged for the Congregation. History shows, however, that this ideal has not always been attained. Hence the role of the higher instances of the Congregation such as General Chapters to recall the first intuition of St. Alphonsus who had an overwhelming experience of the abundant love of God for humanity. As a result of his experience and having seen the abandoned state of the poor especially in the rural areas he decided to come to their aid. If we are the heirs of all that our predecessors have done we are all the more today in our turn 'founders' for future generations by our community intuitions which derive from our loving experience of the redemption of Christ. From this daily lived experience we cry out like St. Paul 'woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel (1Cor. 9, 16) in response to the needs of the Church and society in every epoch. We Redemptorists have committed ourselves in this sexennium 2009-2015 to preach the Gospel in renewed hope, with renewed hearts and with renewed structures for the mission. Nonetheless beyond all these words and convictions about our common responsibility the secret of success lies with the Holy Spirit who goes before us on our mission and opens the door. Our personal conversion witnessed by our life will provide the key to open the second door of this new evangelisation. Then we shall go forward personally and as a missionary community in complete confidence with Christ our Redeemer.

Annexe: Profile of the Redemptorist in the new context of restructuration

The principles of restructuration want to guarantee the continuity of our basic identity and mission as Redemptorists in the Church and in the world. At the same time they require new systems and new structures that will give a new freshness and thrust to our mission and identity.

This is what the document (*Instrumentum laboris: Restructuration for the mission – Hope in Action*) has tried to bring about. It proposes and recommends certain structures. But what about the human dimension? What follows is the profile of what a confrere might be in the newly structured Congregation.

This confrere will have participated in an international Novitiate for different Units normally in the same Conference. He will have rubbed shoulders with confreres from other countries, cultures and different languages. During his initial formation he will get to know the charism of the Congregation and the values and apostolates of his own Unit. He will have learned from our history that renewal and restructuring have always been present and necessary for the continuity of our mission. Taking his vows he will commit himself to the whole Congregation and not simply to his own Unit. In practice this commitment will be carried out in his Unit and in the Conference to which his Unit belongs. In other words he must have a wider understanding of the changing circumstances, the human situations and the apostolic priorities not only of his own Unit but of the whole Conference to which his Unit belongs. For example he must know the immigrant phenomenon within the geographical region of his Conference. Another example, he must be capable of participating in the apostolate of Redemptorist Sanctuaries within the Conference, a growing apostolate because of the modern phenomenon of popular religious devotions. Above all he will know that he belongs to and participates voluntarily in the global mission of the Congregation that is taking seriously the challenge to be attentive to the signs of the times and taking vital apostolic decisions in response to the demands of the mission.