

Congregation of the Sacred Hearts  
of Jesus and Mary

September 2009

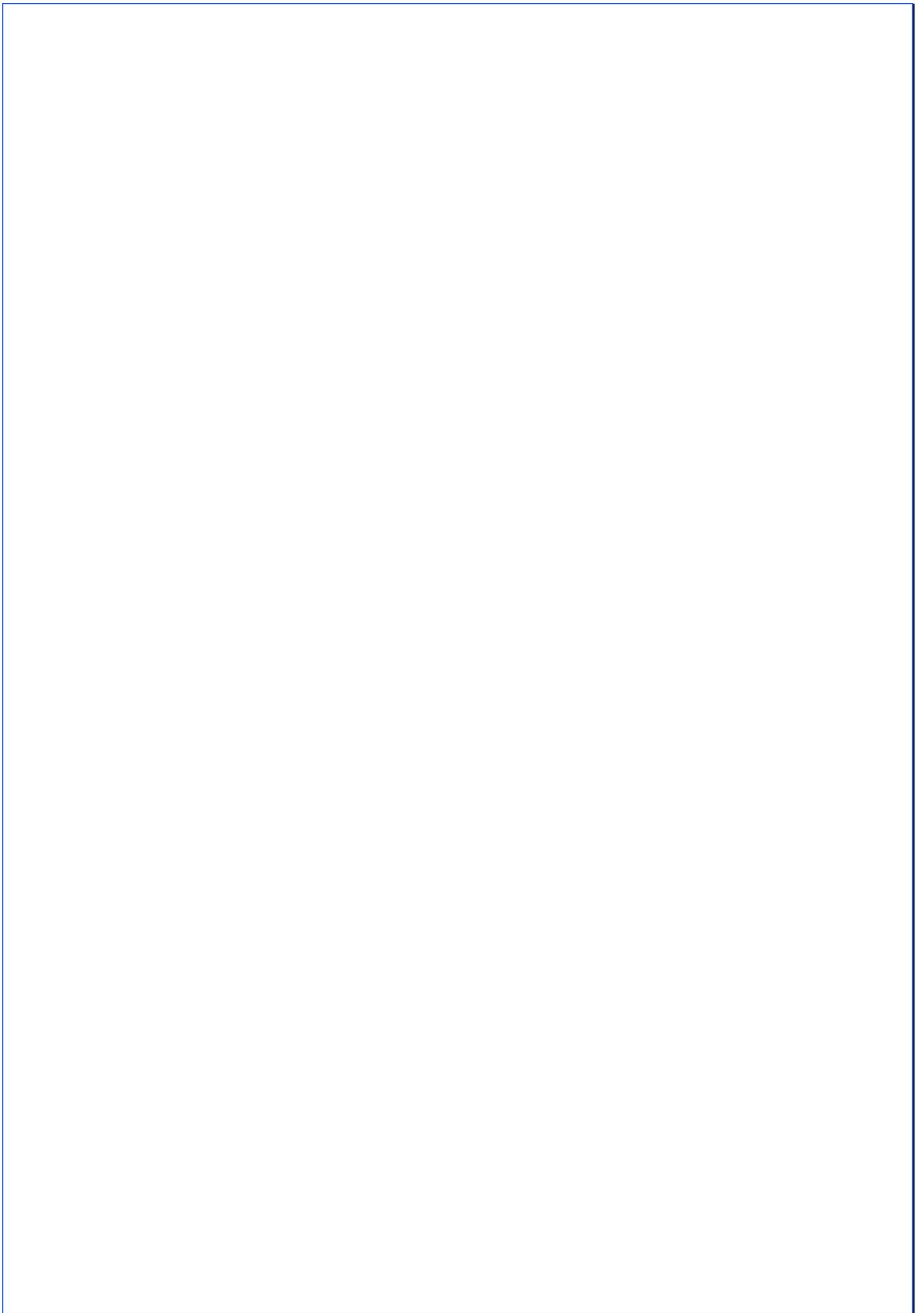


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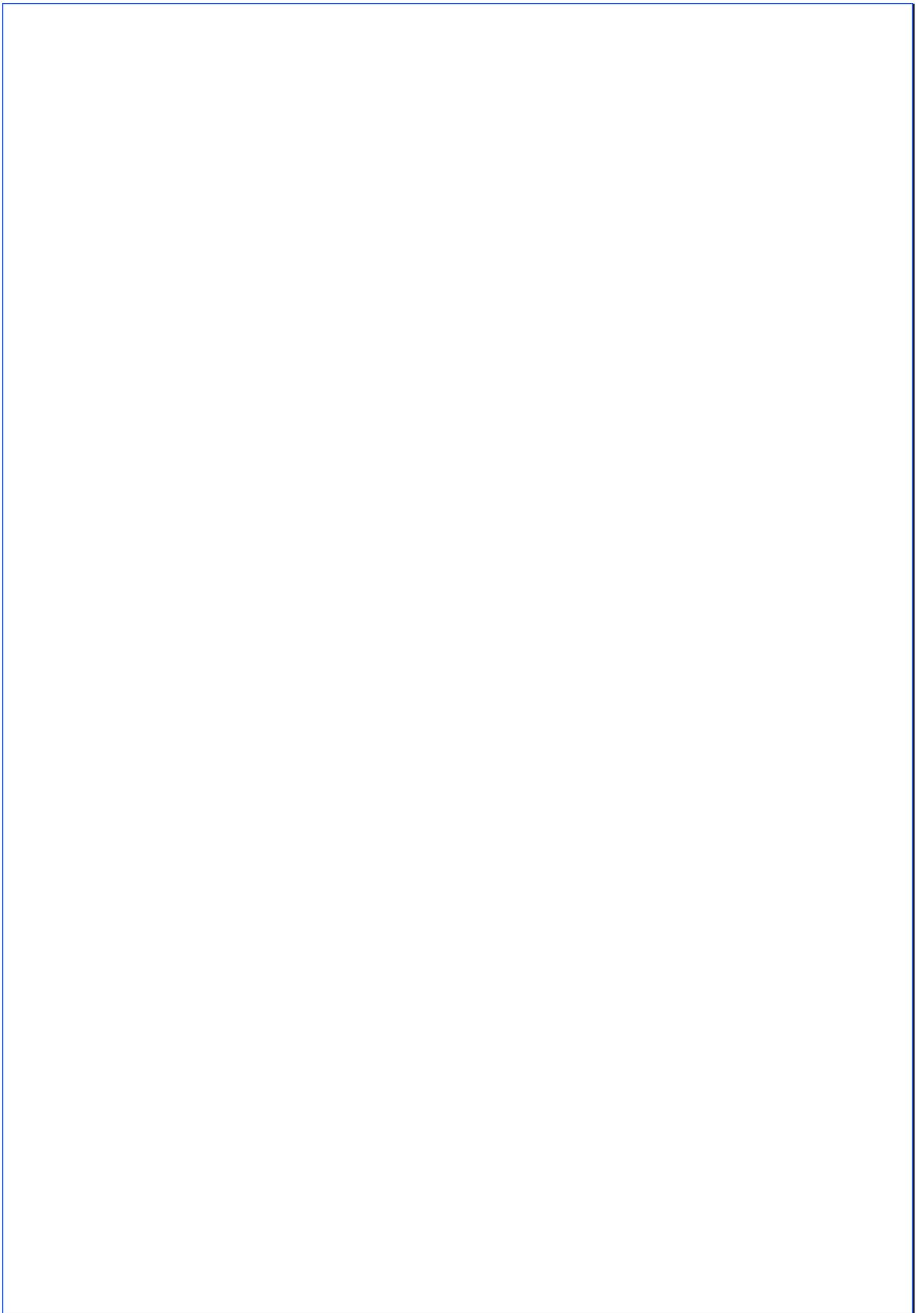


*The past 20 years  
of the Congregation*



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# Introduction

*October 2009*

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Thinking of religious life in the last twenty years means remembering all that has happened since the approval of the Constitutions, renewed in the light of Vatican II, up to the present.

Before that, during the period “ad experimentum” religious life was trying to understand and assimilate what it was supposed to do in light of the ecclesiology of Vatican II, leaving behind the usages, practices and lifestyle of what was called “a state of perfection.”

At the same time, thinking of the last twenty years makes us aware of the profound social, political and economic changes that have taken place in our world and the influence those changes have had on us as individuals and communities.

We could say that the last twenty years have been marked by a new sensitivity created by the centrality that God’s Word has come to have in our prayer. This new sensitivity is also the fruit of our search for God’s presence in the ambiguity of our world, where by our solidarity with today’s poor we want to be signs of the presence of God.

Because of the renewing power of the Spirit, this has been a time of conversion in which we have heard a call to go deeper. In these years we have grown in an awareness of our common mission and the need to give that expression in our plans of religious life. This has been a time of greater diversity and pluralism because of the community has become more international. Internationality is seen as a value which challenges us to give witness that the brother/sisterhood that unites us is stronger than all our differences.

In these years we have discovered the richness of working with members of other congregations and other religions and the need to be open to types of apostolate beyond the traditional ones of our own works.

This has been a time in which the vitality of the charism has also inspired laity with whom we are in communion, their life choices different than ours and yet complementary.

In these years we have lost social status in many places and that has made us “powerless” but it has also given us the flexibility to try to find new answers to the new challenges that our societies present.

Listening to the desires and hopes that beat in the hearts of the men and women of this time, we have tried to discern where the Spirit is manifest and to respond simply but seriously. And this has shown us that it is possible to live in another way and the Reign of God is still present among us and still to come in its fullness.

Affectionately in the Sacred Hearts



Rosa Mª Ferreiro ss.cc.  
*Superior General*



Javier Álvarez-Ossorio ss.cc.  
*Superior General*



## HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONGREGATION?

*Paweł Wiech ss.cc.*



The question above leads us to take a critical view of the qualities of our individual vocation and our personal relation to the SSCC community. It is only through its members that the community can develop - or in some cases - fail to do so.

The SSCC constitutions state that simplicity and a family spirit are key elements of the relationships in the international community, which aims to be open to all nationalities. The 7<sup>th</sup> Article in particular has been the guide for growth and development in our community and its provinces.

However, when looking back on my 17 years in the Polish Province of the SS.CC., I can easily recall negative incidents or examples of behavior that could have affected the community in a negative way. Therefore, I would like to draw attention to two important issues regarding the development of a community. The first issue is the sense of community and of belonging to the International SS.CC. Community.

The sense of community is a living thing, and is therefore always changing. In my opinion, over the past few years our communities have gone from only being a place to live, into being something more - a place in which to grow and learn, and a place where family values such as trust, mutual responsibility and dependence are remarkably strong. I see this transformation as a continuous process. It will never end, because it is a process of never ending conversion and of continuous return to our roots and sources.

There are those who for some reason oppose, or do not wish to be a part of the process of change. They should however, understand that a well-functioning community is not a threat to their freedom – a true community is open to all.

The second element which is undergoing noticeable change is the awareness of being a SS.CC. Brother. Up until now, the main emphasis in our lives and in our work has been the efforts we make in parishes. Due to this, community life has suffered and often has been a second priority, if a priority at all. During the past few years, this trend has turned. It has become important to be a SS.CC. brother first and foremost. Only in that way can the community in which we live, give direction to our involvement and commitment in the local church. The degree of commitment to our work depends solely on us. It rests on our individual vocation which should be seen as a gift to the community and also to the Church.

The second issue I would like to highlight regarding the development of a community, is the fact that much too little is said about the successes we achieve when preaching the Gospel. To preach seems to be a given task, a fulfillment of the duties to which we are called. Yet we make a mistake when we fail to make our preaching a topic of discussion and evaluation. Speaking of the successes in evangelization is not a matter of self-praise or pride. It is rather a help to realizing that it is Christ – he who called us - that works through us when we preach the Gospel. When speaking of the successes of preaching the Holy Word, we give testimony to the power of the gospel to remedy all crises.

The joy that comes from a fulfilled mission, to which the Church has called us through the SSCC community, awakens hope inside the community; a hope that Christ works through us. It is a hope that he changes the world, and gives hope to the people using us as his tools. Only this hope can awaken new vocations to our community. However, in order to achieve that, it is important to start with oneself. In our province, the dedication of each brother to the community is noticeable through activities such as retreats and missions in parishes, through work with youth, and different other groups. This work and the radiant joy that comes from preaching the Gospel are sure to have a strong appeal and be attractive. Anything else is impossible, as this is the natural way that the Gospel of Jesus Christ works.

The unique way that the gospel has in remedying crises, brings us to think about the nature of the crisis. It has become a highly popular term today, yet truth be told, the term "crisis" is non-existent in the liturgy, as well as in the very life of the Church. It has nothing to do with Christianity. It has nothing to do with the preaching of the joyful word and salvation.

The term 'crisis' comes from the lay-sphere where all things are calculated in visible, tangible and material gains - that is in things which can be touched, measured, and which give satisfaction. Even happiness tends to be measured in gains, and joy and future are viewed through the prism of economy.

Unfortunately, the economic crisis which gravely affects the world today also affects the Church and our community. This seems to be nothing else than a case of the individual loss of faith in the power of the Gospel, the immortality of the message of God's love, which is manifested in the hearts of Jesus and Mary – the message which our community carries out into the world.

Therefore, Brothers and Sisters SS.CC. let us return to the source of our vocation, the joy of following the Savior in the spirit of the Sacred Hearts. Let us not speak of crisis, in fact there isn't one - as long as we are faithful in Christ and as long as we are faithful to the spirituality of our Founders.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONGREGATION 1989 – 2009

Columban, Kevin Crotty ss.cc.



My assignment was to reflect on the development of the Congregation during the past twenty years. I can only reflect on the life of the Congregation in the areas in which I have some familiarity, which are the East Coast province and the areas of Asia where the province is involved.

*Twenty years ago I was assigned as pastor to the parish of St. Margaret of Scotland in Seat Pleasant, Maryland, in the archdiocese of Washington, DC, which had recently been committed to the care of the Congregation. This was part of a well-thought-out plan of the province. Following General Chapter recommendations, the East Coast provincial chapter decided to make serious changes in our existing parochial ministries, to expand our outreach to the Hispanic community and develop our ministry to youth. Changes in our parochial ministry involved returning well-established and affluent parishes in the Cape Cod area of the diocese of Fall River and moving into ministries among minorities and more needy people. After considerable research the province council opted for a parish in the Washington area because of the reasons mandated by the Chapter, but also influenced by the fact that we had a house of studies there and a location for ministry would be available for the students. After consultation with the community the archbishop assigned the parish of St Margaret, which had a predominantly African-American population, to the congregation. To expand the Hispanic ministry already underway in the Brownsville diocese in Texas, a parish in the archdiocese of Boston was chosen in consultation with our Sisters, where a team of brothers and sisters were assigned. A separate apostolate to youth proved more difficult to conceptualize*

These decisions were a major development in the mission of the East Coast Province. Relinquishing the pastoral care of the majority of our parishes in the diocese of Fall River was a very difficult step for the brothers involved and also for the parishioners because, over 80 or 90 years, close bonds of friendship and trust had been established and parting was painful. Moving into ministry in the Washington archdiocese in a different milieu was also a step in faith for the province but was seen as a response to the signs of the times. The process of choosing a place for our expanded Hispanic ministry was also a new development for the province; it involved collaboration with the Sisters branch and also with the other two American provinces in a preliminary Community in Mission venture. Because it was a new venture, agreement on a mutually acceptable place proved difficult but eventually the brothers and sisters together chose a small predominantly Hispanic parish in Boston and collaborative ministry began. The project in Boston was initially life giving for the people of the parish and for the brothers and sisters involved and helped to make the congregation aware of the difficulties, material and legal faced by immigrants in the United States. After some years, due to personnel shortage, the work was returned to the archdiocese. This decision of the provincial chapter to expand our Hispanic ministry reflected our understanding of the growth of the Catholic Hispanic population in the United States and the need to respond to it. Whether adequate steps were taken to provide and train sufficient people in the language and culture of the Spanish-speaking people has been debated. The province has consistently been aware of and seen the need for

involvement in youth ministry but, apparently, has never really had a well-thought out and effective project that moved the province to act. In recent years some brothers in parochial ministry have initiated teen programs that are proving effective.

In 1989, a comprehensive three-year study of vowed religious life in the American Catholic Church was initiated. Almost 10,000 religious, sisters, brothers and religious order priests were contacted. The results of the study were published in 1992. Some province members were involved in this study of religious life and there were meetings throughout province to reflect and share on the study.

The authors of the study David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis, CSJ called religious orders to “a radical following of the gospel; a return to their foundation purposes and a development of new ways of responding to unmet needs.” Religious orders had a ten-year window of opportunity to make the necessary changes. After ten years if there were no changes religious life in the United States would enter into an irreversible decline. The study also concluded that Individualism was a major threat to religious life in the United States especially among religious who had been formed in the 1960 – 1970’s “which affected the meaning and expression of membership in religious congregations.” (Ukeritis) Another weakness pointed out in the study was a loss of corporate identity, which made it difficult to focus resources – material and emotional – on a congregation’s expression of the gospel message; a clear expression of the charism, or on some unmet needs in society.

The provincial council agreed that the conclusions of the study applied to the brothers of the East Coast province also. Serious efforts were made to respond to the recommendations of the Nygren/Ukeritis report and to the decisions of our General Chapters. This was implemented especially through a Province Plan, which could be called a self-study of the province: a process to enable the community to make a radical gospel commitment and respond to the unmet needs of society. Questionnaires were sent out to all the members, who first met in local areas and then all came together for series of meetings. There was intense sharing sessions where brothers spoke of experiences in their present ministries and where they felt called to be in the future. If the province has not achieved what was hoped for in religious life commitment and apostolic outreach it was not because of lack of effort.

There is evidence that individualism has diminished in the province and the same seems to be true of other areas of the Congregation. In our recent provincial chapter there was a strong sense of unity expressed regarding the need for a communal response to our present situation and the sharing of our charism through a preaching apostolate centered in Wareham. This is also expressed in our dealings with the areas in Asia in which we are involved. While it was painful for the East Coast Province to sever our direct ties with our brothers in Japan we rejoiced in the opportunity for new growth in their new alliance with the community in the Philippines.

The loss of a sense of identity, which affects many religious congregations in the United States, affects us also and may have resulted in a kind of inferiority complex both as to the value of religious life in itself and our particular contribution to it. While we profess that “the consecration to the Sacred Hearts is the foundation of our institute” (Constitutions #2) there seems to be a certain embarrassment in the proclamation of this reality as if Sacred Hearts spirituality is somehow passé. Is there any significance in the fact that we universally talk about SS.CC. spirituality rather than the spirituality of the Sacred Hearts? We do not normally read about OFM or OP spirituality. A couple of years ago the retreat master who conducted our annual retreat centered on the spirituality of the Sacred Heart, but we failed to take the time to reflect on it among ourselves as a community. The upcoming canonization of Blessed Damien,

the beatification of Eustaquio and the upcoming beatification of the Spanish martyrs should help to strengthen us in the validity of our charism and restore our sense of identity as a community with a valid mission in the contemporary church

Two other important realities absorbed the time, energy and resources of the province during this time: the ageing of the membership of the province and the child molestation scandal. The membership of the province was getting older and there was an obvious need to provide for retiring members of the province. After several studies the provincial chapter mandated that a retirement home be provided at Fairhaven. A capital campaign was initiated, a project in which the province was had little or no experience. However, there was universal cooperation among the brothers a very fine facility for the elderly completed and the 'monastery' became "Damien Residence." While the care of the elderly is something to be justifiably proud of, the question may be asked why the same unity of purpose and energy could not be invested in the promotion of vocations to the Congregation. At this time a dark cloud had begun to appear over the Catholic Church in the United States; the priest/youth sexual molestation scandal which in time would have a devastating effect on Catholic Church life in the United States. Like most dioceses and religious congregations we were also involved in this tragedy. Where accusations were raised, however, the province was careful not to reassign personnel to ministry without adequate investigation.

When the American province was first assigned a mission in Japan it became the exclusive responsibility of the province. The Superior General initially gave letters of obedience, but personnel and financial support came from the province. In recent years there has been a great development in this area and the personnel of the newly created Japan/Philippine province is an example of this, with the personnel including eight different nationalities. As a priority project of the Congregation the Philippines also receives financial support from various provinces through the General Government. In India, which is a region of the East Coast province, a brother from the Spanish province and another from the Polish province have been in leadership positions in the region and both of these provinces together with the Sisters province in Spain have contributed generously to the financial development of the region. A similar situation exists in the African province where there is international collaboration both in personnel and finances. The expansion of the congregation in Asia and Africa fostered a significant development of collaboration between the two branches of the brothers and sisters. Close collaboration between the two branches, the brothers and sisters, has occurred in the Philippines, India and Indonesia. And also, I understand in the Congo and Mozambique. This is seen as a development of the initial charism of the Congregation and has been beneficial to both branches and to the development of the apostolate.

During the past twenty years we have seen the Congregation developing and increasing in numbers in Asia and Africa while it is ageing and diminishing in personnel in the United States and Europe, Ageing and diminishing in numbers, however, does not mean diminishment in other areas of religious life. Here in the East Coast province there is a spirit of serving rather than being served and even the oldest brothers are willing to put the needs of the People of God beyond their own needs. Over the past twenty years there has been a growth in concern for the poor and powerless and a more compassionate approach to the weak both in society and in the church. There is generosity in concern and support for the missions and the international community. There is little sense of pessimism in the province but I would suggest that rather than being optimistic about the future we live in hope. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of new life. (Spe Salvi # 2)

## EVOLUTION OF THE CONGREGATION IN THE LAST 20 YEARS

*María Pía Lafont ss.cc.*



With a certain apprehension and with pleasure I pause, I put aside what I am living at present and in the silence of my heart, I recall in order to put myself in the year 1989.

I am in Rome where I have lived precious years of personal growth in the following of Jesus and in love for the Congregation, through so many lived experiences with brothers and sisters, committed to the SS.CC. Mission in different places in the world and in very diverse circumstances, but always with the vision and conviction of knowing themselves servants and witnesses of the Love of our God.

We have a common feeling; the desire to walk together ahead in the path of renewal, in fidelity to the call of the Church during Vatican II Council, and to the demands of our Constitutions, expression of how we want to live our SS.CC. vocation for the Church and the world.

The General Chapter of 1988 has just finished, that had the theme was: "The mission urges, the Spirit guides us" In El Escorial, the two Chapters of Brothers and Sisters were simultaneous, and the assembly approved in unanimity the 1<sup>st</sup> Chapter of the Constitutions common for the two branches.

The projects of the Congregation in Asia are welcomed and supported by the Chapter and the Congregation is implanted in Africa. The lay SS.CC. communities of the Secular Branch, are part of our vocation and mission.

In this General Chapter there is depth and enthusiasm for the life of the Congregation because the Sisters have already received and accepted the important options and decisions of the 1979 and 1983 Chapters. In them the Spirit manifested itself and action in the delegates because they then felt the urgency to initiate a serious renewal of the Congregation, to be able to respond to the great problems of the world and the Church.

In this climax and atmosphere the Congregation as a whole took the evangelical option for the poor. They saw the need to have a government of animation and participation to facilitate a deep change in the lifestyle, in the mission, the formation and the government.

The return to the sources, so that in fidelity to our origins, our founders, we may be able to do the job of elaborating the new Constitutions and the possibility to come up with a common chapter for brothers and sisters. The redaction of the new SS.CC. mission takes form in the apostolic community, a new way of being in a presence committed to the reality around.

The presence of the Spirit is evident and its action felt in the persons as they stay open to receive the orientations of the further General Chapters, that with no doubt will continue to illuminate and strengthen the way to renewal and conversion. I point out in a special way the documents:

- The profile of the SS.CC. religious woman, called to give life always and everywhere.

- The insistent call to a coherent life in order to become apostolic communities.
- The quality of our relationships and life in the communities.

We are reaffirmed in our SS.CC. Identity and in the true meaning of our common Vocation and Mission in the world that brings up the challenge of: “living a prophetic and testimonial religious life that proclaims the redemptive Love and that denounces all the goes against human life, having the poor as the reference for our life and Mission.”

Coming to this point I see myself today, in the now, in the reality of the year 2009 and I have two strong feelings:

- One is a grateful happiness, for having lived so intensely this time of grace and blessing, in which we have been able to received a family story, and have not blocked life and have been able to participate in a stage in our history.
- The satisfaction of offering to the new generation, our younger sisters, the lived experience in the journey. We are conscious of being in a new culture with great values and different needs. Our sisters will continue to listen, and will know how to discern, search for new responses and give continuity to our family story because we want to always be a Congregation necessary for the heart of God, as a mediation of the love of God for the world.

## THE LAST TWENTY YEARS IN THE CONGREGATION

*Sandro Mancilla ss.cc.*



Speaking of the last twenty years in the Congregation means speaking of all the time that I have been in the community. I entered the postulancy in the Chilean province in February 1990 but my relationship with the Congregation goes back to my childhood in the parish of Saints Peter and Paul in Santiago. However my memories of the time before I entered are more of persons than of the institution as such.

Just like all the ss.cc. brothers and sisters, I would say that my integration into the life of the Congregation was gradual. Little by little I began associating faces, experiences, encounters, contacts, information etc. So I cannot really speak of how the Congregation was 15 or 18 years ago with the same depth that I can today.

At the same time I do not want to make a study of the Congregation in these twenty years, something which I would consider myself incapable of doing. Rather I would like to speak of memories I have of moments that are engraved in my memory and that have helped me understand a bit more the religious family to which I belong and which I love as it really is. And so I offer the following assuming that it does not touch on everything and that there will be things left unsaid.

The first movement or process that I remember is the awareness –I do not know whether this was true of the whole Congregation but certainly of me- of the strong individualism of the decades before the 1990's. They seem to have been times of much searching, of needing to get closer to the world becoming part of its many activities, of encouraging the vocations of individuals and the human-professional development of each person, something which led to openings in new areas and very varied apostolic presences. The richness of that time, especially in social action, also brought with it much dispersion, difficulty in developing more common projects and the weakening of local communities.

Obviously such variety helped explore new possibilities and awakened the imagination of what we were capable of doing. However it also produced a certain identity crisis. And I remember that well from my first years in the Congregation.

What is it that really identifies us? Is it necessary to distinguish ourselves from other people? Is there something different about us? How can we assure that our response to those questions does not move us away from the people among whom we are already present?

Many communities and presences in different parts of the world seem to have had similar experiences. Each province, vice-province or region has been exploring its own way of developing its mission and apostolate resulting in a broad plurality but also raising the question of what it means to belong to one Congregation that has the same charism and, as a result, should have a common face in all parts of the world. How do we give this common appearance? Is it valid to do so? What role does the General Government have in this process? Does it have sufficient power to intervene?

At that time I believe there were two important events or happenings.

The first was the publication of the new Constitutions. At the time I had just entered the Congregation. I remember how I came to appreciate the Constitutions from the great commentaries that I was hearing, for the updating that they represented, for the level of theology and spirituality they contained and for being something more than just a body of laws.

There was a lot of work done to get them out and to offer commentary, with retreats preached especially on the first chapter etc. It was a source continually referred to when addressing different topics in formation.

For me it was also an opening to the world of Congregation documents. In some way the Constitutions were a proof of the desire for unity in the midst of the Congregation's plurality. It was clearly something we had in common and not only as brothers but also with the sisters.

This first process did not end with the publication of the Constitutions but was reinforced with the publication of the letter of Fr. Pat Bradley, then Superior General. It was a wise move and a great help at the time. I remember it as a valuable tool in my novitiate formation. Later I even preached a retreat based on the letter in the community of temporary professed. Even the very title called us to be aware of the unity of the whole Congregation, "Our Vocation and Mission"

The second process that I remember was the emphasis on the development of a Plan of Apostolic Religious Life (PARL) in the major communities.

In my province we spoke of how difficult it would be to do that, to develop a common plan making common choices that would affect everyone, without falling into the temptation to include everything or to defend the individual choices of each person. It was a long process that took some years, a difficult one, but with continued effort it became a great help not only in organization and planning but also in the growing awareness of the importance of the common mission and of being a community in mission.

In the first international meetings in which I participated as a temporary professed, the PARL was an instrument of dialogue that helped us get to know one another and share what was central to our life and mission in the different countries.

I believe that during this time we have come to value more the importance of having a General Government really capable of animating the life of the Congregation in the whole world. A powerful sign of that was when the General Government took on the animation of the so called Priority Projects in Africa and Asia. It was a decision and a step that helped build awareness of the responsibility that we have, also those of us who have been farther removed from the birth and development of the congregation's presence on those two continents. For a country as distant from those situations as is Chile, it was important to feel part of those projects and to be able to collaborate through the presence of a brother, with finances or with our prayer.

We have been experiencing all these processes in the epoch of the computer and the information revolution. Awareness of what is going on in the whole Congregation is not only the result of an effort that we make, but in a certain way it is imposed on us given the increase in speed in which we receive information and ease of accessibility.

However, the increase of communication within the Congregation does not only create greater contact between its members but also a more realistic awareness of the real situation in which we are living. When we have access to reports, images, news, it is possible to have a

more realistic idea of the situation, putting an end to idealizations and false conceptions of reality.

I believe that this and the situation of crisis in the Church and religious life were leading us to a deeper awareness of our fragility in many aspects: the aging of our Congregation, the lack of vocations, the lack of resources, the decrease of “personnel”, the weakness of some projects that depended on one brother and whose future seemed uncertain because of that etc.

The awareness of our fragility also comes from the fact that we live in a world much given to technical analysis and statistics that show the situation clearly and crudely, but which also bring with it the temptation to seek solutions only at that level or to give into to fatalism.

It was necessary to face this reality and that was done in various ways. Perhaps what I remember most because of its impact at all levels were the attempts made to begin a process of renewal and changes of structure or “restructuring.” It was not something that only the Congregation tried but also many other parts of the Church especially religious communities.

In Latin America dialogue and discussion on this topic led to a very interesting process. On the one hand, there was the recognition of a process that for some years there had already been collaboration among the communities of Latin America. Especially interesting was all that was accomplished in collaboration in initial formation, an area in which there were already documents and agreements facilitating interaction and support among the major communities and regions. There was also the journey taken together in the area of mission, especially as regards animation and reflection.

The groundwork was set for taking a further step. We began to speak of interdependence and we established three areas in which we would experience this interdependence: initial formation, ongoing formation and mission. There were structures at the Conference level and agreement, which represented something really new. The interprovincial conference was given the capacity to make binding decisions that obligated all the major communities and regions in their implementation. This meant that the major superiors of Latin America had to cede part of their authority to the conference to make concrete decisions in the three areas of interdependence.

It was also interesting that during all this time the discussion about the new “structure” and its practical application did not just respond to the need of survival in light of our fragility. There was also a commitment to the value of internationality and the unity of the Congregation.

Therefore the topic of internationality will be more present in a host of ways in our communities, not only as a new challenge for new times but also as a rediscovery of this dimension of our history and spirituality present since our origins. Internationality is slowly becoming an element in the identity of our religious family. In that sense the theme of the 35<sup>0</sup> General Chapter was interesting: “Missionary communities for a world without borders.”

From the perspective of the brothers, I can see that in the last ten years there has been a greater emphasis on the relationship with the sisters’ branch and with the secular branch. I believe that this process is also related to the clarification of our ss.cc. identity. Even though this topic is easier in relationship with the sisters by reason of the common origin and history that unites us, it is still a challenge to discover how to translate this relationship into everyday life in our present context.

The relationship with the secular branch has been more difficult to clarify. It is an open question, not a closed process, in which we can now recognize the laity as having a deeper

bond with our life. And they have involved themselves actively in seeking their place within our ss.cc. family.

In these twenty years there have been two events that as I believe have had a positive influence on us.

The first was the celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Congregation in 2000. From what I saw in my province and echoes from other parts of the world, I believe that the anniversary triggered two movements. The first was inward. That was the necessary return to the historical sources of our institute and an effort to seek ways to transmit, communicate and celebrate what we discovered. There had to be real reasons to celebrate the anniversary for it to be a true feast. The second movement was outward toward the Church. At least in my experience, it was important to discover the appreciation of our Congregation and of our contribution to the Church in those two centuries of history.

The second event was the beatification of Father Damien and Father Eustaquio. More than just an ecclesial happening that helped us see ourselves as part of the People of God and Body of Christ, the beatification of our brothers helped us discover the richness of our charism as a way of drawing close to the life-giving Jesus. Both brothers incarnate the proclamation of the merciful love of God bringing the Gospel to the neediest, those suffering from leprosy and the sick.

In a community that wants to strengthen its identity and the bonds of unity in diversity, having brothers like Damien and Eustaquio is a gift, because the action of God in their lives happened within our religious family, under the influence of our spirituality, sharing our mission. And on the other side of the coin, if we want our charism to continue being something liberating in our world, we have to be attentive to the example of those two brothers, not forgetting that the merciful love of God, of his heart, is directed especially to the most abandoned of his children.

I want to finish this sharing of my experience saying that I believe that these last twenty years in the life of our Congregation has been a time of searching, of giving more attention to life within the community as we attend to the question of identity, not to separate us and distinguish us from others but in order to know more clearly what we are to contribute to our Church and our world and where we should situate ourselves so as to be in dialogue with the events of our time.

## SOME REFLECTIONS CONCERNING “YOUNG” RELIGIOUS AND THE OLDER GENERATION OF BROTHERS IN FRANCE

*Eric Hernout, ss.cc.*



Congregations founded in Europe after the French Revolution are aging. That is not news. The Congregation's French province is not exempt from this. At present we number fifty-one in France itself. The generation of brothers over 65 makes up 69% of the province. By way of comparison, in 1989 it made up 38% of the province and in 1999, 50%. The generation of older brothers is growing while the group of younger brothers diminishes. In fact there is no brother in France under 30. The group of young ss.cc.'s has disappeared since the year 2000.

To speak of the young, now we have to move the cursor a bit and look at 40. And there we find one under 40. He is the only one and the author of this article. Since I made profession in September 1997, twelve years ago, I have been the youngest brother in France. A sad record. And now in 2009 I represent 1.8% of the brothers. In 1989 brothers under 40 represented 7.8% of the province and in 1999, 3.6%.

Now if we place the cursor at 45, there are two! There are two of us in the province under 45 (one at 42 and one at 38). In Europe, in France, brothers under 45 are now “young” and very few, while in other provinces such young are aging and already “old”.

What's more, with two “young” under 45, we cannot say that the province has a “young” generation and that has been the case for twenty-five years. There has to be a group to make a generation. Those over 65 certainly are one but not “the young.”

Putting aside the question of number – a generation is not just a question of number, it is also has to do with life and who your parents were – let's look more closely at this generation of elders and what it represents.

The generation over 65 experienced an important paradigm shift that affected both church and society. Our older brothers lived through the war. They were under 50 at the time of the Second Vatican Council and the events of 1968. They represent a time that was fruitful and to be respected. They opened new paths for the Congregation in the 80's.<sup>1</sup>

Four things characterize that time: the ideal of living internationality in the Congregation (the path was opened for the missionary projects in Africa and Asia), efforts toward improving community life (communion in mission, family spirit, a simple life style), work on the unity of brothers and sisters and the creation of a secular branch. Joined to those orientations was research and rediscovery of the charism expressed in our constitutions especially in the three verbs “*contemplate, live and proclaim.*” In the French province, the generation over 65 also experienced an opening in mission with the establishment of communities in parishes. Today our older brothers are the gospel memory of those times and we are their heirs.

That generation gave much and are still with us. They are still giving to us and bearing fruit: their experience, witness, wisdom, listening, prayer and adoration. And so often they give us

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<sup>1</sup> We have to remember that the Rule of Life dates from the 1970's and the Constitutions from the 1990.

their example by their participation in everyday community life by their small unseen and needed gestures.

With all our older brothers, those completely retired as well as those still ready to serve, the former missionaries to far off islands and those who passed their whole life in France, the priest who is confined to bed as well as the one who over the years has become a true spiritual master, all of them make up our community. For some years now, the province has been trying to improve the life of our older brothers. That investment is necessary so as to have rooms that are adequate and medically equipped.

With the heavy influence of the elderly, too often we run the risk of spending time looking at what is not going well, grieving over the closing of our communities, complaining about the old, regretting that someone cannot do more and that certain ones are still around, counting the number of deceased and bemoaning our lot. And yet in 2000 new and audacious directions were taken by the province. I am thinking particularly of what was born in Picpus (thanks to the arrival of the brothers ten years ago and what is being done there with young people at the "grandes écoles," the Picpus Center"), in Villefranche de Rouergue with the opening of Penalty (where young people in difficulty are educated and reinserted in society by means of soccer) and the presence in some significant places where many people pass through, for instance at the Chapelle Saint-Bernard at the Montparnasse train station and the work with street people in Paris.

We can see that there is still vitality in the province but in an aging group there are still risks for the youngest members: self-absorption as community or as individuals, "preventing" the "young" from living their ss.cc. vocation fully<sup>2</sup>; no longer sending brothers abroad,<sup>3</sup> no longer adapting our *modus Vivendi* and the fragmentation resulting from the fact that the brothers we have work in very different apostolates. This last point could also be an opportunity in a world that works more and more in networks.

I said that we are heirs of the older generation and of the changes in the Congregation after the council. In my opinion, the main difference, as is to be expected, is in formation. We did not receive the same type of formation. We have not been formed in the same mold. The Church has changed. Post-conciliar theology, biblical studies and philosophy have "evolved." the world has changed. Today it has become a village. And we already see the turn toward the nouns "*Contemplation, Communion, Compassion.*"

And so, the richness and the importance of the older brothers with regard to the "young ss.cc." raise questions for the internal life of the province as regards communities, mission and lifestyle. Our older brothers, even though aged, have to allow themselves to be questioned just as we the "young ss.cc." As an example, those who dare enter into discernment with us want us to look at things in another way: giving more prominence to our "being ss.cc." over our "doing ss.cc.", living a strong experience of community where shared spiritual experience is at the center of everything, giving greater emphasis to our identity history and internationality, making our ministry of reparative Eucharistic adoration more visible and making present God's compassion.

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<sup>2</sup> To put it clearly, if there are young men entering a province, they are not entering to keep and care for the elderly but to live the ss.cc. vocation and mission as proposed in the constitutions.

<sup>3</sup> Finally, the tendency to a certain self-absorption can find an antidote in the readiness of consecrated persons to continue the work of evangelization on other continents, despite the decrease of numbers in various Institutes...A proclamation of Jesus Christ and his Gospel limited to the European context alone would betray symptoms of a disturbing lack of hope...The same missionary ardour must animate the Church in Europe today... Christians in Europe cannot be unfaithful to their own history." Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia In Europa*, John Paul II, 2003, § 38 et 64.

Finally, and I would like to finish on this note, it seems that we do not reflect enough on the place of “elders” in the province. We think very little of what it means “to be an older ss.cc. religious today.” Both anthropological and theological reflection on this point seems necessary. It is a factor in the life of our province, just like youth and vocation ministry. It would seem good to recall what the General Chapter of 2006 said in the introduction:

*“It is in that nucleus of our community life that, together, we contemplate “what we have seen and heard”. (1 Jn. 1:3) It is there that we live the communion proper to the family spirit, being “one heart and mind”. (Acts 4:32) From there, we bring the compassion of God to the world.”*

*“We are indebted to each other, we need each other and the world needs a testimony of communion and solidarity, from us, that are the result of the learning that takes place in community each day.”*

*“And as we have a positive concern for the young people in formation and want to offer them the best possibilities for integral growth, in a similar way we are also concerned about the significant number of brothers in our communities who are affected by illness or who are getting older.”*

*“It is a loving concern, because we want them to live their old age with dignity, with good health care, with joy in their heart for what they have experienced and shared in community, valued by all their brothers and receiving gratitude from the whole Congregation for lives given to mission. Together we want to live each day of our existence with our gaze fixed on Him who awaits us, until the day comes when we can say from the depths of our hearts: “Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace...”<sup>4</sup> But this does not just happen, and we need to prepare for it.”*

And in the document “Our Vocation and Mission” we read in n. 21:

*“There are other weaknesses in our community which are not an obstacle to our vocation and mission. Quite the contrary, they can be a good opportunity to live the spirit that inspires us in a more authentic way. For, as Saint Paul says, when we are weak we are strong. Our old and sick brothers are an essential part of our community’s treasure. They make us go more deeply into the mystery of the second and fourth ages of Christ. They strengthen us as “family.” They save us from the selfishness that is the temptation of the strong and active. There could come a time when all of us are old and sick and even then our living of our vocation and mission would not be diminished in any way.”*

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 2:29

# THE EVOLUTION OF THE SS.CC. CONGREGATION IN THE LAST 20 YEARS

*Magdalena Figueroa ss.cc.*



To refer to the process our Congregation has lived in the past 20 years is a great challenge that I accept, more as a consequence of my deep love, admiration and gratitude towards our family than as an issue of intellectual construction.

On the first place I begin with my experience on the journey in this 27 years in which I have been able to contemplate with joy that the Congregation, moved by the Spirit of the Lord, is in constant search and openness to the challenges of the reality of today's world.

In the year 1982 when I entered the Congregation I felt that I was becoming a member of a family interested in getting attuned with the demands of the renewal of Religious Life. This was the moment we revised our Constitutions. In my very elementary way of perceiving things in this stage of my process, I experienced in the local and provincial community in Colombia the commitment and enthusiasm to offer its contribution in fidelity to the historical moment of the Congregation.

The years passed and I came to realize the preferential option for the poorest and the insistent call through the orientations of the General Chapters to work to defend life, fight for justice and peace, as a key elements of the fidelity to the Lord as it is revealed in today's world.

The realization of this line of commitment for the poorest, was certainly a clear result of the evangelical option the Congregation made since the 29<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 1979, as it is textually manifested: *"Following the example of Jesus, who gives priority to the poorest and wants to belong to the world of the humble: with them, because of them, and for them"* ***"THE CONGREGATION MAKES ITS OWN AND CONSIDERS A PRIORITY THE EVANGELICAL OPTION FOR THE POOR."***

As I continue the development of this article, I need to say that, in coherence with the spirit of discernment, in this past 20 years, some accents have been given referring to our ss.cc. life and mission. All of them of great importance, and some are worthwhile noting particularly:

- The declaration of mission made in the 30<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in Rome, 1983
- The even deeper awareness about our identity as a Religious family in the world. The Congregation recognizes that we are apostolic communities called to integrate the different elements of: Experience of God, fraternal life and service to the mission. This is an specific decision of the General Chapter in Rome in 1983.
- The 31<sup>st</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> General Chapters, the years 1988 and 1994, continue to insist upon the importance of the apostolic community, initial and ongoing formation, the vocational ministry and the laity, without forgetting the preferential option for the poor and underlining in the importance of the common mission.

- The 32<sup>nd</sup> Chapter in Rome, 1988, defines the presences of Africa and Asia as international projects of the Congregation.

These accents allow us to recognize that in the last years our Congregation has taken great interest in strengthening our identity in the Church for the world. Another essential element that comes out of this journey is the realization of the fidelity to the origins, attending to the invitation of the II Vatican Council to “go back to the sources”, recovering what is fundamental without losing efforts in what is temporary and relative in its form.

- We come now to the beginning of the new millennium, the bicentenary of the Congregation: the year 2000, celebrating the 33<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter; and we find ourselves with the vision and priorities that arise with great light and a new call to be reaffirmed in our fidelity to the Lord in this moment of the history of our world so convulsed. The urgencies of the life and mission as a decisive and priority aspect, the awareness of the reality of the Congregation each time more plural, the condition of the diminishment of the sisters, the challenges of today’s world... among others. From my simple and discreet appreciation I feel all these brought the Chapter to feel the need for a new Configuration of the Congregation and since then, within the Conferences and other structures, many efforts have been done to search around the common mission, that has given a new accent to life and a new hope to the ss.cc. respond in our history.
- In the year 2006, the 34<sup>th</sup> General Chapter takes place in Rome and once again in fidelity to the Spirit, the Congregation picks up the central aspects of our SS.CC. identity as Religious in the Church, underlining essential aspects as: common mission, government and participation, initial and ongoing formation and youth ministry.

In order to conclude this simple journey, I question myself and I respond to myself too saying that to offer a word on the evolution of the Congregation in the last 20 years is just a stammer of the heart, it is also a deep testimony of gratitude to the “good God” as our founder lovingly used to say, it is also a reason to recognize sincerely the multitude of brothers and sisters of the Congregation that in different ways have contributed to make the ss.cc. mission a valuable contribution in the manifestation of the merciful love to the world, particularly among the poorest and marginalized, it is on the other hand, the deepest recognition in faith to the “work of God” that does not stop even with the multiple weaknesses and shadows that are part of our human condition.

I cannot say but Thanks and join with the exclamation of the Psalmist: “God has been great to us and we are happy.” Even more “The Lord will bring to completion the action he has started in favour of us.”

Thank you for the opportunity to manifest that this family is marvellous, it is not perfect and has many reasons to continue to grow and as many to enter into conversion, but it is like the mother with guts of compassion, as the fertile woman, and finally it is “in the world, the Heart of God”.

# HOW DO I SEE THE CONGREGATION SINCE I HAVE BEEN A MEMBER?



*Biembe Bakamba, Médard, ss.cc.*

To tell the truth, I never expected to be writing for Com-Union. Radek asked me to write an article responding to the question, how do you see the evolution of the Congregation since you have been a member? If I understand the question correctly, my contribution will be quite subjective and open to error. What's more, it is a personal opinion. I will speak of two very important times in my life as a member of this great religious family. First I will look at my time in initial formation and then speak of the Congregation since my ordination to the priesthood. Finally I will draw some small conclusion.

## **Initial Formation 1990-2000**

I came to know the Congregation through a Missionhurst father who was my pastor in Kinshasa. He lived in our community in Mikondo because they were building a rectory for Mama wa Bosawa<sup>5</sup> parish. It was at that time that the brothers of our Congregation were opening the door to initial formation. It was with the “foolishness” of youth that I knocked on the door and finally entered and I am still here.

I began the postulancy all alone, as Camille Sapu and Paulin Kadumu had preceded me by a year. And so began the “adventure.” In formation I met Fathers Álvaro de Luxan and Germán Fresán, who were the formators. So we were five in the community: two formators and three postulants (Camille in 2<sup>nd</sup> Philosophy and Paulin and I in first).

This first stage of formation was a discovery for me. Everything was new. That's pretty obvious! At that time I had a desire to know ss.cc. spirituality and go deeper into it, in spite of the fact that the formators put more emphasis on studies, which were not all that good at the beginning.

Because we were the first, we were lucky, as the fathers and the sisters did all they could to make us part of the Congregation. In spite of the fact that we were postulants, the formators organized a time every weekend centered on the history and spirituality of the Congregation. It was interesting with Sister Paula Teck.

At the time, knowledge about the Congregation gradually made an impact. During the weekend sessions the formators spoke more about the international dimension of the Congregation. With Sister Paula Teck already as postulants, we learned all about the foundations of our religious family. That continued until we went to novitiate.

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<sup>5</sup> Translator's note: Lingala for “Mother of Humility”

In novitiate we took on the rhythm of the Congregation's religious life. It was 1994, right after the General Chapter and the formators spoke to us of the priority projects of the Congregation (Asia and Africa), of the restructuring of the Congregation etc.

A consequence of that orientation was initial formation together with the brothers of the region of Mozambique. Father Theo was the Regional Superior and formator at the same time. According to our plan of formation, the two regions decided that the postulancy would be made separately in each region, theology in Kinshasa and the novitiate together in Mozambique, a year of pastoral experience in Mozambique would follow the first year of theology. That led to the presence in Kinshasa of the first two Mozambiquans (Albino and Salvador) in 1994-1995.

This was all in the context of the orientations of the 1994 General Chapter. You could say that internationality and restructuring was the "slogan" of our formation. My pastoral experience in Mozambique (1995-1996) was part of these orientations. As regards Asia, I only was able to read some things in newsletters and the Congregation's INFO. According to our formators restructuring was moving along with "heavy steps" because it was complicated. It was necessary to respect the history of each province, each person, different sensitivities etc.

I remember well how we spoke about this in formation and how we had questions when there would be a visitation in Kinshasa or when we spoke with the formators. Being the first Congolese ss.cc.'s in Mozambique, the experience was different. The Dutch and Irish brothers had another rhythm and way of living community. All of that helped me to open my horizons as I considered the Congregation. During formation I grew with this vision of which I have just spoken.

### **From Priestly Ordination until Now.**

The 2000 General Chapter brought radical change to the two African regions. There had been the ordination of the first three African brothers. Camille Sapu was invited to the General Chapter. He returned with all kinds of commentaries on the work and atmosphere of the Chapter. For me, it was a great thing to see the first African in an international meeting of the Congregation. One of the decisions of the Chapter was the creation of the Province of Africa. I believe that many did not expect that decision. How would we become a province without our own financial autonomy and without being really solid as a group? Amazement...that's the decision... and we took it on with all the consequences involved. For me it was a disappointment, seriously!

The dream of African unity became a reality when we had the first Provincial Chapter in 2001. That same year I was sent to Inhaminga as parochial vicar. In the meantime, there had been quite a few vocations in the province. We are already more mature as a group, having had three provincial chapters, with an increasing number of members and vocations. I have hope for the future of the Congregation here in Africa and in other places. Certainly, internationality is a challenge but because of our vocation each of us is called to respond positively to the love with which God continuously guides us.

### **Conclusion**

I am not sure if I have met Radek's expectations when he asked me to write this article. I think that these last twenty years have been for me, and for all of us, a time of grace, which I

would say has been positive. The Congregation has done much work, especially in the area of initial formation. The two priority projects have had positive results. The Congregation has been enriched with African And Asian priests. I am most grateful to all the brothers who have done and who continue to do so much for the unity of the Congregation.

Perhaps I am a bit pessimistic when it comes to the restructuring of the Congregation. Things go very slowly but there are steps being taken. The interior conversion of each one of us would be an opportunity to make this great dream of the Congregation a reality. I am also pessimistic concerning my province. I have never heard so much talk about finances as in the last two years. Are we just going to keep on like that? What is the future of the Province of Africa? Why are we a province if we depend totally on outside help? What are the criteria in the Constitutions for the creation of a province? Was it a precipitous decision to create the province? Those are my questions that do not need answers. Takhuta!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Translator's note: "Thanks" in Sena

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