

Letter to the Visitators 2016-2017

Dear visitators, dear confreres, dear sisters,

1 “Service in Love”¹

During this special “Year of Mercy” we will start with our normal and regular canonical visitations, which will be finished by December 31, 2017. We have nominated two prelates or confreres from other houses to perform in each canonry this special “service of love”, this ‘stock-taking’ of a community’s current situation. A benevolent outside view can often help a community to see and judge its development since the last visitation, which was completed in December, 2011. It can be both a help and a challenge to initiate a new beginning of inner-communication and deeper reflection within a community by having two confreres take the time to listen to everyone, to speak with each confrere personally and openly and to examine all the relevant facts, proceedings and files concerning the life of our community, beginning with formation right through to caring for our elderly and sick confreres. We should not see this as an inappropriate and unsuitable method of control, or some kind of know-all interference, but rather as a form of con-fraternal help and reflection to see reality as it is and to confront the actual status within the framework of our Constitutions and ideals as Canons Regular. For me it is a great a joy that almost all the confreres who were asked have accepted this task and are willing to share some time with the designated communities. These confreres are willing and ready to look with love at the confreres and to listen with attention and discretion – or to say it with Saint Augustine. “*Dilatentur spatio caritatis*”².

2 “De-construction – Re-construction”

The bi-annual assembly of the General Superiors in Rome (May 25-27, 2016 in Rome, Salesianum) was held under the motto “Consecrated Life - radical in prophecy”. Pope Francis said that being radical is not a characteristic mark only of religious, but of each Christian life. The typical mark for religious should be “prophecy”. We therefore have to live our prophetic dimension radically and in radicality. At the meeting, one main question was asked: can one word, one expression include all aspects of religious life? Can we ourselves become prophets or is this a special vocation of special people called by God himself? It is not an easy task being a prophet and having to take on the role of critic, admonishing, correcting and accusing, putting one’s finger in a wound and speaking the truth even when nobody wants to hear it. When we look at Jesus and other prophets, their lives were turbulent, inconvenient, irksome, difficult and often threatened and at risk. What is our prophetic role in the world, in the Church, in these times? Three aspects were mentioned: our life according to the three vows, our listening to the ‘signs of the time’ and interpreting in the light of the Gospel, and the eschatological dimension and force of our life-style. And the key question to understanding these three dimensions was : What does God want us to do? This question requires prayer and reflection, listening and sharing, and the answer might be different to what we have learned or expected and for what we have asked in our prayers. Here a visitation can assist this process of research and ‘de-construction’ by helping discern those elements that are fixed by tradition and history, or by sorting out what has become systematized and institutionalized, and

¹ conf. “Service in love. Some remarks to the Visitation 2016-2017”. Report from abbot general to the relatives meeting 2015 in monte Cucco.

² Aurelius Augustinus, 69,3: “We should give more space to love!”

therefore being no longer vital, significant or contemporary to our time and our world. But a visitation can also help such reflection find a reason not to destroy, but even more to ‘re-construct’, to find new answers in the light of the Gospel and by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, to listen to the poor and the ‘signs of our times’, in being more open to new missions and visions. “Without missions there is no life!” This sentence impressed me most during this meeting. We cannot say “our mission is complete” when we no longer have manpower and when we are suffering a lack of vocations; we can then become “partners of missions”, we can support and help the activities and missions of other communities. What does God want us to do? We need to dialogue with our confreres, with our helpers from outside – together with our visitators, we have to invest our imagination and compassion, we have to re-construct religious life for today, in the same way that in his time our founder and institutor Saint Norbert had listen to God’s call and he had set into motion practices and concrete initiatives where he felt the Church and the world needed to change and to be reformed.

3 Saint Norbert as a prophet

When we look at Saint Norbert, our Order’s Father, founder and inspiration, we can see how he reacted to the needs and ‘signs of his time’ by wanting to proclaim the Gospel as his main vocation and task with all his passion and strength, with all his talents and gifts. He was an itinerant preacher who could touch the hearts of the people. He could convince people to follow the call of the Lord, to enter into fellowship with his Master, to share this life with others. Norbert was a founder of a community and the communitarian life; he founded and established houses and spiritual centers, he brought people together, priests and laymen, men and women, he initiated and created communities where people could live in “one mind and one spirit on the way to God” (Rule of St. Augustine). Norbert had the talent and vision to bring people together, he assisted their reconciliation and peace, he solved problems of enmity and animosity and initiated a new way of respect, acceptance and love. All these forms convinced him to reform the Church of his time through a strong community life and by a good spiritual and theological formation, in order to live together in unity and simplicity, in modesty and unpretentiousness, to be a good example in following the Lord according to the Gospel, and by the movement of his time as “poor in Christ” (“*pauper Christi*”). So we might describe St. Norbert’s prophecy – among others – by these four fields:

- reform of the Church by ‘re-constructing’ the lifestyle of the early Church;
- living in community in poverty and modesty, in common prayer and solemn liturgy;
- to proclaim the Good News by our preaching and lives;
- to unite in his communities all people, the whole people of God: priest and layman, men and women.

During our Order’s history, have we perhaps lost these strong prophetic impulses of Saint Norbert?

- Today, what is our prophetic impulse and characteristic?
- Today, what would be missing or lacking in the Church without the Norbertines?
- What is now and today our mission and vision in the Church and for the world?

4 Crucial themes

During this assembly, every discussion focused on the prophetic dimension of the religious life; three dimensions were always mentioned, and we should examine these points very attentively and vigilantly during the visitation:

4.1 FORMATION

How can we raise young people to experience a level of deep faith, to have a proper discernment for the religious life, or to truly transform themselves by having a deeper friendship with the Lord?

- What makes us Canons Regular today?
- Does each house have an adapted “*ratio formationis*”³?
- There are annual evaluation of the formation process and valuation of the contents and methods in this formation programs?
- What we are doing to attract young people to our canonical life – in the field of modern media, in the field of contacting and inviting young people, in the field of praying, in the field of an authentic, integral life-style, both personally and as a community (“*integrità*”)?
- The formation of formators is very important: What is each Canonry actually doing in this field (see the new paper from the Vatican⁴)?
- What is done in the field of “ongoing formation” in the house?

4.2 PREVENTION

The visitation is when we should especially ask about the “Sexual-abuse-policy” of each Canonry – perhaps in the meeting with the prelate’s council.⁵

- Who is responsible for this in the community, who controls its execution and evaluation?
- What is done in the field of prevention, from the beginning of religious life (‘screening’ of the candidates and in which form)?
- Are these standards inserted in the “*Ratio formationis*” of this particular house?

4.3 FINANCE

In his conference “Consecrated life – love for poverty, need for management and the ‘temptation of power’” the Salesian Rector Major spoke about financial problems and he proposed that we define, or “re-structure”, our works and activities; we need to ask ourselves, “at which new frontiers do we need to be?” He underlined the call for transparency and vigilance in order to function properly, and for regular financial accounts, in our case for regular financial chapters in respect to transparency and discretion.

Everything we do on a financial and economic level should correspond to the evangelical principles and should be in tune with the social teaching of the Church. The task of ‘*provisor*’ is a service and not a domination.

- Is our live-style simple and moderate?
- Can we accept the competence of laypeople in this field by keeping the final responsibility in the hands of the Canonry?
- Do we have an annual balance, annual reports and financial accounts, a regular revision of book-keeping, a budget for the coming year, independent outside audits, which can guarantee transparency and solidity?
- Who are the signees on contracts, bills, budgets, bank transactions – are there at least two confreres?

We are only administrators, not owners: “Our property and patrimony belong at least to the poor!”

³ In the Order we are working on a new “*Ratio Generalis Institutionis - 2014*”, which was sent to each house for adaptation.

⁴ Congregation for the Clergy and Congregation for Religious on priestly formation (13th April, 2016).

⁵ It was also proposed to put this policy on the internet as a link to the homepage of the Canonry.

5 “Examine yourselves”

And finally, I would like to recommend to you a text from Saint Paul to the Corinthians where he is thinking of visiting Corinth for a third time, and where he is asking, as it were, for a kind of pre-evaluation of their situation before he goes to visit them. This text could be useful for the visitors, and for the community as well, at the beginning of the visitation:

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you (v13).

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in faith.

Test yourselves.

Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? ...

But we pray to God that you may not do evil,

not that we may appear to have passed the test but that you may do what is right, even though we may seem to have failed.

For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.

For we rejoice when we are weak but you are strong.

We pray for is your improvement...

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Mend your ways, encourage one another, live in peace,

and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Greet one another with a holy kiss and the holy ones greet you.”

(2 Cor 13: 5-8, 11-13).

Rome, June 2016

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