



# **FORMATION NOTEBOOKS**

*“ The Guanellian Charism ”*

**Notebook n.3**



# LETTER FROM THE SUPERIOR GENERAL

Dear Confreres,

I'd like to present to the Congregation the third booklet of formation, prepared by the General Council. After the booklet about the Charism and the Spirit of the Congregation, now the topic is Mission. We entrusted this topic to Fr. Alfonso Crippa. He wrote the exposition we now are presenting to you. We thank Fr. Alfonso for his thoughts and concrete indications sustaining and motivating our being among the poor. On the website of the Congregation you can participate on the formative meeting, run by Fr. Alfonso himself. We propose them as an ongoing formation for all the confreres.

When we speak of Mission, I like to start always from the gospel of Mark 3, 13-15. The three verses have an incredible density and completeness. In them we have, in short, the paradigm of every spiritual journey, of the history of every vocation. *"...summoned those he wanted... and he appointed twelve. They have to be his companions and to be sent out to proclaim the message"*.

Our Constitutions too, when they present the story of the vocation of our Founder, are following this paradigm: *"The Holy Spirit called the Founder, made him ardent in charity; sent him to relieve human miseries"* (Constitutions n. 1).

Vocation, formation and mission are an organic unity, giving all together, not in different times, strength and vigor to all ourself: vocation, consecration and mission.

Don Guanella always thought about himself as a missionary of the Father, not as a philanthropist of men. For sure, he loved the poor because in them he was able to see the face of Christ and because God, the Father, was asking him to place at God's disposition *..."hands, mind and heart, even to make a victim of himself for the poor of Jesus Christ, because it is written that the good Shepherd lay down his life for his sheep"* (Constitutions n. 74). Yes, he loved, served, welcomed, promoted,

defended the poor but always because he was able to make space to God, Who through his humble person performed these acts of charity.

For us as well confreres! Let us go among the poor to fulfil our service of charity because we have been called by God, we prepared ourself in his presence, learning to serve from his gospel, and it is He Himself, the Lord, who sends us to the poor in his name.

Wonderful mission that of the Founder and ours: and He *“answered by offering all his life. Guided by an inner voice and signs of grace, he walked the paths of Providence and became the father of many disciples”* (Constitutions n. 1). *“Like him we are sent to evangelize the poor arousing in them reasons for hope, by revealing the love of the Father”* (Constitutions n. 3).

How more rich and reason of human promotion is our mission, whatever it can be, confreres, if we, as the Constitutions are showing us: *“in the Church are witnesses of God’s fatherly love and of the sacred value of each man, even of the least gifted, according to the commandment of the Lord -Love one another as I loved you”* Constitutions n. 6).

My best wishes that, even though this third booklet of formation, our guanellian mission may experience a new and prophetic awakening, in synergy with the man and the institutions of today, but always faithful to Whom wanted to call us to stay with Him, and after to send us to the world: *“instruments of Providence through the exercise of the work of mercy and the ministry of pastoral charity”* (Constitutions n. 3)

May you have a fruitful mission!

Fr. Umberto

# OUR MISSION

## Introduction

Mine is not going to be an exhaustive presentation on the theme of our mission, I am only going to offer some reflections taking off from what our Constitutions state and some developments in time within our Congregation, to encourage a personal reflection and if possible also a dialogue on a theme that touches our identity, but also our daily life, and that will never be completely defined, because mission means also a vision on the future and our being open to God's surprises.

This was the theme on which the Guanellian formation for the academic year 2019/2010 was organised in our Theologate in Rome, and it is from that material I draw some contributions from our theology students.

## 1-. Mission: a dynamic expression of our charism and spirit

In the past two themes of Guanellian formation, the two pillars of our identity as Servants of Charity were presented: "*Don Guanella's Charism*" and "*Guanellian Spirit*".

We will try now to have an in-depth view of the mission as the dynamic application of those two gifts. Mission, for the Founder and for each one of us, represents the third founding element of our identity, well stated also in our very name of Servants of Charity, therefore consecrated, dedicated to live out the Gospel by serving the poorest brethren. Just like Jesus Christ, who came "*not to be served, but to serve*", our vocation is "*serving those whom the Lord reserves for our apostolic care, we imitate the fatherly love of God ... so that they may attain the fullness of life*" (C. 69).

Every religious family was born with a specific spirit and a precise apostolic goal, and these are part and parcel of the charism given by the Spirit for our personal sanctification and to prepare us for a particular mission.

Our Constitutions express well the link between mission and the other elements constituting our identity: "*Apostolic and charitable action belongs to the very nature of our Institute: it is its grace and identity*" (C. 62).

The study of charism and spirituality proposed in the past two handbooks laid somehow the foundation to enable us treat the theme of mission that requires, besides our fidelity to what the Founder enacted or pointed to, the ability to answer to new situations in which we are called to live the charism and spirit given us by the Spirit.

When we talk of renewing religious life the request is first of all to go back to our beginnings, to go deeper into the charism freely given to the Founder and, through him,

to our religious family, and to share the spirit by which the Founder and the early time confreres lived and passed on to the entire congregation.

Pope Francis keeps telling us that we are living a time of change of an epoch. It is good, for us, to ask ourselves, “what can be our contribution to this change?”, and we should begin exactly from strengthening in us the charism and our spirituality, because our mission can be fruitful only when it is nourished by the gift of grace and our spirituality. Charism, spirituality, and mission are a dynamic trilogy, and the three elements give strength to one another and give shape to all other components of our life as religious men.

Mission gives each single confrere and each community their identity and must therefore characterise their whole life. Thus, our **consecration** as religious/apostles can be understood based on the call of God to follow Jesus Christ, who in his public life is obedient to the Father serving his brethren. So we *are called to continue in the Church and in the world the type of life chosen by Christ who, on the roads of Palestine, helped the poor, healed the sick, blessed the children and did good to all people* (Mt 9, 35; LG 46; AG 40). The Church also has approved us as an Institute of apostolic life with some specific characters that distinguish us from other vocations to consecrated life.

Even our **fraternal life** becomes first of all our first mission, to be accomplished in order to make believable the Gospel we preach, and ours becomes the life of a group of apostles who, in Fr. Guanella’s intention, “*constitute a family of brothers loving one another, sent to the poor to announce them the Father’s love*”.

From our identity, our **spirituality** also will stem, and this will be an **apostolic** spirituality, able to live in unity of life our communion with God and our dedication to our brethren.

Therefore our **mission**, calling upon these fundamental elements of our identity, becomes an essential part of our **project of life**, touching all our energies and leading us to say ‘**I am mission**’: “*The Servants of charity should feel within themselves the true fire of the zeal of charity; they must feel themselves the flame of the charity of Jesus Christ and spread it into others*”.

## 2.- The purposes of our mission

What are the “Good News” we are carrying to the world, to the Church, and to the poor through our mission? Our Constitutions, at numbers 69 to 74 tell us clearly the goals we wish to attain as apostles of charity.

- First of all, we need to know where we should draw inspiration and motivation to our mission from. Fundamentally, we need to resort to faith, because the mission

we are called to, is “*missio Dei*” [God’s mission], to be accomplished not on our behalf, but on behalf of the Church, for the mandate received by Jesus. The faith principle that must inspire our apostolic action is the Father’s love, which we want to assume as the model of our relationship with the world, with the people of God, and especially with the poor.

- On our side, the required co-operation is to constantly fan the flame of charity, feeling the urge to spread charity, as our Founder did: “*I want to be a sword of fire in the holy ministry!*” and the passion to “*make charity the heart of the world*”.
- We also need to clarify the mission’s goals, to apply them in the different situations in which we work. The foundation of all our relations with the poor must always be respecting the personal dignity of those we address and whose physical, psychological, moral, social, and spiritual abilities we want to foster. The Guanellian expression ‘*give bread and the Lord*’ indicates that we aim at an integral and harmonic growth of all individuals ‘*so that they may reach a happy destination*’.
- Our mission cannot be limited to single individuals. The Founder wanted a charity without boundaries, he wanted to reach where others were not providing, and where there is great suffering. “*The exceptional circumstances of our times require also special exercises of charity towards our neighbour, and also to this the sons of the congregation devote themselves with energy*”.
- Typical resources for our apostolic action are the teaching of our Founder, we create an environment with the preventive system “*our places should be characterized by a climate of welcome, trust and benevolence. The poor should feel truly loved and comfortable in our midst, as in a family*” (C. 73). We give preference to the pedagogy of the heart “*above all we must love the poor, because the heart needs love as the body needs food* (C. 70)

### **3-. The recipients of our mission**

With a summarising sentence, our Constitutions present the essential requirement to identify the recipients of our mission: “*The Lord sends us to those fragile and abandoned brothers who, like the paralytic in the Gospel, come crying out, “Lord, I have no one!”*” (C. 64).

Then the field of our work, left to us as heritage by our Founder, is more practically specified: “*children and youth, the elderly, the good children, and the flock without a shepherd*”. This classification is certainly insufficient, should it remain general. The first quality, that best specifies these groups of people is always the charismatic one: weakness and neglect. And this is the characteristic that allows us to discern in every situation or historical moment where and how we should go and whom we should give priority to.

Our Congregation, while keeping faith to what don Guanella left us, made practical choices according to times and needs.

About “*children and youth*” the Founder himself, also for his experience with don Bosco and considering the needs of his time and his area, devoted to them his first institution, at Traona, with also a clear vocational aim. The Congregation gave large space to this field of apostolate in Italy during the two periods following the two World Wars, because of the large number of orphans and the scarcity of appropriate educational institutions. The same apostolate was established in Latin America and today in many areas, especially in the Western world, focuses on those minors who suffer for family neglect or social maladjustment.

About *the elderly* we know how the Founder himself defended strongly this group as specific recipients of his mission, especially because he was aware of how much they were suffering for the situations of neglect, in a society that was not providing the needed services for old people who were alone or sick. This problem may even today make our service needed, to rescue the solitude that can be worse than material poverty. With the domination of an individualistic culture, society favours those who can assert themselves, and marginalises those who need the neighbour’s solidarity. In the societies where the life span has also increased in years, this type of apostolate needs to be renovated and opened beyond our Old People’s Homes.

The apostolate for the good children has always been a peculiar characteristic of our mission. Already the Founder was able to offer to the society of his times new methods to promote the dignity of those who are limited in their physical or psychical abilities. Even today, our service and our educational system has great value as a witness that can oppose the *throwaway culture* often recalled by Pope Francis. Often it happens that our work for these “beloved by Providence” opens the way to a new appreciation, so that they are considered with the same human dignity as every other child of God. Remembering how Fr. Guanella insisted that we should give value to their spiritual dimension urges us to give them the opportunities to live and grow in faith and in the Lord’s friendship.

The fourth group, the *flock without a shepherd* is given to us by the Constitutions as a field for our pastoral charity especially towards those who are spiritually poor. This opens us a whole world of initiatives both in parishes entrusted to us, with the effort of making them more and more *Samaritan parishes*, and with other pastoral services, fruit of the creativity of each Guanellian religious, with the strength passed on to us by the Founder with his spirit and his zeal.

We cannot forget two meaningful forms of apostolate, lived deeply also by our Founder: the attention to migrant people and the prayer for the dying, with the institution of the Pious Union of St. Joseph, mentioned by the same number of our Constitution discussing the flock without a shepherd (C 68).

Today, it is not difficult to widen our pastoral horizon: a little attention to the sign of times and the voice of the Spirit and of the Church is enough!

The poor we are addressing are not simply the “recipients” of our service and care, they are active protagonist in our mission. First of all, they evangelise us, as we have repeatedly said, because they closely represent the Lord. Sometimes we call the poor in our homes as *guests* or even *clients* (such is considered the person making use of some services). But in this way they don’t appear for what they really represent for us, if we want to follow the thought and heart of our Founder: *‘Take in the most abandoned of all, have him sit at table with you and make him one of your own, because this is Jesus Christ’*. For the language of faith, the poor are the companions of our journey, they will introduce us to the Lord at the end of our journey; with their weakness, they make us aware of the need for the Lord’s mercy; they force us to be poor, simple and modest as they are, if we want to build up a family with them, in this they are *our teachers and masters*.

#### **4-. Waiting for the hour of mercy**

In order to better understand the history of our mission we need to look first of all to our Founder, especially in the first period of his quest to actualise his mission.

On one side, he had the clear awareness of being called to a mission of dedication to the poor, to answer so many practical experiences of poverty and need he met in his environment. Since childhood he had experienced interior inspirations, which he also narrated: the old man at Campodolcino, the Blessed Virgin at Gualdera ... to these were added other premonitions in some moments of his life: as a seminarian passing at Como by the place where his first House would be later, when he had a strange feeling passing on the ferry-boat by Pianello or going through the swamps at Pian di Spagna ... But, overall, an urge was growing within him to give himself to the neighbour even scarifying his self and giving his time: the soup for the poor he was imagining to prepare as an adult, or the practical attention to some poor individuals in the village or for those who were going far looking for work also overseas, or the commitment at his fellow seminarian sick-bed ...

On the other side, there is the long-time seeking where and how put into practice these interior indications: in foreign missions? – or with don Bosco? – or following the way of Cottolengo? Surely, the conviction was growing in him, that to care for many poor as he was feeling he was called to, required his relying on persons who could follow him

and also finding resources to put up some sort of *ciabotto*, as he called the Houses where he could welcome those who needed to build up again a sense of family that was lost ...

For Don Guanella, it was not easy to reach the understanding of what the Lord and His Providence were preparing for him. Yet, he never lost hope, even after the first failure at Traona and in the solitude and discouragement of Olmo, he remained firm in his conviction that he should not move a step unless in obedience, waiting for the 'hour of Mercy', when almost unexpected he was entrusted with the small thing of Pianello, that will be the providential seed from which his entire work will grow.

## 5-. In the wake of the Founder

The criteria that accompanied the Founder's experience are still valid:

- patience, but also persistence in following one's interior inspirations, certainly given by the Spirit,
- surrender to Providence and the good God seen as a Father;
- conviction that the good outcome of a mission or of a work is reached with small beginnings and with the sacrifice of persons who offer themselves to the mission.

When these criteria are present, we need to run, carried by Providence. Our Constitutions refer the very words of the Founder: *“Be obedient to the ways of Providence by entrusting yourselves to Her and make haste, because you have a mission too great ever to be fulfilled”* (C80).

Also Pope Francis, during the special audience to the Guanellian Family (Nov. 11, 2015) gave us as a mandate the three verbs: **to trust – to look – to hasten** and then he continued: *“misery and the poor cannot wait, because the greatest world's famine is that of charity”*.

Surely, looking at our more that centenary history, we can say we have been faithful to our Founder's mandate. Therefore now, in this change of epoch, we need to continue to be *‘watchful in submitting the works to a constant discernment in order to sustain them with resolution, or wisely adjust them, or even abandon them. And in response to the invitations of Providence we do not fear to undertake courageous enterprises’* (C 72).

The sentence repeated to us by the Founder is very demanding: *‘Take in the most abandoned of all, have him sit at table with you ... ‘*. We cannot assign to others the duty of making our poor feel at home! Together with the duty of ensuring for our poor all that concerns bodily health and the respect of the human person's needs, we cannot leave out the concern for their spiritual health and their right to develop their faith and the religious meaning of their life!

Our Constitutions clearly require of us that *“Our apostolic service takes various concrete forms as determined by the needs of the poor and by the diversity of places and cultures”* (C 72).

The Lord said that *“the poor will always be with you”* but the types of poverty change with the changing of society. Thus, the invitation is clear: we must allow ourselves to be led first of all by “the needs of the poor”: their concrete persons, within the contest of their needs, should be the primary law while figuring out the response of aid, as Jesus did with our human nature in His incarnation.

In this discernment, the Church is our guide, asking us to take our decisions following these criteria: *“commitment to safeguard the significance of their own charism in a specific setting, concern to keep alive an authentic fraternal life and attention to the needs of the particular Church. A trusting and ongoing dialogue with the particular Church is therefore essential, as is effective connection with those responsible for communion among the religious”* (FLC 76,4). *“Religious communities should continue to maintain and fulfil the ministries proper to them. In addition, after considering the needs of the Universal Church and individual dioceses, they should adapt them to the requirements of time and place, employing appropriate and even new programs and abandoning those works which today are less relevant to the spirit and authentic nature of the community.* (PC 20).

Also, the changes made by our 19<sup>th</sup> General Chapter to our Constitutions show this dynamism of our Congregation, especially by encouraging

- to **‘extend the tent of charity’** opening up to new forms of poverty, caused by social and cultural changes,
- to configure our parishes as **‘Samaritan parishes’**, keeping in mind the need often repeated within the Church in the past years, for a deep ‘pastoral conversion’,
- to be the **‘animating core’** within our Works,
- to involve the entire **Guanellian family** in our mission.

The Guanellian mission already has wide horizons, because it refers to charity which is the source and essence of every human being’s life. But, in order to spread charity in society there is the need, according to different times, to give more attention to some aspects. Today the globalisation process requires Guanellians to open our horizon and embrace the whole world. Our Founder showed a strong attraction for missionary vocation, and he accomplished this in the final years of his life, sending his Sisters among the migrants in the United States of America. He is almost repeating to us today: *“It is a very serious duty at our days to come to the spiritual and corporal rescue of those numerous brethren who, forced to migrate to foreign regions, find there very often the ruin of their faith with the ruin of their body”*. And actually, the Congregation, extending to several cultures in the last decades, assumes the aspect and give international meaning to its charity mission.

The international and intercultural communities are slowly spreading among us and they can be a living witness of the universality of the Church and of our Christian faith.

Our life and our work together in these communities is a true richness but, at the same time, involves many challenges. It requires particular preparation and follow-up.

- Today, with many people moving, the Church also changes image and cannot care anymore only for the sheep of her flock, she must 'go out' to look for the lost and the wounded. This is why Pope Francis talks about the Church today being more a 'field hospital' than a specialised beauty clinic. This view cannot leave us unconcerned, since by vocation we are called, like the good Samaritan, to see those who are wounded and marginalised by society, to bend over them and rescue them.
- Today we are plunged in a culture going farther and farther from faith in Jesus Christ and the Christian sense of life, and this causes loss of sacred values, as the value of life, arriving to the demand for euthanasia or abortion, and to marginalise death. We have received the beautiful intuition of our Founder, to understand the value of the last moments of life as the moment that opens us to the encounter with the Lord, so we cannot remain indifferent seeing this loss of sense, we have the duty, by the witness of our mission and the spreading of the Evangelical principles, to oppose the culture of death that is surrounding us and spreading.
- Also, the means to practice our mission are changed. We know how Don Guanella was able to use the printing press to reach where he could not physically go. The Church is repeatedly expressing this need: *"Just as in the past consecrated persons successfully used all kinds of means at the service of evangelization and skilfully met difficulties, today too they are challenged anew by the need to bear witness to the Gospel through the communications media. The media, thanks to impressive developments in technology, have reached every corner of the earth."* (VC 99).

## **6-. Shared responsibility in our mission**

The awareness is increasing, both in the Church and in civil society, that humanity can truly progress only together, with initiatives that can be beneficial not to few people, overcoming the many situations of inequality that are the major cause of conflicts and poverty of many.

Also, about our mission we should be able to involve as many people as possible, so that all can give their contribution, according to the vocation received by the Spirit of the Lord. And this is true already at the level of religious community, learning how to integrate the personal qualities in the community project. Our Constitutions state that our mission is grace and vocation of the community, as the Founder wanted: *"Let all and each of the House members be particularly aiming, as hard-working ants, to provide the moral, spiritual, and economic wellbeing of the House ... all should be competing in work, using their talents not leaving them without fruit, with the only aim to give the greater glory to God and the best profit for the Institute"*.

The encouragement to favour a shared responsibility has to be extended to the entire Guanellian Family, so that the mission can use all the energies coming from the different vocations elicited by the Lord within us and around us. Just think of the importance given by the Founder to the vocation of Brothers, fully co-responsible in the mission, also to accomplish the ministries better meeting their vocation of consecrated lay men: *“The Brothers, as lay religious, offer to the mission their ability, experience and professionalism, enlivening all these with evangelical witness”* (C 76).

Moreover, shared responsibility cannot but involve the other two branches of the Guanellian Family: The Daughters of St. Mary of Providence and the Guanellian Cooperators, who share with us the same charism and are therefore complementary in the mission. Our history, since the Founder’s times, is rich in experience about this collaboration, that surely can be intensified more even today, because of the spiritual similarity that makes us partakers of the same charism and children of the same founder. He, at the beginning, wanted the two Guanellian Congregation to form one family of consecrated women and men.

Today the Church is rediscovering and encouraging the evangelizing mission of all the baptised, she is asking us also to strengthen our ability to involve in different ways lay people in our mission. Time has passed, when religious men and women could cover up almost all functions in the charitable service. Society had developed in time more complex and efficient forms and initiatives to answer people’s needs in the different areas of health services, aid to the marginalised and the suffering. Meanwhile many institutions have started in favour of these needy persons. All this has much impact also on the understanding and the organisation of our services which, by the way, require new abilities and professional preparation, given only by specific studies and training. We are forced to better specify the practical aim of our mission, both with new “ministerial abilities” or pastoral capacities that better can show the witness of Evangelical values, making our service an evangelising witness, and being ready to dialogue and cooperate with different persons and institutions who work for the same type of persons we are sent to.

Our Congregation has codified educational principles and directives of method together with the Guanellian Family, to favour the shared responsibility with all those who, in different capacities, work for the recipients of our mission in the two booklets, ‘Basic Document for Guanellian Mission’ and ‘With Faith, Love, and Competence’. Their purpose is to draw from our charismatic heritage the guidelines for those who are called to cooperate in the same mission with professional ability and also moving from each person’s different culture.

Today a new effort is necessary for all to go deeper into these principles and guidelines, to make our mission more appropriate for today’s development and challenges, through the integration of those values that are proper of different cultural environments and can enrich our charism and its fruitful application in our mission.

A similar approach should be taken about a renewed ability to insert and cooperate in the evangelising mission of the Local Churches where we are. The Holy Spirit gave birth to

our Congregation in the Church and for the Church. Not only our Parishes, but also our Apostolic Communities are a living part of the Local Church, with a specific mission springing from the charism and, at the same time being faithful the pastoral directives of the particular Church.

## **7-. The challenges of our mission**

The Church and also our Congregation are continuously challenged by the mission to take the charity of Christ in our world. This includes both the practical situations that arise in the history of humanity, and the means and places where we should be present, for example the “new areopagus” as Pope Benedict was pointing at globalisation, social communications, migrations, inter-religious dialogue, vocations in missionary dimension, the youth, families, the new types of poverty ... Going back to read the final documents of our recent Chapters (especially the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup>) could be very encouraging to understand and assume the Congregation’s sensitivity towards the many challenges presented by our mission.

Here we recall just some notes about a few themes relevant at the moment.

### *7a – OUR MISSIONARY EXPANSION*

Generally, the idea of mission in the Church has been understood as the impulse to carry the Gospel to places where Christ was not known and where in any case there was much need of witnessing the Christian message in words and works. Often the missionaries were taking along the pastoral schemes they knew and used the means and structure of their own culture: this was not favourable for an inculturation of the Gospel and particularly was not fostering local vocations.

With the advent of globalisation and also the decrease of vocations of special consecration, mission has lost this “geographical” meaning of some people leaving their own country to carry the Gospel to other nations. Today mission is a “global” mission, concerning all human realities, urging the entire Church to “move out” carrying the Gospel to the “human and existential peripheries” of the world, as Pope Francis is telling us.

Applying this new vision to our Congregation we should be aware of the changes of the recent years. First of all, there was a clear choice for the Congregation to open up to other cultures fostering in new countries the vocations to have the charism bear fruit in their environment and in their own culture.

The numerical growth that was caused by this choice produced some challenges for the whole Congregation.

A double effort was required of the Congregation: to assure fidelity to the charism through an appropriate formation and, at the same time, to enculturate the charism to answer the needs of the local Churches and societies where we should be involved and sharing suffering and potentials, surely different from the ones in the western world. These different situations call on us to apply what our General Chapter indicated: “*think globally and act locally*”. We need therefore to define in each area what are the priorities, and also decide which are the best means in that place to accomplish well the mission. One of the most urgent needs, especially in those places where there is no specific pastoral for the recipients of our mission, is not only to accomplish a good project of the typical service of our charism, but also to have it spring out and shared in the local Church where we are present.

We should feel the same need in places where we are already offering a well organised service and we have the possibility to co-operate with other similar associations (especially the diocesan Caritas) to be more relevant with an evangelical message in the local area and culture. We certainly have some experiences to share, like the fact of our Committees for the different fields of our mission. Our confreres should therefore be formed and devoted to a special field of apostolate and they should develop, beyond the instituted ministries, other evangelical ministries typical of our mission as evangelisers of charity and experts of communion: ministries referred to specific types of pastoral as could be the pastoral of listening, the pastoral for the preparation to a good death ... special catechesis for our recipients ...

## *7b - INTERCULTURALITY*

Something else was born from the choice of the Congregation to face a mission open to different cultures, and it is the fact of showing a fraternity of disciples – missionaries coming from different cultures who live and work as brothers, as a prophetic sign in our world that hardly can live solidarity and where usually conflict has the upper hand. This is a fundamental point for our Institute that is growing in internationality and makes more and more true the charism of charity as the journey of salvation for our world: “*charity will save the world*”.

Sometimes it is not easy to cooperate in the highly technical aspects of our mission, because of the complex and demanding services we are called to offer. But it is surely possible to share our human and spiritual resources to show to the world that loving one another as brothers is possible, to give witness of benevolence and dedication for the recipients of our mission.

This theme requires further development and reflection on the on-going experiences, as already several communities are doing.

## 7c – *OUR INSTITUTIONS*

Our Institutions are the working tools to accomplish our mission. Our Charism requires the practice of the works of mercy, and this generally is done in structures entrusted to our responsibility.

The large institutions and some complex organisations are part of our service to the poor, especially in countries where one cannot give services without following specific rules and requirements.

They are also part of our history, the places where we make grateful remembrance of the work and dedication of the confreres who came before us. Often this sentiment is present while making discernment about continuing a service in a particular area.

But today the Congregation, just like all congregations of apostolic life, feels strongly the *problem of Institutions*.

We moved from a family-like management to a complex, almost company-like management, in which the problems of organisation, the rules about labour, safety, etc., take over most of our resources, often to the detriment of our apostolate.

We have generally welcomed with favour the encouragement coming from civil society and laws for a service of quality, even if we must admit that they forced us to relevant changes in our style of accomplishing our mission, so that several confreres wonder whether it is worthwhile to accept this reliance, also financial, from the Government. Even the Founder in some moments defended the autonomy of his Institutions, to the point of renouncing some of the, to avoid the danger that an external intrusion could cause a loss of genuine spirit.

To understand well the value and sense of an apostolic Work we should conveniently:

- First of all, we have to be convinced that “mission” is not identified with our Institutions. If that were the case, the superior would be simply a manager and the religious simple instruments to ensure the efficiency of the Institution; at the end the evagelic inspiration that gave birth to them and should animate them would be forgotten or neglected.
- For our Works to give witness of Christ’s charity, they should be supported by a strong personal and community apostolic spirituality, to avoid being carried away by the many problems of organisation, laws, finance, profession ... these could darken the simplicity and clarity of expression of our charism. The issue should be further developed, we will only give a hint by recalling some elements of our specific Guanellian spirituality, very dear to the Founder: - the spirituality of the Holy Family of Nazareth, - the Eucharist as the source that supports from within the “bond of charity” and our outward mission: *“The fire of the charity of Jesus*

*Christ gives life to the Christian religious person, makes him move speedily in the good works, gives him strength to inspire his own heart and that of others, overcoming also major difficulties, for a speedy journey in the way of perfection”.*

- The Guanellian has also the duty to sanctify himself and others by accepting to “get dirty” in the daily work and in the practical service to the brethren for whatever society requires to assure the wellbeing of the persons entrusted to us.

## **The discernment about our Works.**

The challenge we have to face in order to give an evangelising meaning to our Works requires constant discernment on the part of the Congregation, as Constitutions No. 72 clearly states: *“Under the guidance of our superiors, we are watchful in submitting the works to a constant discernment in order to sustain them with resolution, or wisely adjust them, or even abandon them. And in response to the invitations of Providence we do not fear to undertake courageous enterprises”.*

About this, it is good to reflect on some changes that can help our discernment:

- In the Founder’s time, and later for several decades, the institutions for the poor were accomplished by the Church and especially by the Religious Congregations. Today society is very attentive to situations of marginality and has become aware, with several initiatives of the public and private sector (surely including the Religious), of the duty of solidarity and responsibility toward the forms of poverty. Several Governments have created an efficient Welfare system.
- The relevant decrease in religious vocations for active life, started after Council Vatican II, together with the ever-increasing complexity of the Institutions management, caused a radical change in the Religious Institutions. Formerly, the religious community was providing the different services ... today the religious community cannot cover anymore even the most relevant functions in the social and educational services ...
- By consequence, the Institutions’ management should be organised in a fundamentally different way from the past, especially where the two facts mentioned above are more evident: the decrease in number and increase in average age of the religious men and the complex management of the educational and charitable service.

This change is already well present in some of our houses, in some other places needs to be encouraged. What is more important here is to know what are the challenges that need to be faced for our mission to keep its substantial aims and avoid being equalled to philanthropic organisations as the NGOs.

- In the recent General and Provincial Chapters, our Congregation had to seriously face this theme and was able to define several points about the management of our

Works, as it was done in the last General Chapter (2018) by amending many points of our General Regulations.

- Another concern we are called to face is the financial management of our Institutions, because of the complexity of laws we have to obey and the decisions to take about the use of instruments and the professionals to employ.

This is not the place to face these issues, that are every-day's concern at the different levels of governance in the Congregation. Here we just give a brief hint to encourage everyone to be attentive to the need of constant updating in order to act always according to our spirit and in unity of direction with the choices and indications of the Congregation.

## **8. Formation for mission**

Today the need is very much felt for a formation for mission, just as for the other essential elements of religious life such as the charism, the spirit, and fraternal life. Even, only in this integrated vision of our vocation, a religious man can in fact answer to God's call. The document "Vita consecrata" states: *"more than in external works, the mission consists in making Christ present to the world through personal witness. This is the challenge; this is the primary task of the consecrated life! The more consecrated persons allow themselves to be conformed to Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in the world for the salvation of all."* (No. 72).

We should say that only an integrated formation and a correct balance among the elements constituting our state of life can assure fidelity and effectiveness to a religious of active life and to apostolic communities.

Moreover, today we are well aware that mission in our complex world requires several other abilities, especially about human relations, but also professional abilities. Therefore, a well-prepared formative curriculum must be prepared to make the religious able to open himself and give himself to the world, to the Church, and to the poor, with a valid personal project of life and mission.

A good initial formation will facilitate the direct insertion in apostolic communities, where the support proper of the formation houses is often not present, and where the young confreres are required some changes in their life and daily habits. A particular note is needed here about the necessary preparation for those called to mission outside their own culture. All apostles need a critical consciousness about their own culture, but surely accomplishing one's mission in a different culture is more challenging.

During the initial formation is certainly important to integrate theoretical formation with practical, progressive experiences that should be meaningful about the charism and also adapted to the personal qualities and aspirations that are present or

developing in the young confrere, trying as much as possible to match the practical experience with the specific pastoral study referred to the charism. Our Congregation always considered the formation period of “regency” very relevant, and when there was abundance of vocations this period lasted two or three years. Certainly, this experience is the most typical stage of our formation. Our Constitutions point out to this period by stating at No. 96: “[the temporarily professed confrere] engages in apostolic service and in activities characteristic of the Institute so that he may ascertain more adequately his personal capabilities in light of the Guanellian mission”. Then our Regulations specify better how this period should be lived, as a very important stage of the young confrere’s formation (see Reg. 199 – 202).

This period’s importance relies especially on the experience the young confrere can do, directly facing the real mission, as the Constitutions point out:

- building up a unity of life between action and contemplation, which means giving full evangelising sense to our activity and vocation;
- experiencing life in an apostolic community;
- active, fraternal, daily presence with our poor;
- the need to go deeper into the principles of Guanellian pedagogy, by practicing the values expressed in our Document for Guanellian Mission (PEG).

The same experiences aim not only to increase the educational – pastoral abilities, but principally to form the confrere in the art of education as “*a work of the heart*” and in the values that will give meaning to all his charity mission in the Congregation.

Accompanying the confreres during regency is the key to make this experience really forming.

Even after the first formation, the Congregation provides formation for mission, especially for the confreres in the early years of their apostolic life, and when they are taking up particular community tasks, as the service of authority or the administration, giving opportunities to share experiences fostering unity, fraternity and an ever-renewed motivation for mission. Sometimes the apostle can undergo periods of discouragement or feel lonely, then he needs fraternal help and moral support especially in the first insertion in apostolic life. These means reach their aim when they elicit active collaboration and personal responsibility, also in view of being open to changes required by times and possible new calls within the Congregation.

A word should be added about vocations’ discernment required by our specific vocation. Often, we hear people say: “Your mission is very difficult, that is why you have few vocations”. Surely, Guanellian vocation requires strong motivations and it happened that some young men left the vocational journey because of the difficulties required by our specific vocation. Yet, we are comforted by the Founder’s conviction of founding his hope on the Lord’s Providence and the prayer of our poor, to have the needed vocations for his salvation design: “*The Institute, started in the midst of many contradictions, in much poverty, entrusted more to God’s Providence than to human prudence, must know*

*how to continue its way and show with facts to the world that God is the One who provides for his children with the prompt care of a Father”.*

## **Conclusion**

The Spirit who rose up Don Guanella in view of a particular participation to the Mission of Christ, and guided him to begin the Guanellian family, continues to keep in the Church our particular form of apostolic life, spreading also today the gift of Guanellian vocation. He accompanies, supports and directs our action, fostering in us the “missionary” spirit that invested also Jesus Christ. He is the cause of the continuity in time of the Guanellian charism, and its passing on is not mechanical or automatic, as for a spiritual doctrine, it happens in a living way by our docility to the Spirit, according the practical needs of the recipients, of the environment, and of times.

As in times of origins the living witness of the Founder established and lived out the fundamental elements on which our mission is based, so also today, our fidelity to the charism will make our mission fruitful, in the circumstances we are called to live and to carry it on in time.

A fundamental identity is permanent in it, firmly attached to God’s loving project for each one of us and for the whole world, but at the same time always open to new demands coming from history, to run to the rescue of people we are sent to, in the practical situation of time and place where we live.

We are aware that we are living in a world enveloped by poverties, daily we see how the future of many persons is jeopardised by sickness, poverty, marginalisation, and also so many emergency situations that touch the poor harder. The Pope keeps telling us that the poor are “the wounded flesh of Christ”. We have the vocation of the “*Good Samaritan*” to elicit in us sentiments of compassion and the commitment to practically rescue the person left by the side of the road. Only in this way we can reveal to the world that “*God provides for his children with the prompt care of a Father*”.

Called to be “beloved children of the Father”, we can confirm our identity only by becoming fathers and brothers of those who are in need and have no one to lift them up and help them.

Fr. Alfonso Crippa

# LECTIO FOR THE ADVENT 2020

## Mark 1:1-8

### John the Baptist Prepares the Way

<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,

<sup>2</sup> as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”—

<sup>3</sup> “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”

<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”



#### BRIEF CONTEXTUALIZATION AND EXPLANATION

- With Mk 1: 1-8 we insert ourselves in the initial words of the Gospel of Mark which, from his first words, recalls the essentiality of the Christological faith. Our gospel page consists of the title (v. 1) and vv. 2-8 that make up the first part of the Prologue (vv. 2-13), in which the announcement of John the Baptist is described.

- Let's pay attention to v. 1. It is a title which is also considered the programmatic theme of the Gospel. It opens with the term "principle" (*archè*), which has at least three meanings: chronological beginning, fundamental principle, criterion. In our context, the term takes on the value of "principle-foundation" and explains how the foundation of the joyful announcement (*euaggelion*) is a person: Jesus.

The following word is "Gospel". Today for us the term indicates the book, that is, the four booklets of Mt, Mk, Lk and Jn. However, in Mark the term does not indicate the book but "the heraldic announcement of news that brings joy". Luke and John never use this term; Mt speaks of "the gospel of the kingdom" (4.23; 9.35; 24.14) or "this gospel" (26.13). Mk uses it 7 times, 2 of which with a clarification: "Gospel of Jesus, Christ" (1,1); "The gospel of God" (1:14); elsewhere in an absolute sense (1.15; 8.35; 10.29; 13.10; 14.9).

- It is thought that it was Mark who first used the term to describe the life and mission of Jesus. Perhaps he followed the tradition of St. Paul. But the Gospel also carries within itself Hellenistic meanings: a) announcement of an important coming; b) announcement of a victory against the enemy; c) announcement of the cure of the disease.

Mark specifies that the Gospel is of Jesus "Christ". From the Greek *Christos*, we mean the Anointed, the *Messiah*. He is the character who was expected since the preaching of the prophets. Therefore, the background is the anointing given by the prophets to the kings and the promise made to David (2 Sam 7). Peter will recognize Jesus as "Christ" (8:29). Some manuscripts add that Jesus is "Son of God".

The evangelist introduces v. 2 the citation from the prophet Isaiah to present the figure of John the Baptist. The citation connects Ex 23,20; Mal 3.1 and Is 40.3. By combining three passages of Scripture, the narrator offers a theological interpretation: he reads the OT according to what he means. He inscribes the person of John the Baptist and his mission in the continuity of the faith of Israel, uniting the joyful announcement to the secular history of the chosen people.

Mark does not report the moral preaching of John (cf. Mt 3,7-10; Lk 3,7-9). Baptism is an appeal to all the people to convert (*metanoia*, change of the nous, that is, of mentality).

- John the Baptist is the prophetic forerunner who opens the way to Jesus. John is the "voice of one crying out in the desert", he is not simply a prophet because his mission will prepare the manifestation of God's salvation for all humanity. Its proclamation is equivalent to divine intervention in history and marks the beginning of the good news. Applying Is 40,3 to the Baptist, the evangelist inserts him into the great biblical tradition of the "desert".

With the symbolic expression "prepare the way in the desert" *Deuteroisaia* wanted to encourage the exiles to leave Babylon. Everyone was asked to make a radical decision: to stay or leave. John with his cry in the desert prepared the people for the coming of the Messiah by demanding the confession of sins and with his baptism he fulfilled the new exodus.

The citation from Is 40,3 makes clear the reference to the exodus from Babylon: as with the post-exilic age a new stage in the history of salvation began, now, with the arrival of the Messiah, the time of universal salvation and manifestation begins of the glory of the Lord. In connection with the prophecy of Isaiah reread in a Christological sense, Mark describes John's activity as a "proclaim" (*keryssein*).

He is the announced messenger, the "voice crying out in the desert" proclaiming the proximity of eschatological time. Just as the herald preceded the king's chariot and shouted loudly announcing the arrival of the sovereign, so John the Baptist preaches in the desert preparing the way for the arrival of the Messiah. He is the herald of the time of salvation and like the prophets he shakes men from sleep and calls their attention to the day of the Lord that is about to arrive.

The Jordan is the place where the revelation of the Old Testament stops (cf. the "ending" of the Torah in Dt 34; the "ending" of the Prophets in Mal 3: 22-23; the "ending" of the Writings in 2 Cr 36 , 23), in addition to the rich prophetic symbolism (Elijah: 2 Kings 2,7-11; Elisha: 2 Kings 5). The fur cloak recalls the prophetic tradition (cf. Zc 13,4; cf. 11,32); the leather belt at the hips recalls that of Elijah: the Elijah who must come at the end of time, in which Jesus himself will recognize his precursor (cf. 2 Kings 1,7-8; Sir 48,9-10; Mal 3,1.23; Mk 9: 11-13).

In this certainty of the imminence of the Messianic time, John announces the baptism of conversion for the remission of sins. It is not the foreign occupation in the Holy Land that prevents the advent of the Messianic kingdom, but the enmity with God caused by sin. Hence the urgency of a radical

conversion: only a deep conversion (*metanoia*) of the heart, a personal return to the Lord will allow belonging to the Kingdom of God which is now near.

To those who manifest the will to abandon their unjust conduct and return to Jehovah with all their heart, John guarantees divine forgiveness. His baptism is the anticipation of Messianic forgiveness and the seal placed on those who await the Kingdom of God. But *metanoia* is at the same time also a gift from God. God gives conversion with baptism, but man's task is to accept it, keep it and confirm it as the foundation of his life.

- In vv. 7-8 John the Baptist acknowledges that he is not the Messiah; he cannot claim any right of "spousal" acquisition towards the people (the symbol of the shoes), despite his own prophetic charism, recognized to him by Jesus himself (1,9-11; 11,27-33). John's announcement concerns a "stronger" one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. The Mark's page allowed us to grasp the beginning of the Gospel story, preparing us for the coming of the Lord, who brings salvation.

#### ❖ ↗ POINTS FOR MEDITATION

- The story opens with the presentation of the Gospel, which brings the good news for humanity. The Gospel is a dynamism that involves the existence of the human being in a process of transformation of the heart. Following Peter's preaching, Mark picked up the Gospel message for the community of Rome. The word "Gospel" constitutes one of the central themes of the story. Proclaiming the "Gospel of the Kingdom" represents the primary commitment of the mission of Jesus. The Risen One will entrust to the community after Easter the commitment to evangelize the people.

- A second aspect of meditation is represented by the testimony of John the Baptist and his radicality. He is the witness sent by God to "prepare" the coming of the Son. With recourse to the prophecy of Isaiah, the evangelist introduces the figure of John the Baptist, emphasizing that he is "the voice" in view of the Word of salvation. Every journey of faith needs witness. Our journey towards Christmas is introduced by this extraordinary protagonist of Advent. His radical existence, his authoritative word, his passion for the truth involve us in a profound acceptance of his message of conversion.

- The third aspect of the Gospel passage is precisely the invitation to conversion (*metanoia*). The radical change of mind (*meta - nous*), of the way of thinking and living, implies an inner process that pushes believers to re-read their own existence from the perspective of salvation. Living conversion means making one's heart available for an encounter with God, the God who comes. It is no longer we who determine the direction of history and life, but it is God who makes himself present in Christ, who transforms our poverty into a gift of salvation. The Son is "greater" than John and will bring a baptism in the Holy Spirit (v. 8).

- A last aspect is represented by the theological theme of the "desert". We know how important the desert theme is in Israel's spirituality and memory. Arid, inhospitable land, a place of trial and despair, the desert is part of the history of Israel and highlights all its weakness. Especially in rethinking the exodus from Egypt and the journey to the promised land, the believer must be able to recognize in the desert the "place of change" and the time of trial that prepares the gifts of the Lord. The desert is the land that must be crossed with the confidence that God does not abandon his people. This is the certainty that must also accompany us in the time of Advent.

#### ❖ QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY REFLECTION

- “Look at your story when you pray and in it you will find so much mercy. At the same time this will fuel your awareness that the Lord holds you in his memory and never forgets you. Consequently, it makes sense to ask him to enlighten even the small details of your existence, which do not escape him” (GE 153).
- The foundation of the Gospel is Jesus: how do I live the encounter with Christ in my daily life? Do I feel that I am growing in the relationship with the Lord? What are the signs of this process of maturation?
- The time of Advent is a time of "desert", of reflection, of solitude and of rethinking: do I open myself to God and to his Word? What does the Lord ask me to change in my life today?
- The radical nature of my choices is not simply a moral condition but an existential, planning one: how do I live my life project? How do I build my relationships in the community and outside? Do I feel involved and challenged by the need to help the brothers?

#### ✚ PSALM FOR PRAYING TOGETHER

##### † SAL 27

The person praying raises his prayer to the Lord so that he may be heard and not abandoned. God will open the way and will know how to guide those who trust in Him.

7. Listen, Lord, to my voice. I cry: have mercy on me, answer me!

8. My heart repeats your invitation: "Seek my face!" Your face, Lord, I seek.

9. Do not hide your face from me, do not reject your servant in anger. You are my help, do not leave me, do not abandon me, God of my salvation.

10. My father and mother have forsaken me, but the Lord has taken me up.

11. Show me, O Lord, your way, lead me on the right path, for they set snares for me.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

*(Thanks to Fr. Giuseppe Di Virgilio, author of the text)*