



Rome, 25.3.2021

*“He at once spoke to them and said: ‘Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid’”. (Mk 6,50)
“Courage for the present ... and especially for the future” (St. Daniel Comboni)*

Dear confreres,

Greetings of joy and peace in this time of Lent that leads us to the Easter of resurrection. This is the month during which we celebrate the 190th anniversary of the birth in this world of our Father and Founder Saint Daniel Comboni. We therefore wish, together with you, to thank God for giving to the Church and the entire world our Institute – the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus – and for the mission he gave us of announcing the Gospel to the poorest and most abandoned.

The time of this pandemic we have been going through for more than a year now is changing the habits and lifestyles of many people and institutions and obliges us to take stock of the situation as it affects the next General Chapter of the Institute: it is necessary to take into account the journey of reparation, the present situation of the pandemic and the future prospects regarding the date and place where it will be held.

The XIX General Chapter and the journey of preparation so far completed

On 19 June 2020, the solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we convoked the XIX General Chapter and indicated the date and place where it was to be held. We also set out the journey of preparation that hinges mainly on the involvement, in various modalities, of all the confreres, in the journeys already commenced in recent years.

One of the modalities expected to involve all the confreres is that of provincial assemblies: in them, dialogue and discernment is begun on the report of each circumscription to the Chapter which will later be drafted by the Circumscription Councils and Chapter delegates. However, the pandemic that is upsetting the whole world has forced some circumscriptions to postpone their provincial assemblies: to date, many of them have not yet been held.

In some continents, the continental journey towards the General Chapter has already begun while in others this has not been possible. The same can be said of some sectors as compared with others. Even today we must ask ourselves if we can soon have continental meetings, whether we can obtain visas and can travel so as to meet together and prepare our continental reports to the Chapter.

The delay in electing Chapter delegates has, in effect, postponed – with respect to the dates planned by the General Council – the appointment of the Pre-Chapter Commission, causing it to be delayed until next April. We will then choose and appoint Chapter observers as well.

The journey together with the Chapter facilitator has already begun but we have been able to hold just one meeting with him and the entire General Administration; before resuming our meetings, we will wait until the health emergency diminishes.

The celebration of the XIX General Chapter and Covid-19 restrictions

The pandemic is deeply affecting the lives of each one of us and of the human community, changing our habits and lifestyles. Our Institute is also marked by this situation: at this point, we remember all our confreres who died because of the virus: they are dead to us but alive in God and they continue their mission supporting us with their prayers in their beatific vision of the Father.

Another factor to be taken into account is the different variations of the virus that have emerged, increasing its transmissibility and causing an increase in deaths: we are therefore asked to have consideration for ourselves and others so as not to become means of spreading the virus.

The general situation of the pandemic and that of Italy, in particular, is not hopeful. Just when we ought to be having our Chapter, we are in the middle of a third pandemic wave: the number of infections is high as is that of deaths every day. Many restrictions are still in force including the prohibition of movement and assembly, especially when it is not possible to observe social distancing and other restrictive measures. If the current measures are still in force in September, we will not be able to hold the Chapter at the General Curia. Our house would not enable us to observe social distancing and we would be guilty of crime before the Italian authorities. We have considered the possibility of holding the Chapter in an establishment close to

Rome: this option would increase Chapter costs by 30%, without resolving the problem of the obligatory quarantine of two weeks for people coming from outside the European community. We would still face the problems of visas and the real possibility of travelling to Rome. We also asked ourselves what would happen if one or more Chapter members were to become ill and in need of intensive care. If this were to occur, we would be faced with a difficult situation where all the Chapter members would be placed in quarantine by the public health authorities.

We then asked the members of the General Administration and the Curia community for their opinion. The majority of them suggested we postpone the Chapter. In addition, two-thirds of all the Chapter members, whether ex officio or elected, whom we consulted, also suggested we postpone the Chapter.

For all the reasons given, the General Council believes that the conditions for holding the General Chapter in security, in the chosen time and place are not present. It therefore communicates to the whole Institute its decision to postpone it to a date to be established. This date will be decided upon during the Consulta in June 2021.

We have, therefore, some time to monitor the evolution of the pandemic and especially the progress of the vaccination programme worldwide; we hope by then to be able to discern the length of the delay of the Chapter. Once discernment is complete and a decision taken, the GC will inform the Vatican: it is, in fact, the competence of the Holy See to approve the decision. At that point, we will inform the whole Institute of the new date and the place where the general Chapter will be held.

For the present, the Holy See does not permit Chapters to be held telematically. If it were to allow it, we would have to decide whether or not to hold the Chapter in this way and then plan its organisation.

The journey goes on

We feel we must point out, however, that even though the Chapter is postponed, the journey of preparation for the Chapter and the life of the Institute continue. We therefore invite the whole Institute and all the confreres to greater individual and communitarian participation in the preparation for the Chapter and in responding to the questionnaire. We encourage all the circumscriptions and continents to go ahead with the preparation of their reports to the Chapter and to organise telematic meetings on the four themes of the Chapter. Once it is appointed, the pre-Chapter Commission will be able to assist in this journey of preparation.

The Service of the General Council: Our Rule of Life, 157 and 157.1 states: *“The Superior General and his Council are elected to office for a period of six years at the end of which another Chapter is convoked. The General Council continues in office until the next Council is elected”*. The Congregation for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CIVCSVA) in its letter dated 2 April 2020, Prot. n. Sp.R. 2419/20 writes: *“Contextually, it is to be remembered that the mandates of Major Superiors and their respective Councils are extended until the next celebration of the Chapters”*. The General Council is therefore waiting patiently and continues its service entrusting itself to your prayers.

Conclusion

We are obviously living in a completely new time that demands a spirit of adaptation, creativity and courage so as not to suffer it passively but rather to transform it into an opportunity for each one of us and the entire Institute. In accomplishing this transformation there are no roads already laid out or pathways that may simply be followed: we are called to become ourselves the journey and, through innovation and fruitfulness, and while remaining faithful to the Gospel and the charism we have been given, to set out with decision and joy on the road that will lead us to encounter this wounded, though deeply loved, humanity.

May Mary, our Mother and the Mother of all, Saint Daniel Comboni and all the confreres who have preceded us in the Kingdom of Heaven, intercede for us and all humanity: to them we entrust our journey towards the XIX General Chapter.

Fr. Tesfaye Tadesse Gebresilasie

Fr. Jeremias dos Santos Martins

Fr. Alcides Costa

Fr. Ciuciulla Pietro

Bro. Lamana Cónsola Alberto

