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Towards the new Constitutions

Most of the replies to the questionnaire on the revision of the Constitutions have now arrived, and they are being sorted, studied and synthesized by a special group, to facilitate the work of the Constitutions Committee, which will prepare a report during the month of March for presentation to the Enlarged General Council. The EGC will study the report at its meeting at Carcavelos in May and will appoint a committee for the writing of the first draft of the Constitutions.

A glance at the replies that have arrived reveals that there has been a fairly high level of abstention. During our recent visits we have seen and heard some of the reasons for this: overwork and lack of time; doubts as to the necessity or usefulness of Constitutions (is it possible to "fix" something in a world of

perpetual change?); doubts as to whether this is the right time for it (is it not too soon to take definitive decisions?); priority given to real-life situations rather than to theory; lack of interest in juridical and legalistic questions; tiredness and lack of energy in some Provinces and communities. Perhaps the main reason is that a lot of energy was put into the replies to the questionnaire for the General Chapter two years ago and that many felt they had already expressed their views sufficiently.

However, before taking up the second stage of the process, it would seem worthwhile to draw attention to the implications of this challenge that the Vatican Council has given us, with consequences that could be decisive for the future of the Congregation.

The time has come

On 14 November 1979, addressing 600 Women Superiors General in the Sistine Chapel, during the fifth General Assembly of the UISG, Pope John Paul II said:

"After several years of experiments with a view to updating religious life in accordance with the spirit of each institute, the time has come to evaluate these efforts objectively and humbly so as to bring out the positive elements, set aside any deviations there may have been, and prepare a stable Rule of life, approved by the Church and providing the Sisters with a stimulus for a deeper knowledge of their commitments and a life of joyful fidelity".

It is our task now to try to define the characteristic traits of our Congregation in the post-Vatican II

Church. It is not the first time that the Congregation has had to redefine itself: about every twenty years since the death of Libermann there has been a revision of the Constitutions. The Venerable Father himself foresaw such a process when he drew up the Provisional Rule: *"I am not trying to draw up a complete and final Rule, but to give an impulse and establish the true spirit of the work. Changes will be made later on, in the light of experience"* (Letter to Dom Salier, N.D. II, 154).

The last revision of our Constitutions goes back to 1957. Since then there has been Vatican II, changes in the concept of mission, the rediscovery of our Founders, the new Foundations in the Southern Hemisphere, and the new awareness of universality, subsidiarity, coresponsibility, dialogue with the world,

local Churches, Justice and Peace. . . All of this has broken former moulds and requires a 'second conversion' on our part.

Our whole religious life, in its spirit and organization, is geared to mission: the proclamation of the Kingdom and service of the poor. As in the past, but in a new way, we can say: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to proclaim liberation, healing, salvation, the Good News*". To us also it is said: "*Go and tell John the Baptist what you have seen and heard: the blind see. . .*" Our new Constitutions must be at the service of this concept of apostolate, evangelization, mission. They must stir us to a quality of life, a true

witness, that responds to the demands of our ministry. They must help us to understand it better, to live it more completely and to organize it more efficiently. The revision of the Constitutions will be the result of our understanding of what we are. They will bear witness to our insights into the faith, in contact with this Church and world that are no longer the Church and world of even a few years ago.

What then are our sources of inspiration? What are the basic values that will influence our future? What are the priorities that will call to us? In a word, what is 'God's today' for the Congregation?

Our identity card

Our Constitutions are a sort of identity card of the Congregation. Rather than a collection of norms and a rule of conduct, they should express what is best in us, what the love of God has placed in our hearts, his dream for each of us, the joy of the gift of ourselves, understood and accepted by us, our dedication without reserve to the cause of the most abandoned. They should tell a story, our story, lived by thousands of confreres since the beginning of the Congregation. They should be a storehouse of our riches, expressing the best of what all Spiritans have lived and contributed to the service of the Kingdom. It is from this past heritage that we get our inspiration for today.

Whether we think of the 1734 Rule or Libermann's Provisional Rule, texts have always been first

of all the expression of a lived faith-experience before being written down. Every Rule is basically a biography and remains alive only if based on biographies. It is because it is this special kind of book that the revision of our Constitutions is a challenge to us. The biggest difficulty to be faced is not one of vocabulary but one of content.

When a Congregation is faithful to its charism and meets in a General Chapter to express in today's terms what it believes and what it lives, it is not difficult for it to find the words. The sad thing would be if confreres had nothing to say about their life.

Have we not much that we can say to the world today from the experiences we have lived?

Our letter of recommendation

When St. Paul wished to present his credentials to the Corinthians as an Apostle, he referred only to the living community that he had founded: "*You yourselves are my letter of recommendation. . . , which anybody can see and read*" (2 Cor. 3:2). Is it not the same for ourselves? To revise our Constitutions means to take stock of our lives. The faith-experience of each confrere, the life of faith of each community, must be the first 'constitutional' value for any institute. Our Constitutions are, in the words of St. Paul, "*a letter written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on stone tablets but on the tablets of your living hearts*" (2 Cor. 3:3).

The revision of our Constitutions should be a sort of Pentecostal period, in which the whole Congregation will assemble in the Upper Room and allow itself to be 'invaded' by the Holy Spirit. It is from Him that the first word on the revision should come. Certainly

there must be discussion and consensus, but in a sense the Constitutions precede our consensus: the Spirit should be there before us. Our reflection and our study are only to try to discern together what the Spirit has already written in the heart of each one.

St. Paul goes still further and stresses the witness value of this 'constitutional letter': it is not in the first place something individual; still less is it a work of experts or of an editorial committee; there is something in it that only a community can give, and only a living community experience can give life to the texts. Without this experience, neither the Church's approbation nor the most careful editorial work will be able to make us credible and give value to our message. Without his 'letter of recommendation', St. Paul himself would have felt like an intruder in the apostolate.

A task for all to share in

Called as we are to live Christ's life in community, it is in community that we must revise our Constitutions. Some seem to be suspicious of the text in advance, fearing that it will not bring out sufficiently the deep paschal experience, the long discernment

that preceded the writing of the original Rule. But are we lacking in prophets? Is it not possible for our new Constitutions to be a living witness of faith rather than the fruit of analytical study and legalism?

● The revision of the Constitutions should be first of all the expression of the love of each one of us for the Church and the Congregation. It must be a renewal of 'life', and love is the only force capable of generating new life. There can be no Rule which is not the fruit of great love. There is a special 'grace for the revision of Constitutions' and in practice, for each of us, this means seeing how we stand in our love for the Congregation.

● Each of us should play his part in the revision. This does not mean that each of us should be on the committee! There has to be a special group appointed to try to express the feelings and insights of the others, but we should each have the opportunity to make our views known. It is a task to be done TOGETHER.

● A third important point is that it should be a work, not of 'experts', but of really committed people. A deep knowledge of the Congregation is necessary – its history, its original inspiration, its mission in the Church, its tradition. It can only be done by those of the family. Others may be able to help – experts in canon law or in the theology of the religious life – but the basic work must be done by members whose hearts are committed to the Congregation, with the intuition and sensitivity that only members can have.

● Another requirement is the state of conversion. Without it, how will the Holy Spirit be able to do his work? We must be completely open to the Lord and his demands. Only *"the pure of heart will see God"*, who *"gives his grace to the humble and resists the proud"*.

● A final requirement is unity and family spirit. A divided Congregation would not be capable of the work, and the Holy Spirit is not present where there is discord. An atmosphere of confrontation and conflict would make it impossible to see things clearly in God.

But we must be fully conscious that we live our unity not only in diversity but in the midst of real and painful divisions that affect the Church as a whole and that we are not in a position to heal. They form part of the cross that we must carry.

The Constitutions will remind us that the ideal that we share lies beyond these divisions, at the end of a road that is still not clear. They will help us to hold out our hand to each other in brotherly love and to esteem each other in spite of differences, because we remain brothers and we all wish to work for God's Kingdom.

A Rule of Life

The first aim of any revision of Constitutions is always a return to the Sermon on the Mount, a re-awakening to the primacy of the Gospel. And having the Gospel as our basic inspiration means proposing a program of radical options that will affect our lives. Vague, lukewarm Constitutions that "empty the cross of Christ" would be useless. The new Constitutions, like the old, should not hesitate to speak of a hard road and a narrow door, a cross to be taken up every day, long periods of prayer, the renunciation of material possessions, the suppression of useless expense and costly clothing.

At the same time, Constitutions that are drawn up in the spirit of the Gospel should have all the human and divine warmth of Christ; they cannot be juridical documents, imposing a law or a sabbath that would take precedence over persons.

Renewed Constitutions will tell us to stop when we meet a widow of Nain and to weep when our friend Lazarus dies; they will give us the heart of St. Paul to call our brothers "beloved", as he did the Christians of Rome.

Renewed Constitutions will teach us to leave ninety-nine persons who are safe to go in search of the one that is lost; they will shake us out of the comfortable circle into which we so often close ourselves and open us to the problems of the Church and the world. We must be prepared for the new Constitutions to drag us out of ourselves.

In a course that he gave on the question, Fr. Dortelet-Claudot reproached Congregations that would tailor the demands of their Constitutions to the needs of confreres who, in spite of good will, are content with a minimum: so as not to upset them, the Constitutions are brought down to their level. A Rule should state clearly the ideal to be lived. Human weakness will see to it that we do not always live up to the ideal, but let us humbly accept that the Rule should challenge us and shake us out of our laziness.

May our new Constitutions clear the air of our communities and help us to breathe the Gospel!

A source of identity

"Given the importance of Constitutions for the identity, development and unity of a Congregation, it is not good to remain too long with provisional texts... The time of revising should not be prolonged unnecessarily. Twelve years should normally be sufficient. On the other hand, the task is a demanding one, requiring an experience of life before codification... It should also be remembered that

the full understanding of one's charism requires time, both for it to become really part of oneself and for seeing all its implications... There can be sound reasons, therefore, why an Institute that has seriously worked at the revision of its Constitutions might not be able to have its text ready for the second ordinary Chapter".

This was the reply of Sister Mary Linscott, of the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for Religious, to some Congregations of Women that had expressed uneasiness at the prospect of a deadline for having their Constitutions ready.

It reminds us that it is not good to remain too long in a state of experimentation on questions that concern the Congregation's backbone: we would be in danger of losing our uprightness and internal cohesion.

It is our Constitutions that rally us around a clear and unambiguous Common Project, without confreres

going off to 'do their own thing'. They protect us from pressures of various kinds, both within the Church and from outside.

They are our identity card and at the same time the guarantee and source of this identity. Those who wrote our original Rules and Constitutions (Poullart des Places, Bouic, and Libermann during the year 1840 that he spent in Rome) took all the time needed to ensure that they would express our identity, and this heritage is a precious one that we should not cast aside but enrich with the experience gained since then.

New vitality

It is in the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* of the Second Vatican Council that all religious institutes were asked to revise their Constitutions in the light of the Council. It is clear from the Decree that what is aimed at is less the revision of the texts themselves than the renewal and adaptation of religious life in all its aspects. In other words, what is important is not new Constitutions but new vitality. The revision of the texts is merely the consequence, the expression, of the changes in religious life - changes that move in two directions: back towards the sources and out towards the world, the return to the essential and the return to the real. In biblical terms one would speak of 'conversion' and of 'signs of the times'.

● The first principle given in *Perfectae Caritatis* for the revision of Constitutions concerns their faithfulness to the Gospel. Shall we return to a radically Christian life or shall we remain on the periphery? Will our Constitutions be firmly rooted in the Gospel or have only a vague connection with it? Will they contain really evangelical values or merely juridical norms? There is, it is true, a "letter that kills", but there is also a letter that inspires and is a source of life.

● The second principle concerns fidelity to the charism of the Congregation. To what extent will they be "the Gospel according to Poullart or Libermann"? Will the lives of our Founders and their faith experiences be the light that illuminates our texts? Will they provide the impulsion that will set us on course again? Constitutions cut off from their Founder would be like a fruit cut off from its tree, or like a tree that has been uprooted. The primitive Rule of St.

Francis, which is considered the Rule that is closest to the Gospel, was not the Gospel according to Mark or Luke but "the Gospel according to the intuition of St. Francis". The Founder's life is the book or the place in which God has chosen to reveal his intentions for each of us. And renewed Constitutions will have all the more impact if they succeed in transmitting in all their vigour the dreams and ideals of the Founders.

● The third principle given in *Perfectae Caritatis* is that Constitutions should be in tune with the needs of the present age. They should not be the echo of a past period of history but should rather look towards the future. When a Founder writes his original Rule, he writes it for the age in which he lives, but in the years preceding Vatican II much had changed in the world while the structures of religious life were becoming out-of-date and its language was no longer the language of the times. If there were defections from religious life after the Council, the fault is not to be sought in the Council but rather in the religious life that had preceded it. With changes in its prestige and social role, flaws in its evangelical vitality were quickly revealed.

Shall we be able to find the true sources of our own vitality, and the language in which to express them for today? Our Constitutions are not meant to speak to the world at large, but may they at least speak to us and to the hearts of young men today and tomorrow.

THE GENERALATE TEAM.

"We agreed that a Provisional Rule should be written from the start, before the missionaries left, even though it would take several years of experience before it could be definitely fixed. The reason is that if the missionaries go out to different countries and get absorbed in their activities without some sort of Rule in their hands, it will be almost impossible for the work to develop" (Libermann, *Letter to Dom Salier*, N.D. II, 153).

"In any society there must be a rule. Look at the world around us: there isn't the smallest gathering of people with a common purpose, not even, for instance, a stagecoach office, that hasn't got its rules, for without them individuals would act on their own, there would be no unity and therefore no society" (Libermann, *Provisional Rule*, Gloss, p. 59).