

Dear confrere:

INTRODUCTION: The general Council, in communion with the three new Provincial Administrations of South America (St. Joseph, St. Peter, and St. Paul) at the beginning of their mandate, with the African-European (Blessed J.B. Scalabrini) – soon to be appointed – and the remainder three Provinces (St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, and St. Frances X. Cabrini), feels the need to renew our trust in the *God of hope* (Jer. 29,11.13), precisely at this moment when five of them are called to serve in authority. God comes in human flesh to the pastoral and formation communities, that they may proclaim in unison with joy to the migrant brothers and sisters and to all religious, the Father who loves us in the Spirit and has redeemed us in his Son, who died, rose and now lives among us (Cfr. Deus Caritas Est, 12).

APPEALS. Reaching the end of the year and glimpsing the first rays of the new one, the Word of God, personally reflected and celebrated in community, so rich in the time of Advent, invites us to reflect upon the questioning of the heart and to accept the appeals of fraternal life in community.

1. **ON THE LOOK OUT.** We must sharpen our senses in discerning God's signs calling us to rediscover religious life as an "*apostolic congregation of religious men*" (RL, 1). We are living a year of hope, that began with the celebration of the XIII General Chapter and concluded with the precious encyclical of the Pope: "Spe Salvi". I invite you then to remain with me in watchful prayer listening to what God is whispering to the heart of the congregation (1 Cor. 4,5)!

We do not seem to have fully reached a consensus about the faithful interpretation and the common practice of the Scalabrinian Missionary Project. We still have to make a few more steps in discovering and discerning what God wants of us. I trust in your commitment, starting from the religious in the general and provincial/regional Administrations, so that the dictates of the XIII General Chapter (No. 14,1.d) be accepted and observed. In doing so we will harvest the fruits of the Spirit promised to the Congregation. I also trust all religious, in following with the Chapter directives (No. 14,2.a) that they be faithful heralds and genuine interpreters to the communities of the final document's directives. Look at the ethnic and international make up of the general Administration: it reflects what the Congregation is at now and what it will be from now on. My councilors and I are fully convinced that the service in authority we have been called to is a sign of acceptance by the broad base community.

2. **WAKE UP.** The second appeal, taken from the Word of God, comes from the very words of Paul: "*It's time to wake up from sleep*" (Rom. 13:11). It's a fraternal call to warn us against the weakening among us of our religious commitment and missionary spirit. When we let ourselves be enlightened by Christ's star at Bethlehem, the darkness that wraps around some of us – compulsive individualism, lack of communion, satisfying comforts, inconsistent talks, defense of personal projects, opposition to the opening of the charism, fear of risking new horizons, rationalization of failures... - will shine brightly. That light will flow into harmonious relationships amongst brothers, open and reconciled dialogues, friendships marked by sincere affection, Easter joy, and tangible and creative solidarity.

The call to "*be disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ*" (5th Latin-American and Caribbean Bishops Conference, at Aparecida), freely received from God's love requires a firm and decisive option for Jesus Christ and for his project. It requires a proven consistency between that "Yes" pronounced on the day of our consecration and the daily attitudes and behaviors. It requires a life – reason, heart, and feelings – lived out according to the freedom of the evangelical counsels (1Thess 5:23-24). It requires gifting ourselves willingly for the mission of the Church with a deep seeded compassion toward the confreres and toward our migrant sisters and brothers and refugees.



3. **STRAIGHTENING OUT.** The third appeal comes from John the Baptist's call: "*Straighten out your ways!*" (Mt 3:3). It's an urgent appeal that sounds strong at the threshold of the new year. **In compliance to the XIII General Chapter (No. 14,1.d) we propose to the formation houses and pastoral communities to dedicate the year 2008 as the Year of the Rules of Life and of the Community.** It's a journey we have begun some years ago, thanks to the various studies done on our roots and to the gift of the Founder's beatification. It has been a journey in retracing the sources of our identity, charisma, spirituality and mission. As a matter of fact, Blessed J.B. Scalabrini is more loved today, precisely because he is better known and prayed by the religious, the lay people, the young ones and the very same Church. As Christian men who have chosen to closely follow Christ in Consecrated Life by professing fidelity to the prophetic spirit of Scalabrini, we cannot ignore the Rules of Life. They are one of the spiritual sources for community growth. From the very first Bylaws of March 6, 1888, written by the Founder, the current Rules of Life have embraced the spirit of renewal willed by Vatican II. Scalabrini stands as a forerunner.

In fact one day with courage we bet our very self and everything else on these Rules of Life! It was on these Rules that one time we made the decision to offer our life to soothe the wounds of migrants in a broken world. Inspired by the XIII General Chapter we ought to embrace theologically and lovingly the Rules in our downtrodden hearts. Our community meetings and assemblies, our pastoral planning and "life evaluations" are often oriented more on doing than opened to dialogue about our being. It's here that we all must grow our sense of belonging to the Congregation and to the Church. As we face new challenges, that some religious are so afraid to recognize, and as we face the consequences of internationalization – present in most Institutes of Consecrated Life today – I am convinced that our rediscovering the Founder must be accompanied by our returning to the Scalabrinian sources through the Rules of Life. These are the banks where runs the river of renewed community enthusiasm, of daring missionary spirit, of fair sharing of goods, of joy in announcing Christ to all peoples, and also the springtime of vocations (Cfr. Phil 4:4-5). We must be ready to answer a very basic question found in the Fathers of the Church about searching for a spiritual master: "Tell me what is the rule". Based on the answer the novice would make a choice which to follow.

As brothers in need of reconciliation before setting out to follow the only Master we have (Mt. 23:8), in the light of the prophetic example given by Scalabrini, let us accept the Rules of Life as a powerful tool to uproot the lifestyles that are not in tune with the Gospel (Cfr. Rom. 13:13-14) and in open contradiction to the same Rules of Life. Amidst the diversity of spiritual upbringing and pastoral models, as we learned in Novitiate, the Rules of Life are like *the compass* signaling the direction of our criteria and behaviors, like *the lighthouse* brightening the balance between community and mission and *the word* that denounces the disheartened missionary spirit and the weakening of fraternal life and of vocational appeal.

CONCLUSION. Thanks for your dedication to life in community and to your pastoral commitment for the good of the Congregation throughout this past year. 2007 was marked with bright hope, and also with pain and suffering: 9 confreres have reached the heavenly home, 21 have made their first profession, 10 perpetual professions, among them one religious brother, and 19 priestly ordinations. This same year has also been characterized by a gripping question mark regarding formation: 16 young confreres with temporary vows have left us! It is a sign we must interpret with serenity... and creative fidelity to God's plan!

I am sure that this is the golden rule leading to a harmonious balance between personal witness and *new evangelization*, between community discernment and *new global migration era*. We will then discover our specific identity in the Church – less fragmented and secularized. We will accept the challenges of the new missionary frontiers of our charisma, as in Asia and in Africa, whereabouts all – priests, brothers and lay people – committed to the poorest of migrants, will be the visible signs of Emmanuel's kingdom -God with us. (Cfr. Is. 7:14-15)

Best wishes of a Christmas feast day, filled with God's presence, lived out in fraternal community and made present in the life of migrants, refugees and seafarers.

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Superior general and his Council