



OPENING CONFERENCE

GENERAL CHAPTER 2013

11 September 2013

Mother Cecilia Wang osu

The Summons

We have all heard the “summons” from Jesus...to follow him; to leave self behind; to show forth his love and compassion; to take risks for his sake.

And now we are summoned here together to hear him again, to discern his call for our Institute today.

This morning at the Opening Mass we were called one by one to come together for this 20th General Chapter of the Roman Union, which I now formally declare open.

With the General Council, I warmly welcome all of you to this important moment in the life of our Institute.

First, I want to take a moment of remembrance of Sr Milagros del Pilar Miranda Carmen. Sr Milagros bravely faced her illness over more than a year and all that time gave of herself to her Province of Peru. After those months of suffering she is with Jesus, but we do not forget her sisters, who, while they know her to be with the risen Lord, also experience the sadness of their loss. Sr Andreja and Sr Rosana, we share with you in your loss and in your courage.

A Chapter is an important event in the journey of our Institute; it is a moment to celebrate our charism; to renew our commitment as an Institute and to look at our future direction.

It is also “a sign of unity in charity”. Its “function is to protect the patrimony of the Institute....and to promote an appropriate spiritual and apostolic renewal.” (Art. 172) (Canon 631)

Our patrimony is the charism of Angela and our traditions of religious life lived over the centuries. To protect this patrimony means to see how it can be best lived out today; how it is relevant for today.

The Chapter represents the whole Institute and, while it is in session, is the supreme authority in the Institute. All the members have equal responsibility. It is collegial. We are here as a body. I am not here for my own interests or the interests of my own Province, but for the interests of the whole.

At the Chapters of 2001 and 2007, the capitulants spent several days raising the priorities for the Chapter. This time the General Council and the last Enlarged General Council have seen urgent issues which are facing us. We have seen, stemming from the recommendations of the Chapter of 2007, a development of regional solidarity in our Institute. We have also seen a need to reconfigure some of our structures within Provinces and between Provinces. From this, the EGC identified the call which we have all contemplated: “Go out into deep water” and together in these weeks we have the task to see what this will entail for our future life.

The Chapter of 2007 called us to “go beyond our borders.” In our preparations for this Chapter, we found ourselves again and again conscious of the need to go deeper: to rediscover the riches of our spirituality; to deepen our living of community; to go out courageously in ministry; to deepen our witness to Jesus by our consecrated life in today’s world.

When we look at our Institute as a whole, we have areas where there are vocations and where there are young sisters; but we have to face also the reality that in many areas Provinces are diminishing in numbers and are ageing. Maybe it feels like a crisis. I would like to remind you that the Roman Union was born in a crisis and grew through the solidarity of one monastery helping another under persecution and another with very few sisters.

As you probably know, the Mandarin symbol for crisis (WeiJi) is made up of danger and opportunity. This Chapter is our opportunity to collaborate in solidarity in order to give life and vitality.

This Chapter is taking place as we come towards the end of the Year of Faith; a year which has seen momentous events in the Church; the election of Pope Francis who has brought his own spontaneity to the Church and to his leadership.

The Encyclical “The Light of Faith”, in which Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have both had a hand, also gives us some encouragement in the face of our opportunity.

*Faith is a light coming from the future and opening before us vast horizons which guide us beyond our isolated selves towards the breadth of communion.*¹

In some of his homilies at his morning Mass at Saint Martha's and in his talk to the novices and seminarians gathered in Rome in July, Pope Francis reminds us of another aspect of our life of faith, of what it is to be contemplative and apostolic, of what needs to be our basic attitude.

*Go out of yourselves to proclaim the Gospel, but to do this you must go out of yourselves to encounter Jesus.....Don't be afraid to go out of yourselves in prayer and in pastoral action. Be courageous in praying and in going out to proclaim the Gospel.*²

*Cultivate the spiritual life and, at the same time, go out, meet people, especially those most scorned and disadvantaged. Don't be afraid to go against the tide. Be contemplatives and missionaries.*³

In recent years we have talked a lot about the need for conversion, the need of each of us for conversion, a conversion from fear to faith and trust. The Holy Father encourages to go out without fear with our eyes fixed on Jesus. In the text of Luke which we have contemplated over the past year, we see Peter afraid and aware of his sinfulness before Jesus: *Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man.* And Jesus' response: *Do not be afraid.*⁴

Many situations in the Gospel find Peter afraid. The Holy Father reminds us, *We are weak, but we must be courageous in our weakness.....We are tempted to say, "I am safe where I am.....I fear moving forward...I am afraid of where the Lord will bring me.".....Do not be afraid; always look to the Lord.*⁵

It is our relationship with Jesus which overcomes our fear and enables us to go out. *Without a constant relationship with God, the mission becomes a job.....If we look at Jesus, we see that prior to any important decision or event he recollected himself in intense and prolonged prayer. Let us cultivate the contemplative dimension, even amid the whirlwind of more urgent and pressing duties....Let your heart be closely united to Christ's heart, full of mercy and love.*⁶

Richard Rohr (an author perhaps known to some of you) says:

*Faith is the leap into the water, now with the lived experience that there is One who can and will catch you – and lead you where you need to go!*⁷

In Angela's words: *Without doubt you will see marvellous things, if you direct everything to the praise and glory of his Majesty and the good of souls.*⁸

In her prayer, Angela sums up well for us the journey of faith: the need for conversion, the commitment to mission, the offering of her whole self.

With her we will sing now her prayer to *My Lord, my life, my hope – open my eyes to your light.*

During the Chapter may Angela keep us pure in our desire to seek God's will for all our sisters, to seek the way forward with our eyes fixed on Jesus ready to fulfil the mission that he gives us.

I would like to end by invoking also the help of our Mother Mary by saying together the prayer which ends the Encyclical:

Mother, help our faith!

Open our ears to hear God's word and to recognize his voice and call.

Awaken in us a desire to follow in his footsteps,

to go forth from our own land and to receive his promise.

Help us to be touched by his love, that we may touch him in faith.

Help us to entrust ourselves fully to him and to believe in his love,

especially at times of trial, beneath the shadow of the cross,

when our faith is called to mature.

Sème dans notre foi la joie du Ressuscité.

Rappelle-nous que celui qui croit n'est jamais seul.

Enseigne-nous à regarder avec les yeux de Jésus, pour qu'il soit lumière sur notre chemin.

Et que cette lumière de la foi grandisse toujours en nous

jusqu'à ce qu'arrive ce jour sans couchant,

qui est le Christ lui-même, ton Fils, notre Seigneur!

Sow in our faith the joy of the Risen One.

Remind us that those who believe are never alone.

Teach us to see all things with the eyes of Jesus, that he may be light for our path.

And may this light of faith always increase in us, until the dawn of that undying day

which is Christ himself, your Son, our Lord!⁹

¹ Encyclical Letter: Lumen Fidei 4

² Talk of Pope Francis to Novices and Seminarians, Rome, 6 July 2013

³ Ibid.

⁴ Luke 5: 8, 10

⁵ Homily of Pope Francis at Santa Marta 2 July 2013

⁶ Homily of Pope Francis to Novices and Seminarians, Rome, 7 July 2013

⁷ Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent, Richard Rohr

⁸ Counsels, Prologue 18

⁹ Encyclical Letter: Lumen Fidei 60