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A word from the superior general

Climbing Mount Tabor then descending to the real world

*'On hearing the voice, the disciples fell to the ground, full of fear.
But Jesus came, touched them and said, "Stand up, do not be afraid."
When they raised their eyes, they no longer saw anyone except Jesus.'*

(Mt 17, 6-8).

Dear Betharramites,

These verses of Jesus on Tabor with the disciples are part of a text presented as an Image of the life of all consecrated persons in the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (VC 14). When we read them, the call to get up and **go out to share** resounds with us. Do it without fear. Face the Christian life, just as it comes today: in challenging circumstances and in a time of decline...

When God calls us he is also determined that we be happy. He speaks to our heart, takes us to the top of the mountain, shows us the foundations of his Word (the law and the prophets), and gives us the means to achieve happiness, in particular his Son. Along the way, he never renounces his love for us, even if from time to

time we make him angry because of our lack of faith or our clumsiness. He stays with us even when current temptation leads us to focus on self (self-referentiality, individualism, narcissism), forgetting that love is giving oneself, offering oneself as a meal, making a sweet alliance in which we abandon ourselves in the Other.

This was the experience of the apostles when they were with Jesus. He took them apart (he 'consecrated' them) and said to them: 'Watch and pray' (Mt 26:41) and they fell asleep, or became isolated... But later discipleship made them learn to always stand up, never to fear, to trust in his presence; but only after Easter when guided by the Holy Spirit, they reached their own 'transfigured existence'. In the first apostolic community, they would become authentic 'other Christs.'

That Paschal experience also marks our life. Religious consecration is a call to awaken from the dream. Because our dreams are not always the dreams that the Lord has for us. We see very dimly, and we need to be enlightened by faith. And when we start to follow that call more closely, what was dim slowly becomes clear and the clouds dissipate. This necessary step was taken by so many Betharramites of past and present. Thus they grew in holiness. We are called not just to be what we are now ('Lord it is good for us to be here!'), But also to walk towards what we are called to be (the descent towards Calvary).

Consecrated to live the life of the

trinity both within us and among us, we have been privileged by a God who came into our lives. He did it by giving us life in a human family and in a specific place. Then he gave us new birth by baptism and called us '*to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity*' (LG 40). He invited us to answer his call in the small family founded by St Michael Garicoits. God made us 'to go out to share' life with others. As God said to Abraham: '*go from your land, and from your home place, and from the house of your fathers, to the land that I will show you*' (Gen 12. 1). More precisely, he invites us to give our lives for love and to create a *style*, a particular project of Life: the same project as the Heart of Jesus. We are invited to leave everything to enter the Kingdom of the little ones; to lose everything to win Christ, the true Life. '*Here I am, Here we are: Ita Pater, yes Father*'.

That was the ardent longing of Saint Michael Garicoits. He had experienced that with God everything is possible and without him we are nothing. He gave himself to the dream that the God of love desired for him, exclaiming: '*Oh, if I could gather a group of priests in the image of the heart of Jesus...*'

As men consecrated to this mission we cannot go through life as sedated, numbed beings. It's time to wake up from our sleep! (Rom 13.11) With eyes wide open looking not at a screen, but at real people, at the brothers & sisters who need us, who are eager for

apostles, messengers of a God that brings them hope. Our consecrated mission is more valid today than ever: let us emerge from the shadows. Let us dedicate time and enthusiasm to our task: to be witnesses of God's love for the world that they may believe.

I share this vision because I believe that we live in a time when consecrated life lacks visibility. Go out! Share! We know that the Sunday homily, adverts and social networks are not enough, though much good can be done if we use them correctly, i.e. to evangelise. But frequently, what we show of ourselves in social media has nothing to do with what people expect to see in a consecrated person! And yet, people are so good to us, and support everything we do with patience and resignation ... One or two people may like what they see (on social media) but many more are silent, perhaps a little embarrassed or disappointed ...

We have all been taught that being religious implies having entered into a space of intimacy with Jesus Christ, which has set us apart, like Peter, James & John. That experience of life on the Spirit will always grow, because the Love of the Lord will never desert us (1 Cor 13. 8). How difficult it is for us to express this truth with respect, with a healthy modesty, as discretely as Joseph and Mary in the Gospel! The Scripture shows us how God trusted them more than any others and, nevertheless, the parents of Jesus did not make themselves felt, they were discreet, humble and simple. Saint Michael also wanted

from us a 'perfect simplicity'.

Brothers, we have been consecrated, to be a sign. If our freedom is side-tracked by worldly concerns and we do not resist it, we will be pulled in the opposite direction to what St. Michael wanted in the manifesto: 'before this wonderful sight the religious of Betharram have felt drawn to leave everything to consecrate themselves to the Lord through the vows' (Founding text). That's why I ask you:

- What signs do we give of the visibility of our life as consecrated persons in community?

- In what way do we accept 'to lose everything for Him'?

This is how St. Michael wanted us to be: religious who love their vocation, who do not remain alone, or asleep, or in gloom, but who persist in sharing with others the same happiness.

'What feelings divine intervention should inspire in us! What love, what respect for the Congregation What an amazing thing to have been called to belong to it! What joyful and constant dedication to work in its favour, to form men worthy of it, suitable, trained and willing, men ready for everything, detached from everything and completely open to those who direct them!' (DS 272)

I wish you all a good and holy Lent that will lead us all to live a holy Easter.

Fr. Gustavo SCJ
SUPERIOR GENERAL

Homily, Ash wednesday, 6 march 2019

Rome, Basilica of Santa Sabina

On this Lenten journey, back to what is essential, the Gospel proposes three steps which the Lord invites us to undertake without hypocrisy and pretence: almsgiving, prayer, fasting. What are they for? Almsgiving, prayer and fasting bring us back to the three realities that do not fade away. Prayer reunites us to God; charity, to our neighbour; fasting, to ourselves. God, my neighbour, my life: these are the realities that do not fade away and in which we must invest. Lent, therefore, invites us to focus, first of all on the Almighty, in prayer, which frees us from that horizontal and mundane life where we find time for self but forget God. It then invites us to



focus on others, with the charity that frees us from the vanity of acquiring and of thinking that things are only good if they are good for me. Finally, Lent invites us to look inside our heart, with fasting, which frees us from attachment to things and from the worldliness that numbs the heart. Prayer, charity, fasting: three investments for a treasure that endures.

Jesus said: *'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'* (Mt 6:21). Our heart always points in some direction: it is like a compass seeking its bearings. We can also compare it to a magnet: it needs to attach itself to something. But if it only at-



taches itself to earthly things, sooner or later it becomes a slave to them: things to be used become things we serve. Outward appearance, money, a career or hobby: if we live for them, they will become idols that enslave us, sirens that charm us and then cast us adrift. Whereas if our heart is attached to what does not pass away, we rediscover ourselves and are set free. Lent is the time of grace that liberates the heart from vanity. It is a time of healing from addictions that seduce us. It is a time to fix our gaze on what abides.

Where can we fix our gaze, then, throughout this Lenten journey? It is simple: upon the Crucified one. Jesus on the cross is life's compass, which directs us to heaven. The poverty of the wood, the silence of the Lord, his loving self-emptying show us the necessity of a simpler life, free from anxiety about things. From the cross, Jesus teaches us the great courage

involved in renunciation. We will never move forward if we are heavily weighed down. We need to free ourselves from the clutches of consumerism and the snares of selfishness, from always wanting more, from never being satisfied, and from a heart closed to the needs of the poor. Jesus on the wood of the cross burns with love, and calls us to a life that is passionate for him, which is not lost amid the ashes of the world; to a life that burns with charity and is not extinguished in mediocrity. Is it difficult to live as he asks? Yes, it is difficult, but it leads us to our goal. Lent shows us this. It begins with the ashes, but eventually leads us to the fire of Easter night; to the discovery that, in the tomb, the body of Jesus does not turn to ashes, but rises gloriously. This is true also for us, who are dust. If we, with our weaknesses, return to the Lord, if we take the path of love, then we will embrace the life that never ends. And surely we will be full of joy. •



From Bouar to Bangui.. the mission continues

After 22 years spent in the "Our Lady of Fatima" mission in the centre of Bouar, Father Beniamino Gusmeroli SCJ has left for Bangui with the task of bringing life, with his brethren, to a new missionary reality. ●●●

'It isn't simple to summarise in a few lines such a long and rich period of time as I experienced in Bouar. How could I forget the people I met and worked with in the town and in the numerous villages (25) within the parish. Also, how could I forget those who, since Italy, have always supported me and with whom I was able to share numerous projects: The Association AMICI, Jiango be Africa, and numerous missionary groups.

It's not simple either to revisit one's own personal path: beyond the years that have passed, I feel enriched on a human level and in my capacity to love and to feel the ever closer presence of the Father of Goodness.

I remember what I used to tell myself at first, during my outings to the villages on my motorbike, when I had to avoid the potholes and pass over tree trunks which had ended up on the road: "To do something here, you need to have a lot of time in front of you: you either stay forever or you leave right away." Circumstances "wanted" my stay to

last all these years.

So many kilometers travelled by motorbike or jeep, and so many adventures! The sun, the heat, the storms and the downpours that took me by surprise on the tracks and paths... punctured wheels and some falls from the motorbike, but just one broken rib in more than twenty years.

During my last days in Bouar, a number resounded in my head: 6,000... that's the number of baptisms that I have had the fortune to celebrate since my arrival.

The principal activity has been the training of different groups and the festive celebrations at the Church of Fatima just as in the little village chapels. I will never forget the evenings spent under the stars, in the villages, chatting with people and drinking coffee prepared in a saucepan, together with kilos of manioc. It is exactly these moments of sharing that have allowed links of solidarity and reciprocal trust to be woven: the farewell celebration in the parish was unforgettable. People came from all the villages bringing gifts. And those who greeted me with the most emotion were the poor of the parish.

A lasting sign remained etched in the hearts of people (and in mine) when, in 2013, during a coup, a large part of the parish's population found itself at the mission for a

long period of time: the house, the different rooms, the church, the chapel and the youth centre served as a refuge for all these people, to take shelter from the bullets and the raids that devastated the town. Just as significant and touching was the solidarity shown by all those who kept me informed about the situation and the dangers and advised me to avoid trips and to stay at home.

There weren't only pastoral activities: on my arrival in Bouar, in the surroundings of the mission which stretched to 130 kms from the centre, only three schools were in operation. Throughout the years, we managed to open nineteen other schools: so more than 3,000 children had the chance to go to school.

During these last years, the resources were also used for another project, that of agriculture: in this case, it was a matter of thinking big, about a project that stretched to the whole region. So 150 agricultural associations saw the light of day. This project experiences reaches its

most important moment during the annual agricultural fair: an initiative that the whole town of Bouar gets involved with during the three days of festival.

To finish, what was fundamental for me was the welcome, meeting and collaboration with numerous volunteers who came to spend quite a long time at the mission, starting again several times. From these experiences, a deep and continuous friendship arose and, in certain cases, a beneficial collaboration in missionary projects.

I have pleasure remembering how we crossed the savannah on motorbike, nights spent out in the open or in village huts, work accomplished together and the help that each person gave during their stay here.

And now that I am no longer in Bouar, what will become of all these projects? It would be a shame if it all finished. Since I learned of my transfer, my first care was following up on all this work.



As for the scholastic activities, Fr. Arsene Noba scj, from the Ivory Coast, has already taken note of the various initiatives linked to the village schools.

As for the agricultural development project, the local co-workers, after about ten years of shared work, are in a position to carry on with the activities and to take on responsibility

for them; they have understood the importance of working side by side with their African brothers. It's a "step" that, I won't hide, gives me a lot of joy.

Personally, the first thing that struck me was the speed at which time passes. It feels like only yesterday that I arrived in Bouar, when I was just over 30 years old; and here I am now at almost 60 years old.

I still like to travel by motorbike along the forest tracks, but I realise that the unbridled speed and the jumping over ditches do not agree with me any more. Something has changed: suppleness? Strength? On the other hand, I have learned to love people more, to have compassion for these children who cannot experience a "normal" childhood with their dad and their mum, who cannot go to school, depriving them of a future.

I have understood a little better, what the dignity of a person is, by being in contact with those who

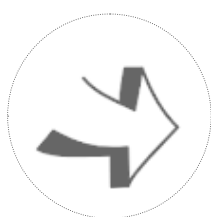
have lost it. I have understood a little better the value of friendship.

In short, I believe I have learned a little how to love: less ideology and more commitment. I left thirty years ago with the idea of changing the world and ... it's the world which has changed me.

How beautiful it is to open up paths, with other people, and to sow some seeds of change.

The Father of Goodness looked for me and found me. With the gratitude of one who feels loved and wants to continue loving, I throw myself into this new mission in Bangui: with immense neighbourhoods, a thousand issues, especially human, that I'll discover little by little and that I'll try to understand. It's that too which makes a missionary adventure wonderful.' •

*From Amici News, bulletin of the
Missionary Association in Italy,
Nr. 30, February 2019*



On Wednesday
November
6th 2018, some Bethar-
ramites, Fathers Benia-
mino and Armel, settled
in Bimbo/Bangui, in or-
der to found a new pari-



sh, Our Lady of the Visitation, and de-localize there the Formation House. The faithful of the mother parish of Bimbo, Saint Anthony of Padua, from which ours is going to be born, welcomed us warmly. A great number of these Christians were asking for the creation of a new parish but they did not expect it so early. Our arrival was a dream come true. Once settled, helped by the priests in charge of 'the old parish', some contacts were established with various responsible lay people living in the new parochial territory. So the basic ecclesial communities have been made aware and invited to invest themselves efficiently in this birth of the new parish. As we want to be shepherds, near our ewes, since the beginning we have created a great proximity with our faithful. We have wanted the first steps of this parish to be done with everybody. For a beginning, I have always been fascinated by these people's availability and desire to progress in faith, through various requests and proposals still being done.

Truly, much remains to be done in this parish still in embryo: to re-examine our life of intimacy with

God, personally and in community, that is to say to march off daily in order to become God's friends, and open ourselves to his Spirit's action; working in such a way that our faithful acquire a strong faith and spread evangelical seeds in their concrete sphere of life. We rely on God's grace to take up the challenge!

Up to now, there are five members in the house of Bimbo. With immense joy, we welcomed Brother Jean-Claude (in his 2nd year of novitiate) on December 21st 2018, and Aymar and Hubert (pre-postulants) on January 6th. Daily prayer and fraternal life in community, which we do our utmost to improve carefully along the days, contribute to our spiritual and human opening out. It is also the channel through which we transmit the happiness which fills us to our districts in Bimbo. It is transmitted simply by a gratuitous smile, a benevolent welcome, by listening with attention.

Armel Daly, scj



An unmissable event

Since three years, the Vicariate of Argentina-Uruguay has been meeting for a few days of retreat and fraternal sharing in our holiday home in Calamuchita (Córdoba - Argentina).

Not having broken the rule, we met this year from February 11 to 15. It is an unmissable event for the whole Vicariate, a meeting attended also by the Regional Superior Fr. Daniel González scj.

The days were animated by Brother Miguel Angel, of the Divine Word, specialist of the Bible. On the first day, the reflection was presented on the religious life as a prophecy; then we dealt with the theme of the personal project of life and, from this, the Community-Apostolic Project. It was concluded on Friday with the Vicariate Assembly. The most strong moment of these days was that of the Eucharistic celebration animated, in turn, by each community.

During these days, there were moments of meditation and personal prayer mixed with moments of



2019 Challenges... :

- *personal and daily commitments*
- *... of the Church and of the Congregation*
- *social, economical, cultural & political challenges*

exchange on what everyone had experienced. We had moments of relaxation and free sharing, all while enjoying the beauty of the surrounding nature and from the river waiting for us to cool off. Calamuchita is a splendid valley.

Our house is built near the river and it is surrounded by mountains which invite you to walk and to immerse yourself in

nature.

All this context brings us closer to God, without moving away from our brothers. All this and the fact of keeping a fixed date each year make possible the participation of all the religious of the Vicariate. Some even take the opportunity to stay a few days longer in such a beautiful place

Angelo Recalcati scj





- With the consent of his Council (meetings on February 20th and 21st), the Superior General of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Betharram, Fr. Eduardo Gustavo Agín scj, presents to **priesthood** the **Deacons Andrew Manop Kaengkhaio scj** and **Banjerd Stephen Chuensuklertaweekul scj** (*Saint Mary of Jesus Crucified Region, Vicariate of Thailand*) and the **Deacon Habib Cossi Yelouwassi scj** (*Saint Michael Garicoits Region, Vicariate of Ivory Coast*), in conformity with the Rule of Life nr. 205/h.
- With the consent of his Council (meetings on February 22nd and 25th), the Superior General presents also to **diaconate** Brother **Joseph Ouedraogo scj** and Brother **Vincent Didier Allelet scj** (*Saint Michael Garicoits Region, Vicariate of Ivory Coast*), in conformity with the Rule of Life nr. 205/h.
- With the advice of his Council (meetings on February 20th and 27th), the Superior General approved the appointment of **Fr. Francisco de Asis Dos Santos scj** as superior of the community of Serrinha, for a first mandate from March 4th (*Fr. Auguste Etchecopar Region, Vicariate of Brazil*) and the appointment of **Fr. Biju Antony Panthalukkaran scj** as superior of the community of Olton, for a first mandate from February 27th (*Saint Mary of Jesus Crucified Region, Vicariate of England*), in conformity with the Rule of Life nr 206/a.
- With the advice of his Council gathered on February 20th, the Superior General approved the **closing of the community of Setubinha-Sabara and the opening of the community of Sabara** (*Fr. Auguste Etchecopar Region, Vicariate of Brazil*), in conformity with the Rule of Life nr 206/b & f.
- In the meeting of the General Council on February 21st, the Superior General approved the **renovation project of the St Michael house at Pau** (Vicariate of France-Spain) according to the proposals and terms indicated by the Regional Superior of the Saint Michael Garicoits Region in his letter of February 19th. Further studies and tractatives will be carried on with the different partners in view of the implementation of the project.



REGION SAINT MICHAEL GARICOÏTS

FRANCE SPAIN
ITALY CENTRAL AFRICA
IVORY COAST
HOLY LAND

France-Spain

On Tuesday, February 19, the bursars and community superiors with Fr. Laurent Bacho, Regional Vicar came together at Bétharram. This meeting was scheduled as part of the regular meetings of the Vicariate. Each bursar shared the 2018 accounts of his community. Fr. Jean-Marie shared details of the joint meeting of the Council of the Congregation and the Regional Bursars in November in Rome. During the exchange, the request for monthly accounts was reminded. In respect of various situations and ages, it can be more easily followed in some communities than others. Father Laurent shared the Vicariate accounts; At the next vicariate council, on April 1st, a chartered accountant will answer all the questions we would like to pose. Clarifications were made regarding the renovation project of the St Michael house at Pau: all noted the progress made in development of a project that takes into account the priority of the presence of our community in connection with St. Mariam; the reflections to refine the project continue in a good partnership with the economic council of the vicariate.

This meeting of the bursars and superiors of the community of our France-Spain Vicariate, and all our meetings are first of all fraternal moments: to meet again and live the

fraternity of 'Here I am' following St Michael Garicoits.



Bétharram the place of our roots is beautiful and full of history. At the end of February, our international Monastery (Notre-Dame) community* was visited by a family from Argentina who came in the footsteps of Father Auguste Etchecopar and Saint Michael Garicoits. Our community has also welcomed for a short visit Mrs. Aka Patricia, a lay associate of Bétharram in Ivory Coast. To all of you who are thirsty, the Lord Jesus hands you the Saving Branch with his sweet Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

* It is composed of: Fr. Laurent, Regional Vicar, Bro. Habib, whose priestly ordination is scheduled for July 6, Fr. Reagan scj and Fr. Shamon scj, from India, and Br. Apka N' Cho Hyacinthe, 2nd year novice)



Ivory Coast

In order to mark this time of Lent and find the strength necessary to walk towards Easter, the community of Adiapodoumé, on Saturday march 9th, exercised itself more particularly to remain silent, throughout a day's recollection on the theme: 'How to live Lent as a period of commitment in our everyday life'. The preacher on that day was Father Vincent Worou scj; he took as a background Pope Francis's message for this Lent, inviting us through our various ways of being to be present among our brothers: an incarnate presence, a presence of love without self-interest, a presence of prayer, of service, etc. The preacher underlined that it would be vital for us to take advantage of this favourable time which is offered to us, keeping in our hearts the desire of exclaiming: 'Abba, Father, I am yours', doing so for a revived community and an edifying pastoral action.

The recollection ended by the Eucharist, during which the liturgical gestures, well performed, were witnessing a real fraternity.



Italy

'Forward always!' said St Michael. And this Sunday, February 27, young *BetharrAmici* (friends of betharram) linked to our community of Pistoia (Tuscany) and accompanied by Fr. Simone scj, set out for Parma to meet the young people entrusted to scj fathers from the community of Langhirano (in Emilia-Romagna). After some ice-breakers, the actual meeting began around 14:30. The young people of the *BetharrAmici* group, who have been deepening Betharram's charism for several years, explained to the young people of Langhirano who they were and what they did together: the birth of the group, the monthly meetings, experiences lived together as times of evangelisation at Rome, the WYD in Rio de Janeiro, the youth camp at Betharram, the youth camp in Ivory Coast ...

The young people from Langhirano Parish shared their group experience and presented their reality, which is still in its infancy.

This meeting ended with proposals: invitation to the young people of Langhirano to join a summer hike, which will leave Betharram to reach Ibarre. We left with the hope of renewing such moments of sharing and debate. Next step for *BetharrAmici*: the community of Lissone (Northern Italy), where other young people are ready to go!



REGION FR. AUGUSTE ETCHECOPAR

ARGENTINA URUGUAY
PARAGUAY BRAZIL

Paraguay

Three new postulants were recently welcomed to the Betharramite community of Lambaré, in February as it is being the end of the summer holidays and the month of reopening in the southern hemisphere. They thus unite with the three other postulants of 2nd year.

The FVD Group of Paraguay's Betharramite Lay Youth Association was among the first to welcome these new members. With their Convivial Commission, they organized the reception of these new postulants and at the same time to make known their group and to offer a time of sharing. A mass was celebrated for this entrance to the postulancy at the Formation House of Notre-Dame de Betharram. Mass was followed by a meal bringing together the religious and lay people.



to think about going out and having sense of Christ to others. By realizing what's bursting in my life and what needs to die in us to be born again. We also gave a warm welcome to Fr. Sylvain Dansou Hounkpatin SCJ who has arrived recently to spend time with the members of the English Vicariate.

India

Corrigendum: 269 families live their faith, despite their great isolation, in the Betharramite parish of Simaluguri, Diocese of Guwahati (269 and not 12 as it was written in the editorial of the NEF of February, 12 being the number Christian families in Hojai).

Fr. Pascal Ravi scj (Parish Priest) together with other religious men and women, carry out their mission working for the human promotion and evangelization of children, young people and adults of different tribes in the north-east.



REGION SAINT MARY OF JESUS

CRUCIFIED
ENGLAND INDIA
THAILAND

England

On 18th and 19th of February we gathered together for our togetherness day at Nympsfield. Sr Teresa Kennedy PBVM was the guide for our reflections. She has allowed us to reflect on the theme of going out to share. She has asked us



People are very welcoming and share in their poverty the gift of peace and joy in the Lord. A reality that needs everyone's material and spiritual support: 'We go out to share'.



Thailand... and Vietnam

Our Superior General, Fr. Gustavo Agin scj, is currently on a canonical visit to the Vicariate of Thailand. However, he seized the opportunity of this trip to Asia to go to Vietnam to spend a few days at the beginning of the month at the Betharramite residence of Ho Chi Minh City, under the responsibility of the General Council.

Thus, after being welcomed by the Sampran formation community (Thailand), Fr. Gustavo Agin scj, accompanied by Fr Enrico Frigerio scj, Regional Superior of the St Mary of Jesus Crucified Region went to visit our brothers Fr. Yesudas Kuttappassery scj and Fr. Albert Sa-at scj.

This was an opportunity to develop the formation project for young people who make a first vocational discernment in Vietnam and for young Vietnamese who are now in India and Thailand.

Father Yesudas and Fr. Sa-at shared their experience, their difficulties and their hopes for the future of

Betharram in Vietnam.

This visit also allowed the Superior General and the Regional Superior to meet the people who accompany and help our religious in their activities and their mission.

The canonical visit is now continuing in Thailand, where the reception is particularly festive and warm. Upon his arrival in the north of the country, a meeting was held with the first bishop of the new diocese of Chiang Rai, Mgr Joseph Vuthilert Haelom.

Fr. Gustavo scj will be visiting northern villages these days, accompanied by the young Betharramite Thai priests who inspired by the example of our first missionaries in Asia decided one day to follow in their footsteps. He will probably be taken to the small church of Mae Hae, village of Deacon Stephen Banjerd scj, a few kilometres from Huay Tong. Named Our Lady of Betharram, the church was built by Fr. Mongkhon scj to let parishioners know of the spiritual tradition of Betharram (with frescoes designed by Fr. Thinakorn scj)



The vocational discernment of Fr Auguste Etchécopar

by Gaspar Fernández Pérez scj

In his biography of Fr Etchécopar, Fr Fernessole writes that 'signs of a call to the priesthood were manifest in Auguste Etchécopar from a very early age'¹. He adds that Fr Salaberry, parish priest at Saint-Palais, had been impressed by his human qualities and in a letter dated 18 June 1838 to Auguste's father, he wrote: 'Embrace Auguste for me whom I believe is called to the priesthood'².

In the earliest of Fr Etchécopar's letters to have been preserved, he tells his brother Evariste, who had left home to make his living in Argentina, how he discovered his vocation. Through his letters we are able to experience his vocational discernment. Personally, I have always found this a very striking and moving story. He was eight when he first voiced his anxiety about vocation: *I am constantly asking God to give me some direction as to my vocation. If he listens to my desires, I will be consecrated to the ministry of the altars*³. He was already able to make a clear distinction between his will and what the will of God might be.

He also recounts how torn he feels when, scarcely yet twelve years old, he is faced with two options:

- *Sometimes I feel as if I am called to follow you to those distant shores where Nature seems so different.*

- *Then at other times, it also seems*

1) Le Très Révérend Père Auguste Etchécopar, Pierre Fernessole, p. 29

2) *Ibid.* p. 29

3) Letter Nr. 1, 8 May 1838 [Saint-Palais], to his brother Evariste



*that God has destined me to sing His praises and join the ranks of His ministers.*⁴

When at age seventeen he is preparing for his baccalaureate exams, he has already been wrestling with this dilemma: go to Argentina and make his fortune, or stay in France and become a priest. He is thinking deeply about a vocation. Once he had passed his baccalaureate (in literary studies), his vocation to the priesthood became a certainty. *I believe I was born for this*⁵. *God, dear brother, has other plans. In his Providence and wisdom, He is calling me irresistibly to His service.*⁶ He is convinced God loves him, that He has a preference for him and wants him to stand aside from the crowd and give himself entirely over to God and the things of God: praising God, celebrating His sacraments and preaching His word. God also wants him to work to save men's souls, to intercede on behalf of all mankind but in particular for the members of his family. *I confine myself to praying for you, working for the salvation of your souls, and I am proud of my mission.*⁷ He passes on this experience of discernment as being a struggle between what he wants and what God wants. He is conscious of the obstacles and resistance to God's call. He is well aware of the value of all that

4) Letter Nr. 2, 26 October 1842 [Saint-Palais], to his brother Evariste

5) Letter Nr. 4, to his brother Evariste, 27 April 1849 [Saint-Palais School]

6) Letter Nr. 3, to his brother Evariste, 30 October 1847 [Saint-Palais School]

7) *Ibid.* Letter Nr. 4

he is renouncing by saying 'Yes' to the Lord. He is grateful to Him who showed him special preference by inviting him to live with Him in closer friendship. God's preference is also manifest in the preference shown by Mgr Lacroix, Bishop of Bayonne, who, excusing him from attending the seminary, asked him to teach maths at Saint-Palais during his years of formation (1847 and 1853), and allowing him to gain experience by spending a year before his ordination with the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross in Oloron.

When recounting how he felt after hearing the sermon on celibacy upon being ordained a sub-deacon, he is full of enthusiasm and assurance. He is happy, full of joy, confidence and the personal equilibrium of a fulfilled human being. *Dear brother, The Lord has spoken and in spite of my unworthiness I ran towards Him, My Lord; I have given Him my all, my heart, my soul and my body... Oh what joy! Oh what happiness! If the world could understand how I feel...*⁸ He was twenty-two years old.

Yes he expresses how important prayer is in recognising and choosing a vocation, but we see that the experience of his vocation goes beyond moments spent in prayer; it requires knowledge and strength to take a decision. He bears witness to experiencing a communion with God which overcomes every aspect and moment of his life. *For a long time... in my hurry to give God my whole being, undivided and unconditional, which I derive from His merciful bounty, I waited silently to hear clearly and distinctly the lo-*

8) Letter Nr. 6, to his brother Evariste, 24 June 1852 [Saint-Palais school]

*ving voice of my God, who for some time had spoken to me in the secret places of my heart; for in spite of all my intuitions, irresistible inclination, the needs of my soul, in spite of my hopes, never would I myself have dared to claim to be an intimate friend of God, the depositary of His powers, His representative and minister for His people, His flaming torch - a representation and model of Him for the faithful of His Holy Church.*⁹

His brother, Evariste, is his confidant and a witness to the joy which floods his whole being as he worked as a teacher before ordination and again when ordained deacon at twenty-three and a priest at twenty-four, and of the concern he had to prepare his sermons properly.

At that time, the Bishop Mgr Lacroix had the idea of forming a Diocesan Society of Auxiliary Priests of the Holy Cross at Oloron. This was a group of priests chosen and formed to hold the most important posts in the Diocese¹⁰. To be admitted one had to be extraordinarily gifted and talented, robustly pious, desirous of perfection, blessed with good health and to have completed at least three years of theology. The founder, and first Superior, of this institution was Mgr Menjoulet. Fr Etchécopar entered the Society one year before his ordination to the priesthood, which took place in Bayonne on June 10th, 1854, on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity. The experience was short-lived¹¹. •

9) *Ibid.* Letter Nr. 6

10) *L'Homme au visage de lumière, Pierre Duvignau s.c.j., p. 31-32, note 29*

11) *Le Très Révérend Père Auguste Etchécopar, Pierre Fernes-sole, p. 55-76*

Discouragement. What is an extremely dangerous temptation which can in practice be an enemy of salvation?

A. It is discouragement, because it attacks all the virtues and then conceals itself. (...) But is discouragement a genuine temptation?

A. Certainly, because every feeling which is opposed to the law of God, either in itself, or in its effects, is a temptation; but discouragement specifically attacks Hope, which is as necessary as Faith and Charity. So discouragement should be regarded as a temptation and even as a most dangerous temptation, since it tempts the Christian soul to abandon all works of piety. Think about it: In their ordinary conduct, what motivates men, and what sustains them in their troubles, what animates them in their difficulties?

A. The hope of succeeding: take away that hope and they soon fall into inaction. In the practice of virtue, discouragement has the same effect. The soul that does not hope is half defeated already, the fear of not succeeding prevents it from seeing the means it must take to overcome difficulty and the God-given means to do it. The soul then surrenders to the enemy without a struggle. It becomes like a little boy trembling at the sight of an approaching giant, because he cannot imagine that a slingshot is enough to defeat him if used in the name of the Lord.

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*From the SCJ Community of
Mangalore (India)*



One glance, many glances
One smile, a bunch of smiling faces
To recognise and welcome the 'Other'
To walk, together, to that place where the 'Other' reveals to us
That place of happiness where we can love and be loved in a never ending unity.



Societas S^{mi} Cordis Jesu
BETHARRAM

Generalate House
via Angelo Brunetti, 27
00186 Rome (Italy)
Telephone +39 06 320 70 96
Fax +39 06 36 00 03 09
Email nef@betharram.it

www.betharram.net