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The healing ashes of mercy

"Let us not tire of doing good; for the harvest will come to us in due time if we do not lose heart. So, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all, but especially to our brothers in the faith." (Gal 6: 9- 10)

Dear Betharramites,

We have proposed as a theme in 2021 *to go out and share the same joy, to do good, and do it with all the brothers, without distinction. What a great goal to keep in mind during this time of grace that we begin!*

Pope Francis, apostle of the joy of the Gospel, asked us religious on the occasion of the celebration of the Mass for Consecrated Life: *"To have patience and a sense of humour."*

Here I share the quote. With his usual eloquence, he said:

(The religious) *"we are few and this Covid traps us..., but we carry it with patience. **We need patience. And to carry on offering our lives to the Lord"**.*

"There was a young religious woman who had just entered the novitiate and was happy... She found a kind, holy, elderly religious woman... "How are you?" — "This is paradise, Mother!", says the young woman. "Wait a little; there is purgatory". Consecrated life, community life: there is

a purgatory, but it takes patience to carry on."

I would like to point out two things that may help: please **flee from gossip**. What kills community life is gossip. Do not speak ill of others. "It is not easy, Father, because sometimes it comes from the heart!". Yes, it comes from the heart, it comes from envy, it comes from many deadly sins that we have within. So flee. "But tell me Father, is there not some medicine? Prayer, kindness...?" Yes, there is a medicine which is very much "homemade": bite your tongue! Before speaking ill of others, bite your tongue so that it will swell and fill up your mouth and you will be unable to speak badly. Please, flee from gossip which destroys a community!"

"And then, the other thing that I suggest (added the Pope) for community life: there are always many things that do not sit well with us. From the Superior, the Councillor, and whoever... There are always things we do not like, right? **Do not lose your sense of humour, please**: this helps us so much. It is the antidote to gossip: to know how to laugh at oneself, at situations and also at others with a good heart, so do not lose your sense of humour. And flee from gossip. What I am suggesting now is not very clerical advice, let us say, but it is human: it is human in order to carry on with patience. Never speak ill of others: bite your tongue. And then, do not lose your sense of humour: it will greatly help us.

Thank you for what you do, thank

you for your witness. Thank you, many thanks for your difficulties, for how you bear with them and for the great suffering due to the lack of vocations. **Go forth, take courage: the Lord is greater, the Lord loves us. Let us follow the Lord!** (Pope Francis Mass February 2, 2021)

It seems that the Pope has observed that this long pandemic is weighing down on our spirits a bit and can make us lose our joy..

It is true that the whole of 2020-21 has been rather like an intense Lent... The journey through the pandemic desert has forced us to ask ourselves many questions about the life we have been leading so far ... it made us face our own limitations ... Suddenly, in full confinement, we reacted and ideas, videos, proclamations began to abound...

When creativity is genuine it always engenders communion and a serene bond that confirms us in brotherly love. Creativity is not opportunistic... Something different happens when we allow ourselves to be carried away by despair and decide to transform ourselves, for a while, into prophets of doom. That is when our proclamations can embitter us and embitter the lives of others. We squander the gift of joy.

I am aware of the suffering caused by not being able to carry out ordinary pastoral and missionary activities. I am sorry myself for not being able to leave Rome to be close to the brothers, visit them, listen to them, dialogue, grow together in fraternity

and share burdens.

The abstinence in personal contact with the faithful, in effect, has shown how much we owe to the People of God to whom we belong as servants and how much good it makes us feel that we are laying down our lives for them.

The Pope insists that, from this pandemic, we must come out together, come out better (not worse), and that we must do so while respecting subsidiarity and solidarity (catechesis August-September 2020). However, sometimes, we forget this slogan, and we convince ourselves that the only important thing is that "what I say" is done (...because I have spent so much time in the room meditating on it..)

Perhaps we are lacking the creative joy of the gospel. That which makes us share life not only with those who mark us with a "like", but with those that God has given us as community brothers. It is true that community brothers do not usually gratify my needs, however, they do know how much I am worth because they live with me and know me well, not because of what I post on *social networks*, but because they share their bread with me. I have the grace to be for them no more than the man made of the dust of the earth.

In this time of conversion it is good for us to remember it: before the vastness of galaxies and space, we are tiny, we are like dust in the universe. *We are ashes loved by God.* The Lord was pleased to collect our dust in his hands and breathe his breath of life into it

(cf. Gen 2,7). To Him we are precious dust, destined to live forever. We are the earth on which God has poured his heaven, through his Beloved Son; we are the dust that contains his dreams. We are God's hope, his treasure, and his glory.

The Father covers his children with the healing ashes of his mercy. The ash that is placed on our heads stirs our minds. Jesus stirred his disciples when they could not understand his shocking idea of a messiah who must face the cross and the resurrection ... *"But the disciples did not understand this and were afraid to ask him questions."* (Mk 9:32)

In this season when we want to go out to share the same happiness, the same joy, let us accept the challenge of continuing to do good to all without discrimination. Let us look at each other with more mercy, let us practice dialogue and mutual listening.

And, above all, let us not lose our sense of humour, so that what seems unbearable under the pandemic lens, creatively becomes an occasion to awaken smiles, as simple and true brothers of the same family.

Fr. Gustavo scj

Superior General

Homily, Feast of the presentation of the Lord • 25th World day for consecrated life, Vatican Basilica, Tuesday, 2 February 2021

Simeon, so Saint Luke tells us, “looked forward to the consolation of Israel” (Lk 2:25). Going up to the Temple as Mary and Joseph were bringing Jesus there, he took the Messiah into his arms. The one who recognized in that Child the light that came to shine on the Gentiles was an elderly man who had patiently awaited the fulfilment of the Lord’s promises.

The patience of Simeon. Let us take a closer look at that old man’s patience. For his entire life, he had been waiting, exercising the patience of the heart. In his prayer, Simeon had learned that God does not come in extraordinary events, but works amid the apparent monotony of our daily life, in the frequently dull rhythm of our activities, in the little things that, working with tenacity and humility, we achieve in our efforts to do his will. By patiently persevering, Simeon did not grow weary with the passage of time. [...]

His hope and expectation found expression in the daily patience of a man who, despite everything, remained watchful, until at last “his eyes saw the salvation” that had been promised (cf. Lk 2:30).

I ask myself: where did Simeon learn such patience? It was the born



of prayer and the history of his people, which had always seen in the Lord “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and fidelity” (Ex 34:6). He recognized the

Father who, even in the face of rejection and infidelity, never gives up, but remains “patient for many years” (cf. Neh 9:30), constantly holding out the possibility of conversion.

The patience of Simeon is thus a mirror of God’s own patience. [...]

Let me point to three “settings” in which patience can become concrete.

The first is *our personal life*. There was a time when we responded to the Lord’s call, and with enthusiasm and generosity offered our lives to him. Along the way, together with consolations we have had our share of disappointments and frustrations. At times, our hard work fails to achieve the desired results, the seeds we sow seem not to bear sufficient fruit, the ardour of our prayer cools and we are not always immune to spiritual aridity. In our lives as consecrated men and women, it can happen that hope slowly fades as a result of unmet expectations. We have to be patient with ourselves and await in hope God’s own times and places,

for he remains ever faithful to his promises. [...] Remembering this can help us retrace our steps and revive our dreams, rather than yielding to interior sadness and discouragement. Brothers and sisters, in us consecrated men and women, interior sadness is a worm, a worm that eats us from within. Flee from interior sadness!

A second setting in which patience can become concrete is *community life*. We all know that human relationships are not always serene, especially when they involve sharing a project of life or apostolic activity. There are times when conflicts arise and no immediate solution can be expected, nor should hasty judgements be made. Time is required to step back, to preserve peace and to wait for a better time to resolve situations in charity and in truth. Let us not allow ourselves to be flustered by tempests. [...]

Our communities need this kind of reciprocal patience: the ability to support, that is, to bear on our own shoulders, the life of one of our brothers or sisters, including his or her weaknesses and failings, all of them. Let us keep in mind that the Lord does not call us to be soloists – we know there are many in the Church – no, we are not called to be soloists but to be part of a choir that can sometimes miss a note or two, but must always try to sing in unison.

Finally, a third setting is *our relationship with the world*. Simeon and Anna cherished the hope proclaimed by the prophets, even

though it is slow to be fulfilled and grows silently amid the infidelities and ruins of our world. They did not complain about how wrong things are, but patiently looked for the light shining in the darkness of history. To look for the light shining in the darkness of history; to look for the light shining in the darkness of our own communities. We too need that kind of patience, so as not to fall into the trap of complaining. [...]

It can happen that even as God patiently tills the soil of history and our own hearts, we show ourselves impatient and want to judge everything immediately: now or never, now, now, now. In this way, we lose that “small” but most beautiful of virtues: hope. I have seen many consecrated men and women who lose hope, simply through impatience.

Patience helps us to be merciful in the way we view ourselves, our communities and our world. [...] We need patience and courage in order to keep advancing, exploring new paths, and responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. And to do so with humility and simplicity, without great propaganda or publicity.

Let us contemplate God’s patience and implore the trusting patience of Simeon and of Anna. In this way, may our eyes, too, see the light of salvation and bring that light to the whole world, just as these two elderly individuals did in their words of praise. ●●●

Ordinations to the diaconate

Saint Michael Garicoits Region has been enriched with four new deacons:

- On Sunday 27 December 2020, the feast of the Holy Family, **Br. Serge Appaouh SCJ** was ordained as a deacon by Mgr. Tardelli, Bishop of the Diocese of Pistoia, in the Betharramite Parish of St Francis in Pistoia. The celebration, held in compliance with anti-contagion rules, saw the participation of two hundred faithful and was animated by the parish choir and the seminarians of the diocese. Serge's family and young Betharramite laity followed the

“Lord, I don't have a proud heart or ambitious eyes. I don't pursue big projects or wonders that are beyond me. But I keep my soul serene and silent.”

rite through the live stream on Facebook and the website of the Vicariate of Italy.

In his homily, the Bishop emphasised the importance of the family, cradle of vocations and place where the service of love is lived. He then invited everyone to pray for vocations and thanked the religious of Betharram for their service in the diocese.

- On the same day, the scj religious of the Vicariate of France-Spain, with the lay associates and the parishioners of the “Holy Family” Parish of Pau, welcomed with joy the new deacon, **Br. Landry Koffi**. The order of diaconate was



conferred by Mgr. Aillet, Bishop of the Diocese of Bayonne.

- The two companions of study and formation of Serge and Landry, Br **Br. Arnaud Kadjo** and **Br. Christian Yao** were ordained deacons by Mgr. Lezoutié, Bishop of the Diocese of Yopougon, on Saturday 9 January 2021, in the

Cathedral of Yopougon.

A four-fold action of grace, between the feast of the Holy Family and that of the Baptism of the Lord!

We join in the joy of the Vicariate of the Ivory Coast and of the whole Saint Michael Region. We wish our young brothers a fruitful ministry. Always ahead! ●●●

Neither Peace, nor tranquility

Central Africa,
Niem, January 29, 2021

After the last presidential elections on 27 December 2020 which saw the re-election of the outgoing president Archange Touadera, Central Africa is again going through a period of serious uncertainty and instability. Various armed groups (which already occupy 70% of the country, supported by ex-president François Bozizé) did not accept the result of these elections and indeed embarked on a military march towards Bangui, the capital. These groups have been blocked at the gates of Bangui by various foreign military contingents, in particular Russians and Rwandans with the support of the UN peacekeepers who have been present in Central Africa since 2014 with about 11,000 men.

I do not want to enter into a politico-military discussion that is not my responsibility. There are many elements at play, in particular the



Fr. Tiziano Pozzi
Regional Vicar
in Central Africa

control of the gold and diamond mines present almost everywhere throughout the country. There is one even 5 km from Niem and they whet the appetite of many, with or without free and fair elections. (Remember... only 30% of those entitled to vote were able to actually cast their vote...) What I want to highlight is that once again the Central African population is undergoing a severe trial. The words "peace" and "tranquility" have for a long time lost their value and their meaning here.

For many young people to be able to plan for their future is just a pipe



dream. It is more attractive for them to enlist in one of the various militias or the so-called self-defense groups.

Niem, from where I write, has been under the control of the armed group « 3R» (Return, Reclamation & Rehabilitation) since May 2017. Of course, they do not hinder the activity of our mission but our people live in a state of constant fear and this inevitably affects all the activities of the parish. This applies not only to us but to all the missions of the diocese and of the entire country. At the hospital, for about fifteen days we have been treating various members of this group from different combat areas who come to us with gunshot wounds. They are practically all aged between 20 and 30...

The « 3R» are now also the masters of the city of Bouar despite the presence of the FACA (Central African army) and the UN peacekeepers. What made a striking impression was that they took

control of the city without firing a shot. Bouar is a strategic city because the main road (practically the only one) that facilitates transport of goods from Cameroon to Bangui passes through here. Since December 20 this road has been blocked, causing serious supply problems for the capital, and so far the state has not been able to regain control. An attempt to pass with a convoy of trucks, (though protected by the Blue Helmets), resulted in the death of two Cameroonian truck drivers following an attack by « 3R» .

Bouar has been completely blocked for at least 20 days and the people, full of fear, have taken refuge in the various missions and parishes. Of course, our two communities, Fatima and St. Michel, are host to many displaced people. There is talk of at least 10,000 displaced throughout the city. I leave you to imagine what all this can mean, without counting all the rumors of an imminent military intervention to free

the city ...

Taking advantage of the fact that I am the "doctor of the '3R' " and that many of them know me, I have been to Bouar several times in the last few weeks. All activities are stopped, there are very few people around: an infinite sadness ...

There would be a thousand things to say yet but I prefer to end by emphasising an obvious fact: in moments of crisis, everyone takes refuge where the Catholic Church is present. Currently in the mission of St. Joseph, the bishop, the Prefect, the Sub-prefect and the mayor of the city are refugees ... And also the large NGOs (Doctors Without Borders, World Food Program, etc.) rely almost

exclusively on the structures and above all on the hospitality of the Catholic Church. Here, in St. Michel, there are the staff of the Red Cross, of Action Against Hunger... and Minusca itself (the UN mission), that is the UN Blue Helmets. Though they have their own base in Niem they ask me about the situation in our area...

The next few days, weeks and months will be difficult for all of us but surely, and I think I speak for all my brothers, when I say that each of us will strive to do our utmost to try to alleviate the sufferings and fears of our people.

Greetings to everyone. ●●●



Extract from the Regional Superior's circular letter on his return from his visit to the Vicariate of Central Africa in December 2020.

«...Once again despite the under-development, the extortionate demands of armed gangs, corruption, pillaging of the sub-soil, malnutrition, malaria, Aids (covid-19 being the least of the worries at present) inflicted on the people of the Central African Republic, I experienced first hand their unexpected resourcefulness. I witnessed the pain and the dignity of these women, these mothers, single-handedly carrying their struggling country. I was impressed by their deprivation, their faith, their acceptance of reality, their ability to face the worst trials with joy and acquiescence. I followed religious and lay people alike, working night and day in the service of all, without distinction as to religion or ethnicity; I saw our brothers, shoulder-to-shoulder with religious sisters and humanitarian workers of many different nationalities, educating, caring, calling out and denouncing injustices, rising up against wrongs even when a Kalashnikov rifle was pointed at them, not for one moment giving way to fear or ceasing to defend God's little ones. »



CONGREGATION



Vietnam • The three Vietnamese novices of the second year, Br. Joseph, Br. Peter and Br. Thang, are doing their ministry in northern Vietnam in three different parishes. We wish them all a fruitful experience in view of the first vows.

Our house in Ho Chi Minh City is currently composed by two first year novices and two aspirants, under the guidance of Fr. Shamon scj. Withheld in Thailand by the travel restrictions due to Covid, Fr. Albert-Saat has at last been able to come back.



REGION SAINT MICHAEL GARICOÏTS

FRANCE ^{SPAIN}
 ITALY ^{CENTRAL AFRICA}
 IVORY COAST ^{HOLY LAND}

Ivory Coast

• The extraordinary novitiate of the Vicariate, which began on August 26, made its first 10-day Ignatian Retreat from Tuesday December 8 to Friday December 18. The novices Antoine, Henri-Joël, François, Belmond and Bourgeois were accompanied by their master Fr Jean-Paul Kissi SCJ. We continue to support them with our prayer in their spiritual journey.

• Despite being struck by and hindered in its activities by the Cov-

id-19 pandemic; despite being shocked by the death of Mrs. Henriette N'Guessan (a recently deceased Betharramite laywoman); despite being worried about and affected by the recent post-electoral crises (in the Ivory Coast), the Fraternity of the Betharramite lay associates, with their gaze turned firmly to the Lord, have finally restarted their meetings and relaunched their activities on the 12th December in the community of Adiapodoumé.



Indeed, the announcement of the Lord's coming blows a breath of fresh air on this family; so happy to have its members reunited and willing to walk once again with the Lord in a half-day retreat. This retreat, led by Fr. Jean-Paul Kissi scj, started with a sharing of news between the community and the lay associates. This sharing was followed by a reflection on the theme: "In the mystery of the Incarnation, God comes to meet us and invites us to spread his life and his joy".

Inspired by Betharramite spirituality and rooted in a consideration of everyday life, what Fr. Jean-Paul's reflection offered the lay associates can be expressed in these words: God,

through the Incarnation of the Word, unites himself with His creation, weds Himself to our humanity and invites us to go forth and to communicate joy in our lives. The retreat ended at midday, with the celebration of the Eucharist followed by a shared lunch. May Emmanuel walk with us. Always forward!

- On Tuesday 2 February, the community of Adiapodoumé celebrated a three-fold event: first of all the feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the temple; then the celebration of the World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life and finally the institution of Br. Jean Claude scj and Hyacinthe scj as Readers, and Br Emmanuel scj and Br Fulgence scj as Acolytes.



Central Africa

- The Bishop of the Diocese of Bouar, Mgr Mirosław Gucwa, celebrated the Feast of the "Presentation of Jesus in the Temple" and the 25th World Day of Consecrated Life with the religious of the Diocese in the convent of the Sisters of St Clare. The religious of the Betharramite communities present in Bouar also joined in this celebration. This year, the anniversary was



particularly significant: the religious present in the Diocese of Bouar gathered around their Bishop, Mgr Gucwa, in a very delicate moment of the life of the country. Mgr Gucwa expressed his closeness to all the religious, inviting every community to be open and ready for anything that can happen at any moment and in particular to be as close as possible to the people who live in fear and terror.



REGION FR. AUGUSTE ETCHECOPAR

ARGENTINA URUGUAY
PARAGUAY BRAZIL

Argentina-Uruguay

- In the Region Fr. Auguste Etchecopar we have shared virtually, on several occasions, the activities carried out by the Betharramite laity and the religious in taking care of the most vulnerable, while also taking into consideration in particular the health restrictions that weigh heavily on so many people all over the world. The objective of these "meetings" was to get to know each other, to enrich ourselves and to share joy with those who, from the limits of their own position, replicate and



manifest through their own lives the generous impulse of the Heart of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, saying Here I am, revealing to the men and women of our time the Tenderness and Mercy, the loving face of God the Father. (RdV9)

An example of an action taken to assist the most vulnerable was carried out in December 2020 at the Felix Trezzi Missionary Center in Santiago del Estero (Argentina), with our regional missionary community of Paso de Los Toros (Uruguay), and under the aegis of the bishop of Santiago del Estero.

The project was entitled: "With my brothers and sisters at Christmas".

It was about sharing Christmas with our brothers and sisters. We experienced this wonderful event as it is for the whole world, the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ –, with a thrilling encounter, so different from the past years (taking into account the protocol imposed by the Pandemic). The Felix Trezzi Missionary Center is located in the eastern sector of the Santiago neighborhood where low-income families live. Some Betharramite laity, together with other lay people, accompanied by the Betharramite religious of Beltrán, have resumed the activities of this Center.

For several days we solicited and

received donations from local institutions, businesses, relatives, and friends, neighbors, etc. We managed to pack 50 bags full of food for families (containing sugar, *maté*, flour, oil, fat, noodles, rice, minced meat, sardines, milk, sweet bread, caramelized peanuts, nougat, juices, etc.). We were also able to fill a Christmas sack with 100 toys and 100 bags of candy and cookies for the children.

Our mission is to incarnate the "*Here I am*" as St. Michael Garicoits asks of us, making us close to the weakest.

BRAZIL

- On December 20, on the 4th Sunday of Advent, during the Eucharistic celebration presided over by the Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Belo Horizonte, Mgr Guimarães, the presence and the pastoral ministry of Fr Francisco de Paula, scj, as Parish Priest, and of Fr Davi Lara scj, as assistant Parish Priest, officially started in the Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in the district of Nova Granada in Belo Horizonte.

Our brothers continue the mission carried out up to now with zeal and apostolic dedication by Fr. Antonio Scarpa SCJ, now chaplain of the Community of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, in the nearby quarter.

- From 24 to 30 January, the annual Spiritual Retreat of the Vicariate of Brazil was held in the São Miguel College of Passa Quatro, the first foundation of the Congregation in Brazil.



Religious, scholastics and postulants joined the retreat, led by two priests from the team of formators of the Jesuit Congregation in Brazil: Fr. Kleber Barberino Chevi sj and Fr. Reginaldo Sarto sj.

During this Ignatian Spiritual Retreat all contributed to create an atmosphere of prayerful silence.

The brush of the Divine Artist, who so beautifully painted the surrounding environment, helped to better enjoy this time of silence and prayer.

of the Lord Jesus in each person's life and to know and to understand the vocation more clearly in their life and spiritual journey.

After studying this topic they came back and shared with gratitude to God for this class that was beneficial to their lives. These classes helped them to understand better God's love and calling, and get to know themselves better. They confidently opened their hearts and minds. They could see their own weaknesses, doubts, depression from within and all kinds of difficulties in their life and ability to accept them and try to overcome them.

These classes will help them to make progress in their spiritual journey and to grow in their vocation.



REGION SAINT MARY OF JESUS
CRUCIFIED
 ENGLAND INDIA
 THAILAND

Thailand

• On the 15-16 of December 2020, our novices had the opportunity to learn about "Discernment" by Fr. Miguel Garaizabal SJ, the Superior of the Thai Jesuit Region. The topic was discern the will of God, to understand the call



•\• Notices from the general council •/\•



==== RL. 295; 205/t • During the General Council of January 22, 2021, the Superior General gave the authorization to the Regional Superior, Fr. Daniel González, to proceed with the sale of a piece of land located in Nova Granada (Belo Horizonte, State of Minas Gerais, Vicariate of Brazil - Region Fr. Auguste Etchécopar).

==== RL. 206 • The Superior General & his Council (27 January 2021) approved the following **appointments of the Community Superiors**:

Region / Vicariate	Community	Superior	Term
Region SMJC	Thailand	Fr. Jailertrit Michael Tidkham	2 nd term starting from February 1 st
	Thaïlande	Fr. Sukjai Gabriel Pornchai	2 nd term starting from February 1 st
	India	Fr. Sathish Paul Raj	1 st term starting from February 1 st

==== The **Betharramite Formation Team** (SFB) meeting is taking place by videoconference from February 9 to 12 and from February 15 to 16. Appointed by the Superior General during the General Council of January 27, the team is composed as follows: Fr. Stervin SELVADASS scj, General Councillor for formation & Coordinator of the SFB, Fr. Gaspar FERNÁNDEZ PÉREZ scj, Fr. Glecimar GUILHERME da SILVA scj, Fr. Jean-Paul KISSI Ayo scj, Fr. Kriangsak KITSAKUNWONG scj, Fr. Simone PANZERI scj.



In memoriam

- Argentina: On December 4, **Mr. Pascual Daleoso**, brother of Fr Francisco Daleoso SCJ, of the community of Adrogué passed away at the age of 85, in Buenos Aires.
- Argentina: On Saturday 16 January in Lomas de Zamora (Buenos Aires), **Mr. Mario Surace**, father of our Scholastic Br. Mariano Surace SCJ, of the community of Adrogué, returned to the Father's house. He was 74 years old.
- Paraguay: On February 9, **Mrs. Ramona Dalida Ríos**, mother of Fr Fulgencio Ferreira SCJ, of the community of Ciudad del Este, passed away at the age of 89, in the City of Coronel Bogado (Departamento de Itapúa – Paraguay).

We offer our brothers and their families our heartfelt condolences reassuring them that we hold them and their dear one in our thoughts and our prayers.

There must be laughter in heaven on the occasion of my ruby jubilee!

Br. Gerard Sutherland scj

Who in their wildest dreams would have thought I would be a Betharramite in the early 1980's? On many occasions I have been asked whether I would do it all over again. The truthful answer is 'yes' -a thousand times 'yes', and without any hesitation.

I remember working in a hotel in Birmingham after qualifying as a chef and telling the waitress that I was leaving and joining a religious congregation ... 'You must be mad', was her reply ... What are you running away from? I had at that time no real answer. It was only during my novitiate that my novice master Fr Terry Sheridan spoke about our lives in religious life as not about running away from society, but about being immersed in it totally, and this being a sign of the kingdom of God. This has stayed with me all my life.

I joined the Congregation on the 4th October 1979. A few months earlier I had visited the National Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham with



Bros John, Michael, Ian, Philip, Colin and a few others. Colin was one of my teachers at school in the early 1970's so I knew him a little. Travelling to Walsingham was a long journey by minibus. It was during that journey that I got to know the community; the laughter and joy of sharing our lives and the Eucharist was a real sign to me, enabling me to think about dedicating my life as a Betharramite. Soon afterwards I spoke to my family about joining this beautiful branch.

I started my journey in Garicoits House in Worcester, but after 18 months we were moved to Olton. Here I made my first profession in 1981 and my final profession in 1986. To date I've worked in three parishes, Droitwich Spa, Great Barr and Olton and I have always enjoyed myself enormously doing my ministry. It gave me the experience of living and working with parishioners old and

young, accompanying them, especially in our prayer services in Lent and Advent and visiting the sick and housebound and our parish schools.

When in Bethlehem in 1995 Fr Francesco Radaelli the then Superior General, asked for volunteers to help in the new formation house in India it struck a chord with me. Eventually I spoke to Austin our then Vice-Provincial to see if I was the right candidate to help. With my mother suffering with Alzheimer's, I thought it best to leave it for a little while and help the family. After my mother's death, I had no excuses and I travelled to India in April 1997. The experience I had was out of this world; the students and people around our seminary were amazing. They gave to me a lot more than I could give in return. We all helped by teaching classes and sharing our lives and ourselves with the students. There was both joy and sadness in our formation house, which is natural but that's passed.

The underlying question which came up time and time again in the early years - to myself, Fr Enrico and Fr Jose Mirande was – 'What are we going to do after formation?' – As at that time we had two houses of formation. Today I see and I hope all can see the joy and passion of our young religious working in parishes, schools and formation houses. It gives me great hope for the future. It

brings great joy to see the seed planted, growing and flourishing. The nearly eight years I spent there live in my heart and always will.

After my return from India I was appointed to Olton, where I worked in a small retreat centre called 'Bethany' and this gave me a real sense of joy and happiness sharing myself and the faith with others, Catholic and non-Catholic. In 2008 after the sudden death of Fr Xavier I was asked to return to India to help – this I did willingly. After witnessing the growth of Betharram, the branch was growing stronger. I returned to the UK and went to live in the parish of the Holy Name with Fr Colin, a short lived experience as he died about five weeks later. It was the first and only time I have lived alone; this was an experience I didn't really like. After five months, Br John joined me, with Fr Stervin and Fr Subesh. We were eventually joined by Fr Mongkhon and we formed a truly international community.

Forty years later I can actually say that religious life has been a fantastic opportunity for me. My call, my vocational call, I re-live daily in my heart. Early on in my ministry I was vocation promoter for our congregation here in the UK and I recall giving many talks to young men and women in schools and parishes, and this experience stays with me even today.



It was about God always calling - It is like when in a large crowd (before Covid-19) watching a football match you can often hear your best friend call you by name over all the shouting from the fans, not hearing what he or she is saying, just hearing your name. This is how God calls... This is very true for me today; God is always calling and sometimes I hear the call over the noise of the crowd and act upon it, just like Samuel.

Who, even in their wildest dreams, could have envisaged that today we would reach out to parishioners via Zoom or Microsoft teams for parish meetings and evenings of prayer in Advent and Lent? Or reading the scriptures during Mass via webcam to people unable to attend, while looking down at an empty church. The word 'webcam' wasn't even in existence back in the 1970's or for that

fact mobile phones. We may not like change but if we don't go with it then it will force itself upon us whether we like it or not. The future is never what we think it is going to be. That is why it is important to live in the here and now, which could stand for 'No Opportunities Wasted.'

My life as a religious is a gift to be shared, it's not just for me, it's for the Congregation and the Church, as a sign and witness to God who has a sense of humour because he has called me. ●●●

Circular letter

F.V.D.

Betharram 26 March 1886

My dear Fathers and Brothers in Our Lord,

A sweet and precious favour has just been granted to our dear Congregation and my heart feels such joy that I hasten to share it with you.

In response to one of our letters which accompanied our offering of Peter's Pence (to Rome), the Supreme Pontiff deigned to write to us through his Secretary of State, Cardinal Jacobini, the letter of which I am sending you the translation.

"His Holiness assures us of his esteem, his affection, even his gratitude; and, to the touching expression of such feelings, he wants to impart an Apostolic Blessing for our members and our works."

What happiness that the highest Majesty of the earth stoops down towards the most humble of her children!

What encouragement! And, as the letter says, what comfort in this blessing from a Martyr-Pope who raises his hands in captivity to show us his fatherly tenderness and encourages us to be bold in the struggle!

Also, I have absolutely no doubt, my Fathers and Brothers, that this benevolent act of the Holy See, while melting our hearts, will further ignite our zeal and will make us renew with enthusiasm the cry of our venerated Founder: Forward...let us go forward!

Yes, forward like soldiers who have already had the good fortune to stand out in the eyes of their glorious leader and to obtain from him a glorious honour.

Forward in that spirit of union and discipline which His Holiness urges us to follow in his admirable encyclicals and which is nothing but the sint unum of the Divine Heart.

There, you will doubtless find the secret of the victory which will save the Church in the terrible struggle in which she is engaged.

With God's help, we will have our share of this triumph as our little Society has been animated with this spirit.

Desist therefore, I beg you, desist more and more from anything that can harm the fraternal union, the respect for authority, the holy laws of the Church, the Constitutions and the Rules of our dear Institute.

On the contrary, let us console the Heart of Jesus and that of his August Vicar, by the spectacle of the most perfect charity, of the most complete obedience, of the most edifying regularity; in short, by the example of a truly priestly and religious life which persuades everyone of the perfection of the Gospel.

May this be for the greater glory of Our Lady the Divine Mother, ad majorem Beatae Mariae Virginis gloriam.

Let us ask St Joseph for this remarkable grace.

Could this Pontifical letter, dated March 22, be a sign that St. Joseph is smiling on this Congregation which has chosen him as its special patron?

To the great and good Saint Joseph be gratitude, love, and trust everywhere and always.

All yours in Our Lord,

Etchecopar priest

Signed by Etchecopar Signed by Etchecopar Signed by Etchecopar Signed by Etchecopar

Lent: a Time for Renewing Faith, Hope and Love.



... It is absolutely necessary to open up your heart when facing exterior and interior difficulties, knowing that you are a very much loved child of the heavenly Father, you are always doing his chosen work, always in his presence, always supported by Him with the greatest favours, and his incessant care.

All this is beyond doubt and requires on your part the greatest openness, complete self emptying, humility, gratitude, calm, joy and that interior and exterior peace, which nothing should ever perturb. What more could we want under the guidance of such a good Father and Friend? ...

Saint Michael Garicoïts, to a Sister of the Cross, 27 December 1861

Wishing you a grace-filled Lent!



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