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By way of introduction to
the meeting of the Superiors of the Regions and the Vicariates

(Bethlehem, April 22nd – May 7th 2009)

We are living a time of grace in our congregation, a **kairós**. We cannot fail to make the best of it. We cannot let the Lord pass by without meeting him and miss the consolation, the happiness and salvation he offers.

As a time of grace it is also a great challenge for us as we must do our best to convert ourselves, to renew the fidelity to our vocation, to give new impulse to our evangelical fraternity and new thrust to our mission.

It is a time of grace - kairós – insofar as we are organizing our Congregation differently: into Regions and Vicariates. It is the General Chapter in 2005 which made a discernment and took this decision so that, at this time of history, we could better live through our vocation and better fulfil our mission.

The same Chapter reminded us that the whole organization of the Congregation is at the service of each religious and community, which is the place where the life and the mission of our whole family are at stake.

The Chapter stated that the regionalization process was necessary in order to live the paradox experienced by any ecclesial group, that is ‘communion’: *unity within diversity*. The same Church is the *mystery of the missionary communion*.

Unity of the Congregation within the cultural diversity of the Regions and the Vicariates. Unity must come true in every community formed by unique individuals, who are unique and have their own values, aptitudes, various and complementary potentials.

Many elements unite us: *one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*. (Eph. 4, 4-6)... A charism, a founder, a spirituality, a mission, a spiritual patrimony...

And there is also a great diversity. Four continents, fifteen countries, languages, cultures, ways of life, legislations. If the common good is well assumed, all this diversity enriches it and allows it to be expressed in different ways, yet without changing it. Thus, cultural diversity enriches the charism and the congregation.

The values of our lifestyle which unites us are the following: the experience of God and the contemplative dimension; the charism; the Betharramite virtues (humility, gentleness, obedience, dedication and charity); poverty, chastity and community fraternity; mission (to cooperate in order to create a new world by making known the love of God, revealed to us by Jesus).

Any Betharramite religious, wherever he lives and whatever his lifetime in history, cannot fail to aim at these values. We have to live these values in order to bear witness to Jesus, even though people don't understand us or persecute us because of them.

Religious life has to inculturate itself, but it has sometimes to be countercultural: by denouncing and fighting against what does not humanizes people as God wanted them to be humanized.

We are sensitive to other values, which are the features of the globalized culture in which we live and because they are in tune with our vocation, which asks us to live and bear witness to the Gospel in that culture: freedom, solidarity, human rights, rediscovery of the religious value, importance of life experiences and emotions, longing for happiness, integral vision of human life, ecumenism, ecology. Fostering these values helps us to live better our vocation as consecrated persons.

There are other values, proper to each culture, which are not opposed to the values of religious life and which should help to develop the values of our lifestyle. Cultural values can never replace the values of religious life. Cultural values have to be in tune with the Gospel; this requires from us to be vigilant and to make a personal and community discernment. We have to keep in mind Saint Paul's recommendation in the Letter to the Romans: *Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect* (Rm.12,2).

Besides the cultural originality which may characterize us, as religious we live the common values in an original manner, since each one is a unique individual. But individual diversity should aim at communion: union built on the elements and common values of each community.

This union within diversity is today a great challenge for our Betharramite family. In the past, it has not always been so in our Congregation... It has not been easy to accept new vocations in the places where the mission had sent us. The *coutumier* used to establish one single way of life of expressing our spirituality, in the various places. At times the superiors would not understand why the white cassock was used in tropical countries, instead of the black one.

If the inculturation of the charism has been difficult, it has also been difficult to achieve the union of the congregation, especially from the creation of the Provinces in 1947. Given their autonomy, the Provinces would look like different congregations.

Today, you, as Superiors of the Regions and Vicariates, are the representatives of the diversity of the Congregation, that the General Chapter in 2005 wanted to guarantee and respect. On the other side we, the Superior general with the General Council and the Council of the Congregation, have to ensure the union of the Congregation: may each religious and each community live in a serious and mature way the values of the charism which we have in common. May the union be expressed by the care of each religious for his brethren, for example through the exchange of religious and by putting in common the resources, using the criterions of austerity, justice, solidarity and sharing.

But diversity should be expressed in the original way of living the charism, the brotherhood and the mission, of each community. And this is possible only if the religious of a community organise themselves in a particular way, by elaborating, living and evaluating the community and apostolic project.

All this will be possible only if the originality of each religious is respected. For this it is necessary to rely on the psychological and vocational maturity of each religious, who commits himself to taking seriously his vocation and the opportunities emerging from the elements of our lifestyle and allowing his own blossoming: vocation, consecration, fraternity and mission.

Priorities or elements requiring special attention in this moment of grace. We are inundated with papers; so what we need now is to be operative in order to *Be truly religious of Betharram:*

- Each religious should revive the fire of their vocation and be always able to live and act in keeping with it. The major priority is the experience of faith, experience of God's love.
- Composition of true communities based on the community and apostolic Project.
- Taking up again the role of the Superiors of community, so that the communities be the place where we live our vocation and mission, where we share and sort problems out.
- Motivating all the religious in order that they get interested in the vocation promotion.
- Missionary cooperation.
- Truly succeeding in sharing the goods among all the religious of the Congregation, so that all can live with dignity and achieve well the mission of the Congregation.

How to implement this new organization:

- It is necessary to listen to the religious. The Superiors of the Regions and the Vicariates have to arrange interviews with all the religious, not only spontaneous but also planned meetings.
- Conversation should not only concern what one does, but also what one lives, feels and what one is. It is necessary to know the method of “**giving account of one's conscience**”. It is necessary to be able to speak of what is essential, the motivation of our life, the experience of faith and the vocation.
- If one community does not succeed in elaborating a community and apostolic Project, it must be approached and accompanied with discretion, gentleness and respect in order to be helped in the elaboration, implementation and evaluation of such a project.
- As Superiors, we must be always patient, as we know that changes do not happen by a click. We must have much respect for the individuals, just as they are, and take time. In the next two years, we will most likely not achieve all that we have planned, but we must not fail to do what we can.
- It is important to revalorize the **canonical visit**, as required by the Rule of life. It is good that the Regional Superior make once a year a more formal visit to each religious, including interviews, and more formal meetings with the community.
- We should not abandon what has been achieved in the field of formation. We are aware that our communities must be well-prepared to welcome and integrate the new vocations who are being formed differently. If we want to strengthen the new style of religious life that we have just been talking about, we must continue to insist both on personal guidance and on the Spiritual Exercises.

On the agenda of this meeting of the Superiors of Regions and Vicariates:

- Four days to revive the fire of our vocation through the experience of the *Narratio fidei*;
- We will examine a 'Directoire' that should help us to make the animation of the Congregation work;
- The experience of the charism: spirituality and mission;
- The community in mission, and the community and apostolic project;
- The role of the Superior of the community;
- The new Rule of Life. Looking on Chapters 1 to 7;
- The regionalization according to the Rule of Life and the 'Directoire';
- The Economy of communion according to the Rule of Life and the 'Directoire';
- Vocation promotion;
- Betharramite formation; missionary animation and co-ordination;
- Sharing the spirituality and the mission with the laity
- Planning the Meeting of the Superiors in each Region;

➤ Time for the Regional Councils to gather.

In the meeting of the plenary General Council in December 2008 we appointed the new Superiors of the Regions and Vicariates. We agreed also on an animation project for the whole congregation for the current year. The present meeting is the second appointment of this animation project. It is important that the Superiors of the Vicariates, also Councilors of the Regional Superior, share the principles, criteria and actions which help to give new life to the religious and the communities of the Congregation.

- **The 3rd appointment will be in September or October 2009, when a meeting of all the Superiors of the communities will take place in each Region**, just as it was decided in the Council of the Congregation in Bangalore. The superiors have an essential part in the process of reorganization and revitalization of our Family. The superiors are key people in guiding the religious in the fidelity of their vocation and in building prayerful, brotherly, welcoming and missionary communities. We would like also that the *narratio fidei* method be used in the meetings of the Superiors.
- **The 4th appointment will be by the end of 2009: an Assembly of each Vicariate** in conformity with art. 259 of the Rule of Life. Our objective is that all the religious of our family, one by one, can valorize their own vocation, consecration, fraternal life in community and mission. For this we propose also to apply the *narratio fidei* method in these assemblies. In this way we can reach each religious.

We are celebrating the Easter of the Lord to which we have been associated by our Baptism and consecration. Filled with serenity by the peace of the Risen Lord and with enthusiasm coming from the Easter happiness, we want to live these days by dedicating ourselves to prayer, communion and work. We have the privilege of living in Bethlehem, where God made himself visible. We are accompanied by the intercessions of Mary, the mother of the Incarnate Word, and Joseph, the Carpenter who protected Jesus' and Mary's fragility. Our Father Saint Michael encourages us to give a new impulse to the Charism offered to him by the Holy Spirit. Father Etchecopar, who founded this community and visited it several times, rejoices by seeing us seriously interested in the present and the future of the Congregation. The Holy Spirit carries us along this dynamics of fidelity. We let ourselves be urged by Him, like Miriam, whose relics rest in the Carmelite convent, and who intercedes for us that we get rid of all illusions and live always with realism in truth and love.