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Purpose: Circular for Lent 2018.

Dearest Sisters

I have just returned to Italy, after lively days spent in the Philippines, together with the General Councilor Sr. M. Rosa, days full of hope and holy joy in the Lord. The eight Indonesians postulants entered into the novitiate, transparent, simple ladies, full of enthusiasm and desires to be one with Jesus, who are falling in love with, the charism and of our mission, in addition was the planning assembly which was the center of our visit.

I believe that this time among them has made me relive the times, now far away, of my novitiate and juniorate ... times of great enthusiasm, generosity, joyful and ready availability ... To see these young ladies attentive to every little detail, to every little gesture of service and kindness ... I am reminded of so many of us, competing in the incarnation of the "family spirit" so dear to Don Orione and so present in the Sisters who taught us by their example, as a true daughter by Don Orione, a true LMSC.

But we know that we not only have a "glorious history to remember", perhaps with a little bit of nostalgia, we mostly have a "future" to prepare starting from the coherent, joyous and courageous experience in our "today", in our "here and now"...

Therefore, dear Sisters, I would like to offer you for reflection, for this time of strong conversion that is Lent, the first critical point that the XII General Chapter has identified, in its first part: **the ambit of consecration, with its signs of strength and weakness**. The mystery of the Lord's Passover is characterized by strength and weakness, by death and resurrection, from this mystery of a God who takes on our weakness and "re-creates" it by the power of his love, redeeming it, healing it, giving it back the original dignity, elevating it to the dignity of "sons" in the Son.

So much to thank...

With a grateful heart we can welcome the "signs of strength" that the XII GC underlined in the context of our Consecration! All the fruit of the personal and community effort of these years, in which the reflection and commitment to embody a new "lifestyle" has helped us to see each other with new eyes, to evaluate and renew in our lives what no longer responds to the times and to today's Church.

We are aware that many of us have taken seriously what the Congregation has asked of us and we have made a journey to deepen our "self-knowledge and the self-awareness of our limits"¹.

It is not possible to progress on the path of following Christ without embarking on a journey towards our interior life, a journey in the truth of what we are before God, a journey of authentic knowledge of ourselves. Only by putting ourselves in truth before God, we discover God in us! Only in the awareness of our limitations, of our inconsistencies, of our spiritual and psychological fissures, can we be "initiated" on the path of purification and liberation to which the Lord wants to lead us. Only by welcoming ourselves as

we are we can welcome others as they are ... Only in the serene acceptance of what we are we can commit ourselves with determination "in personal and communitarian sanctity²".

This "holiness of life" we have many examples among our young sisters and our younger sisters! A holiness that does not make noise, that is not made of words, but made of charity, of openness, of courage in goodness, a daily holiness... holiness that is "lifestyle", seed, ferment, fruitful silence, gesture, smile...

We have so much to thank in our sisters 'lives of yesterday and today... but also so much to regain, to reflect and to confront... The cry of Don Orione "I need holy children!", should be our perennial longing, that keeps alive and strong the flame of our vocational response.

Let's take a break in reading:

- We recall some yesterday and today' Sisters, young or less young, which are signs of holiness for us to which we are all called by vocation and mission.
- We thank the Lord for their lives.

So much to purify...

With an opened heart to the grace I invite you to welcome also the "signs of weakness"³ that the XII CG has identified in our Congregation. We do not want to look at them with pessimism or discouragement, but as challenges and an invitation to conversion in this Lent that we are starting:

- **"Weakening of the faith and too much human reasoning"**: unfortunately in many of us we highlight this "weakness" that is really serious because it affects the root of our Christian and religious vocation; it undermines the meaning of consecrated life and the experience of the vows, weakens motivations and the daily life of vocation, of relationships and of the apostolate becomes heavy, negative and sad. When the "spirit of faith" weakens in our lives, the "worldly spirit", "human reasoning" and "negativity" take over. It does not mean that we do not have to "reason" or have our own "thought": absolutely! But if our reasoning is not then declined on that of Jesus, of the Gospel and of the charism, freely chosen as "style of life", we distance ourselves from the ideal that orients our vocational choice and everything begins to be boring, meaningless, relative, polemized. After all, what we freely and joyfully "gave" to the Lord one day through the Profession of Vows, slowly we get it back by retracting into ourselves, denying to God what we had previously offered with generosity and unconditional love... and so the "poverty" is no longer detachment, "chastity" is no longer freedom, "obedience" is no longer availability... "charity" is no longer ablative.

- **"Weakening of the spousal bond with Christ; the experience of the vows has failed"**: this "sign of weakness" identified by the Chapter is a consequence of the previous one; if faith fails, if the gift ceases to exist, if the supernatural sense of our Consecration disappears, the bond of nuptial love with Christ who are the vows certainly ceases to exist. Through the profession of vows we have become "spouses" of Christ! What is it expected from a "bride"? It is expected fidelity to the covenant of love, intimacy with the Bridegroom, beauty and delicacy, donation and fruitfulness... The bride is then sister, mother, friend ... of those whom the Bridegroom entrusts to her. She is a happy and generous "bride", not a "spinster" who is frustrated and selfish.

Let's stop and ask:

- What are the symptoms of "weakening faith" that we find in us, in our community and in our Vice-Delegation?
- What is it lacking to reinvigorate the testimony of our being "brides of Christ"? How are we witnessing the "experience of the vows"?

- **"Poor quality of personal and communitarian prayer"**: this "sign of weakness" is the axis of all life, of the quality of life. Prayer is a "meeting", prayer is a "breath", prayer is a "relationship". Is like this our personal and community prayer? Our life is often returning to languid, watered down... our harsh and conflicting relationships, our introverted and comfortable apostolate... simply because we do not pray, or because we pray badly. The Chapter speaks about the "quality" of prayer, this means giving time, space and creativity to prayer... overcoming the habit, repetition, formalism, rush, routine, superficiality, to give space to a more incarnate prayer that involves our whole being: spirit, soul and body, which is "direct way" to the encounter with God and with others, which transforms our life. The quality of our consecrated life depends on the quality of our prayer ...

- **"Fragility in the fraternal life and little testimony of joy"**: arriving at this "sign of weakness" we can say that it is the sad consequence of the precedents. Pope Francis repeats that "where there are consecrated persons there is joy"! Because the joy of the consecrated it is to belong to Christ, to be with Christ, to be in Christ! If Christ is at the center of our fraternal life, then, the discord, rivalry, jealousy, pride, hypocrisy, "the terrorism of chattering" (as the Pope says), permanent discontent in all respects cannot exist among us... We often see how and we said frankly that who has the habit of criticizing others behind, is then unable to accept the slightest fraternal correction or the advice of a sister: the criticism makes superb! These things divide and divide us and division does not come from God, but from the evil one who knows well that dividing us it will triumph! Our consecration puts us in the best situation to live to the maximum the commandment of love and to bear witness to it with the joy that comes only from the love of Christ in us.

- **"Lack of immersive spiritual itineraries"**: this last "sign of weakness" indicated by the Chapter questions us about the responsibility each one has of his own formation and self-formation. In the spiritual journey we all need to be accompanied, animated, oriented, helped ... The Congregation offers us permanently tools and opportunities for our human and spiritual growth and maturity, because formation is and will always be a priority; what we have spent on animation, for the accompaniment and formation of the sisters, will never be wasted ... But how do we welcome and take advantage of these tools and opportunities? How often do we not accept them and, sadly, even criticize what the Congregation offers us? These "involving itineraries" imply a serious, tenacious and persevering commitment on our part, so that our whole being may be gradually christ like we put ourselves in an attitude of permanent "obedience"... In the spiritual life Don Orione told us, "whoever does not advance, goes back"! Woe to us if we believe we have arrived or have not more need ("at our age") to progress and to be accompanied...

We pause in our reading to ask ourselves:

- How is our prayer? How do we make it more authentic and a source of personal and communitarian transformation?
- What are the symptoms that we see in our relationships that highlight the "fragility" of the fraternity and the "witness of joy"?
- What is the route of growth in our spiritual life that we are going through?

The strength of "good example"

Dearest Sisters, this Lent season invites us to review our life in the light of what the Chapter has left us in the "signs of strength and weakness" of our consecration, and to resume our journey with renewed strength and hope, that which comes from Christ, dead and risen.

I would like to invite you to live this time in the light of an expression, I would say, old and new at the same time, very dear to the Saints and to our Founding Father, because it has its foundation in the word of Jesus: "May your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven "(Mt 5:16). I mean the "good example". I said "regain" because it seems to have been

forgotten or gone out of fashion, when instead, actually I think it is more and necessary today than ever in our world so poor and in need of "witnesses", "reference points", "leaders" and prophets "!

If it is true that we are, in large part, what we have received and absorbed by those who preceded us, then, the new generations of PSMC will also be marked by our testimony and "good example" of today.

Our first Sisters looked at Don Orione and they transmitted it us with fidelity and a sense of responsibility. Today, the new generations look at us, they learn from us ... not from our words, not from how many phrases of Don Orione we repeat, but from our life, from our "lifestyle", from our attitudes, behaviors and expressions, from our virtue, from our apostolic passion... We are today, personally and communally, also unconsciously, "schools of formation to the charism" for the new generations, not only for religious but also for the lay people... We are building the future of the Congregation: a quality future, if we live a qualified religious life... a future of mediocrity, if we live a mediocre religious life...

Somebody might say of course: "but each one is responsible for their own response"! It's true! But it is also true that the context in which we live the response to the Lord and to the charism is highly conditioning and, therefore, we all are, in a certain way, responsible for the response of all; we are all responsible for the fidelity and perseverance of all, because the sister in the community is "my" sister and as such, even to each one, the Lord will ask the question he asked Cain: "Where is your sister?". And, what will we answer? It's mature, she knows what is doing, it's her business...?

I like to remember and apply to us the words of Don Orione in the famous letter on the Christian education of young people: "young people look at the professor: they live more than his example or his words:" the words move, the examples drag! "it's always true! (...) Example! Example! Example! Young people do not think much: they follow and do what they see"⁴.

Therefore, the reflection on the "signs of strength and weakness" can be a great challenge to regain the strength of the "good example", to make us feel, like our first Co-sisters, the joyful responsibility to build, with the example of our qualified life, the present and the future of our dear Congregation.

Our Lenten commitment

In organizing ourselves personally and communally to live Lent this year, we try to make quality choices, keeping in mind the Articles of the General Norms modified in the XI GC, not conforming only with the external signs, but also having the courage to do choices of interior quality: sacrifices pleasing to God that make life more authentic, fruitful and evangelical and vocationally attractive.


So, let us ask ourselves: at what kind of **prayer**, **fasting**, **silence**, **abstinence** and **charity** should I commit myself?

- Let us commit ourselves to offering ourselves the "good example" of a **prayer** that opens the heart to conversion, so that God may do his work in us; a **prayer** that is gratitude for the "signs of strength", and at the same time, a **prayer** that puts us in a humble attitude to overcome the "signs of weakness" present in each of us.
- Let us commit ourselves to offering ourselves the "good example" of **fasting** from ways, behaviors and styles that distance us from God and our brothers; to fast from what nourishes the "signs of weakness" to nourish ourselves of what makes us more coherent with the commitment and the nuptial alliance with Christ.
- Let us commit ourselves to offering "the good example" in silencing in us those voices that do not lead to truth, goodness, beauty, holiness... in pacifying the heart with the serene breeze of the Holy Spirit who will make us listen to God in us and will lead us to overcoming the "signs of weakness" reconciling us to God and to others.

- Let us commit ourselves to offer the "good example" of abstaining of useless, superficial, ironic, destructive words... of mundane and banal thoughts and words, of selfish and aggressive feelings... to mature words, thoughts, feelings worthy of the "Risen": bearers of life, of communion, of solidarity, of forgiveness.
- Let us commit ourselves to offering ourselves the "good example" of sincere gestures, services and initiatives of charity among ourselves; let us open up to some "existential periphery" near or far with some concrete gesture of charity, of consolation, of welcome, of encouragement: the poor, children, the elderly, the sick, the lonely ... outside the house and even inside the house.

Let us entrust to Mary, Mother of the Risen Christ, the journey of this Lent, so that, led by her maternal hand and expert in the things of God, may we enjoy during Easter the personal and community fruits of a consecrated life more and more in harmony with what God, the Church and Don Orione are waiting for us, PSMC.

United in the same way, I greet each one with sincere affection and great hope, and I wish you all a Holy Easter!


Sr. M. Mabel Spagnuolo
Superior General

Rome, General House, 11 February 2018.