

## Congregation or Disintegration?



162 years have passed since that July 16, 1849. The initial group, formed by the founder and five young fellows, has become a congregation of over 3,000 members. The small cell in the diocesan seminary of Vic where all began now stretches to 65 countries on five continents.

### **What does it mean today to be part of a missionary congregation?**

When I compare the grim faces of those early Catalonian missionaries, dressed in full black, with smiling faces and colourful costumes of our young Indonesians, I realize that much time has passed between them. Cultural distance is enormously larger than the short time span of 162 years. In the history of religious institutions, just over a century and a half is not much time. The Rule of St. Benedict, inspiring many forms of monastic life, has more than 1,500 years. St. Francis founded his order for more than eight centuries, and the Jesuits date from 1534.

**We are a "young" institution**, which has not yet completed the cycle of two hundred years that historically tests its strength. And yet, the cultural changes that occurred in this time have been so profound that it seems a miracle to continue to exist. We were born during the Industrial Revolution, one year after the publication of the Communist Manifesto of Marx. Today we are deeply involved in the knowledge and information society.

The current text of our Constitutions is very different from the one approved by the Holy See in 1865. Catalonian and Castilian from our origins have given way to English, Portuguese, French, Indonesian and many other European Asian and African languages. Clearly we are not the same and yet we recognize ourselves in the same Congregation. **What ties us together with that small group of 1849?**

The theological answer is right on everyone's lips: We share the same charism, which, according to the guidelines of the Church must be "lived, preserved, deepened and developed" (cf. *Mutuae Relationes*, 11). Both the first missionaries and us, in an exercise of historical continuity, subscribe without reservation number 2 of the Constitutions that speaks about **seeking in everything the glory of God, our sanctification and salvation of all human beings**. And number 46: "The ministry of the Word, through which we communicate the total mystery of Christ to humanity, is our special calling among the People of God." Is it enough to know and feel that we belong to a religious congregation in a cultural moment in which many forces push us to dis-integration?

Are we culturally and spiritually prepared to live together with a clear awareness of what that means in times of fierce individualism, on the one hand, and mere gregarious phenomena, on the other? Aren't we also needing to recreate a new sense of "body", in which all members have been called for a

common life and mission? The last General Chapter addressed this point: "Therefore, we do not join the Congregation through a contract which we are able to rescind at will. We are not part of an association in which we dedicate part of our time and energy.

**We are a new family in the Spirit** which is not based on flesh and blood but on love and listening to, welcoming and proclaiming the Word of God (cf. Mt 12:46-50, Jn 15:12) " (MFL 38). Therefore, "towards her we bear feelings of gratitude, respect, loyalty and dedication" (MFL 39). To have a more profound correspondence between our beliefs, our feelings and behaviours, we probably need to rely more explicitly on the rod of the Cross and the staff of Mary. Every year we remember the words of Claret: "I based my first sermon on those words of the twenty-third Psalm: Your rod and your staff give me courage (v. 4), alluding to the devotion and confidence we should place in the Holy Cross and the Blessed Virgin Mary and applying it also to the project we were beginning. We left those Exercises full of fervour, bound and determined to persevere, and, thanks be to God and Mary, all have persevered." (Auto 490).

From Yogyakarta, I ask the Lord to be our shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, show us the way, heals our wounds, lead us to abundant pastures and protects us when we pass through dark canyons. HAPPY FOUNDATION DAY to all Claretian Missionaries, friends and benefactors.

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