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## At the service of an intimate and fruitful encounter

### *Letter to the Sons of charity*

Here are a few simple reflections about our pastoral charity. What I would like to do first of all is confirm the way that we situate ourselves in the Church as religious and shepherds, both with our internal diversity and with the common pastoral options that identify us as Sons. These orientations are seen concretely in our community apostolic projects and in the letters of mission each team has received from its corresponding major superior. There is an option that I believe could sum up all the rest, and I would call it: **pastoral work for the intimate and fruitful meeting with the Lord and with others**. I chose this starting point, moreover, for its biblical importance, because it seems to me especially pertinent for the present moment of the Church.

In the second place, he seemed to me a good thing to invite us all to reflect on this theme following a year in which we were immersed in a special way in our spirituality and in Fr. Anizan's apostolic and religious experience. His pastoral charity was the main fruit of his life. We are called to reproduce it permanently in every time and place, including today.

A third and no less important reason arises from the requests put to us in different ways by lay persons who use the same spiritual resources and share with us the same charism and mission. They, too, are called to live out this pastoral charity today, "as Fr. Anizan did."

In reference to pastoral action, today's ecclesial context is diverse and complex. The concept of the Church-world relationship in most of the Church, and especially in religious life, continues to be guided by the orientations of Vatican II. But it is also true that one can find everywhere something that worries not a few Sons is seeing that in some places ways of understanding this relationship thought to have been superseded are reappearing. It is said sometimes that they are closer to the idea that "outside the Church there is no salvation" than to the Council's teaching: "*The joys and hopes and anguish of people of our time, and above all of the poor and all the afflicted, are also the joys and hopes, the sadness and anguish of the disciples of Christ and there is nothing truly human that does not echo in its heart.*" (G.S.1) That's another reason for reinvigorating our ecclesial identity and for confirming the place of our charism and our ministry in the Church.

I will follow three steps: first, some short theological reflections; followed by others of a pastoral order, concerning our pastoral charity as a way of an intimate and fruitful encounter with the Lord, for us and for those we wish to serve; and I will conclude with some points for our religious life, recalling a few orientations of the Chapter.

## **I. A theology**

Allow me, then, to begin with some notes of a theological order, just to remind us of the foundation on which our pastoral orientations and practice are built. Every practice has behind it a theology. It is healthy to identify and explain it, even if it be in a very succinct way. I believe this theology revolves around three key concepts: Trinitarian love, Covenant and a vision of creation and grace. All three reveal to us God's love, whose most complete expression is found in the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God.

### **1. The source of the mission: Trinitarian love**

The love we are to witness is the love of God who is Trinity, and it has a double aspect. On one hand, it burns like a bright flame at the heart of the three persons of the Trinity, in a constant movement of giving and receiving. On the other hand, it is a love that infuses humanity and the cosmos in the economy of salvation. The importance of this affirmation of faith is in the fact that our mission does not originate in the needs of some people who need to be saved. Such a concept, which is ultimately based on our generosity, could give our action a certain tinge of superiority. Everything changes when we realize that the mission originates not in human need, but (if we might express it this way) in God's "need" to enter into relationship with every person, in order to share his Love and Life. In this sense, apostolic action is not an option one takes as the fruit of a generous decision, but is, rather, a natural part of being the Church, just as it is for God. Vatican Council II put it this way: "*The pilgrim Church is, by its very nature, missionary, since it finds its origin in the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit, according to the plan of God the Father.*" (Ad Gentes, 2)

Consequently, our first concern (and task) should be to submerge ourselves in the loving heart of the Trinity, accepting the relationship to which it invites us personally and communally. There can be no creative and fruitful apostolic action if we do not cultivate this immersion in the heart of God's love through prayer, meditation, and community reflection and discernment, in order to infuse ourselves with the attitudes, feelings, thoughts and action of the Son, the Good Shepherd, an expression made perfect in Trinitarian love. "*May the good Master make me completely his own! That is the prayer that I offer him most often. We speak of heaven sickness; I have God sickness. I would like to immerse myself in his adorable Trinity and make my home there forever,*" exclaimed Fr. Anizan. (Letter to a young woman counselee, December 30, 1920) How could we do so without entering in his plans and putting ourselves at his service as shepherds and apostles?

### **2. Servants of a Covenant**

As we know, the God in whom we believe was revealed to us through a covenant which he wants to make with humanity and which he renews unceasingly. God's desire is to have forever

inscribed on our hearts as a way of salvation, *“The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . I will place my Law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”* (Jer 31:31-33)

The Church is seen as a part of humanity that has said yes to God’s invitation to seal with humanity, through Jesus, who died and rose again, a “new and eternal covenant.” The Church agrees to be God’s people, to belong completely to God. The new covenant thus sealed in Jesus Christ is definitive and is renewed every day in the sacrament of the Eucharist: *“This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.”* (Lk 22:20) *“So every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.”* (I Cor 11:26) A covenant is not just a proposal for a few, for a chosen elite, but for all people. *“Remember how in former times you gentiles according to the flesh were excluded from the community of Israel and strangers to the Covenant and its Promise; you were in the world without hope and without God. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have brought near through the blood of Christ.”* (Eph 2:11-13)

Accepting the Lord’s invitation, however, implies a mission. The Church is not only beneficiary of the covenant, but its spokesperson, as well. The Church’s mission is to be an instrument through which God might encounter every person and “form an alliance” with him or her. The way in which this covenant is realized is beyond the Church’s control, because it happens under the Spirit’s influence. The Church is not asked to control it, but to announce it, proposing it “in the name of” the Lord through the witness of its own experience.

The whole history of faith is, in the end, a history of trust between God and humanity, as occurs in every genuine relationship. Unlike a contract, where each party tries to protect himself, a covenant is based on a relationship of trust. But the covenant has a fundamental peculiarity: one of the parties, the one who takes the initiative, is God himself, the always Faithful One. This means that the eventual unfaithfulness of the other party does not call into question this relationship on God’s part. The history of salvation shows this. On one hand, the divine will to enter into a relationship of mutual love with his creature appears unceasingly, and, on the other hand, there is a more or less explicit and conscious desire on humanity’s part to respond affirmatively, though always cancelled out by infidelity. With a gesture that is strong yet gentle, God patiently renews human faithfulness, thus proving his love and reinforcing human trust and faith. Until the final proof of his love: the incarnation of his Son with his saving words and gestures, especially among the poor and excluded, his death and resurrection for all. This has a consequence for the Church: its way of acting with those who are likewise called to encounter the Lord, should reflect what the Church herself has experienced from God: faithfulness, strength, patience, gentleness, trust. It’s a question, in our case, of the way the Church acts with the poor and the workers.

### **3. A theology of creation and grace**

When a group of shepherds says that neighborhood life in which they live and work is a place of encounter with God, they are expressing a theology of creation and grace, deeply rooted in the ecclesial tradition. Here are five affirmations to underline its principal characteristics:

**-The world (and we who live in it) is the fruit of God's love.** And this holds for all created reality. With this affirmation we are saying, among other things, that "the natural," the "worldly," is not "bad." Nor do we set it in opposition to "the supernatural," which would be "the good." As we know, this was an idea that became encrusted with a certain platonic and dualistic theology, which still remains present in the unconscious of many sectors of the church. In the Bible, what is natural is the work of God's love. That which is not God's work is sin. *"God saw what he had made, and it was all very good."* (Gen 1:31)

**All reality carries the mark of God's Spirit,** which works unceasingly and blows where it wills. *"I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,"* recalls Peter on Pentecost, citing the prophet Joel (Ac 2:17). In the words of Teilhard de Chardin: *"In all creatures, without exception, God badgers us, penetrates us, kneads us. We thought he was far away and inaccessible, but here we are living submerged in his warm embrace. "In Him we live . . ." Truly, as Jacob said upon awakening from his dream, the World, this palpable World that we look at with the disinterest and disrespect reserved for profane places, is a sacred place. And we didn't know it! Come and adore!"* (The Divine Milieu, French edition, pp. 133-134.)

**-Sin comes not from nature, but from the evil use of human beings' freedom,** when they rebel against their creator. On one hand there is fragility in humanity and in the world that is proper of its existence as creature, and which often produces suffering. On the other hand, there is a fracture that comes about between humanity and the world, between persons, and between humanity and God, which is the product of the evil use of human liberty, when it closes itself to love; and this case the suffering produced originates in humanity's sin.

**- God offers grace for human freedom,** in order to give people the possibility of making their way to God and of encountering God. This is the fruit of that refreshing and saving love fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who died and rose. The Spirit of the risen One, immersed in the reality of the world, accompanies and guides this history of love, at times letting itself be felt, more as a soft breeze than as a windstorm (I Kgs 19, 11-13), and at other times in silence and darkness, as experienced by all the mystics of yesterday and today.

**- The Church exists because it has experienced this gift of God.** Its first reaction was one of joy and recognition (in both meanings of the word: becoming conscious of and thanksgiving). From this experience of joy sprang the need to give witness to it and to practice it, in collaboration with the work of the Spirit. The Christian community is thus a visible sign and social expression of God's gift of self to humanity, but the Church knows it is not owner of this gift, but rather its servant.

## **II. Pastoral charity**

This theological vision has a pastoral expression, found in all our projects as Sons of Charity, regardless of their cultural, geographic or ministerial particularities. It has one characteristic: it is far from a naïve and promethean vision of the world as it is from a pessimistic vision that empties history and the world of the mysterious presence of the Spirit. Let us reconsider it in five brief affirmations:

- Humanity, the universe, our neighborhoods and their peoples, their work and struggles, their joys and hopes, are the fruit of God's love, who looks upon them with a merciful eye.

- There is a fragility and suffering in our world and in ourselves that come from our being creatures. Humbly accepting and assuming that condition opens us to God's love. Being a creature is not identifiable with sin and doesn't discredit us humanly; on the contrary, it reminds us that we are creatures loved by God. Thus, people and "secular" reality, the object of our pastoral action, are "sacred ground," blessed by God. Pastoral charity begins with recognizing this and, at the same time, by stating and helping others to understand, with joy, that humanity and the world are not "God," but rather creatures.

- However, the truth is that there are divisions (between persons, in social structures, in the Church, in each one of us) that are the consequence of the poor use of freedom. We Christians call it sin: enclosing one's self in a selfish spiral that rejects the love that is offered. Pastoral charity wages an unending battle against this sin and its consequences, which create distress and destroy the work of God. It's a battle waged within the apostle and shepherd and in the Church itself, both called to a permanent conversion, and it's a battle fought as well in their surroundings, in persons and in structures.

- But God, the One who is always faithful, forever offers the grace of his love for humanity's freedom. For God, no one is ever lost. Our world is infused with God's Spirit, who continues to heal and save, in an unending Pentecost. The shepherd must make known the Spirit, proclaim it and open up ways by which more and more people can let themselves be guided by it.

- Our Institute, our communities and parishes, are called to be the sign and the living consciousness of this Love that God has for the world, which we experience with joy. Witness, transforming action, song, and celebration rise up from that. The special place for living that is in the places where the human fabric is most broken, whether as a consequence of man's fragility as creature, or whether it is caused by sin.

### **1. To make possible an intimate and fruitful encounter with the Lord**

The God we are called to announce is the God, who wants to reveal himself and shape our world and its peoples to his dream. The teams, parishes, and communities that we accompany must allow themselves to be shaped by Him. Our structures and our actions, all our life must reflect him. For that to be possible, the encounter with Him must be ongoing.

A biblical image that immediately comes to mind is that of the loving and fruitful encounter between man and woman. We could say that the objective of every pastoral act is to make possible the encounter of concrete men and women with the Lord. An encounter that is always **intimate** (lived from the gut, from the deepest part of our self) and **fruitful** (generative of life and hope).

If we do not make possible this encounter, and if it has no real consequences on our surroundings, in the sense of God's dream, which Jesus makes explicit with his words and gestures, there will be no pastoral act. There may be pious religious or social activities, but not pastoral ones. The one

and only model, as Fr. Anizan insisted upon repeatedly, is Jesus the good shepherd, who brings the crowds closer to God, so that they might live the same relationship that he has with the Father: *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me, as the Father knows me and I know my Father . . . I also have other sheep who are not of this flock . . .”* (Jn 10:14-16) *“On that day you will understand that I am in my Father and that you are in me and I in you.”* (Jn 14:20)

## **2. Characteristics of the pastoral work of encounter**

Let's make a little more concrete some characteristics of a pastoral charity in service of this encounter, having in mind especially the communities we accompany, which are its true subject. They are characteristics that I think have been forming with time in the best pastoral experience of the Church, and also in our Institute. I only note them, but I would suggest that each of us, both personally and especially as a team, continue to enrich and develop them. This is a way of being obedient to our last Chapter, when it asks of us: *“To work and reflect upon the evangelical foundation of pastoral charity.”* (p. 10)

### *a) Being with Him in order to be sent.*

I insist: the basis is an experience, personal and communal, of God's love, instigated by a Jesus who has come out to meet us. This always translates into love for this world and this humanity, proven by a love for the poor and the most wounded of our brothers. In our case, a love for the crowds made up of those men and women who *“earn their daily bread by the sweat of their brow.”* Or as our founder said, pulled between the “passion for God and the passion for the ministry of the people.”

*“He went up the mountain and called those that he wanted: and they joined him there. He named Twelve, to be with him and whom he would send to preach with the power to expel demons.”* (Mk 3:13-15) We must never separate that which always goes together in the gospel. On one hand, pastoral and apostolic action is sustained in a strong and cared for experience of “being with him”. This happens in each one personally, in our teams, and in groups and communities that we accompany. It is nourished by prayer and sacramental life. On the other hand, if it is Christian prayer, and if the community truly has an experience of being “with him,” in its own time it will come out to meet the world, conscious of being sent by the Lord, continuing the relationship with him in a way different from the former way.

### *b) As disciples.*

Thus, putting one's self at the service of the Lord's encounter with people requires the attitude of the disciple. The disciple is sent, *“as the Father has sent the Son”* (Jn 17:8), for which he had to leave behind everything, following the steps of his Lord (Mt. 10:16). Led by the same Spirit (15:26-27), he will produce the same fruits (Jn 15:16) sure that the Spirit always accompanies him in the mission (Mt 28:19-20).

The disciple's first concern will be to learn to put himself at the Master's feet, to listen, to meditate on his word, to understand and identify with his gestures, as did Mary of Bethany. This attitude must always accompany him, for if he abandons it, he runs the risk of remaining in mere human generosity, which is not necessarily directed by the Master's feelings, but by his own or

those of some other master. And it's probable that he will fall into an activism without direction, which will feed upon itself.

If he is a disciple of Jesus, he won't attempt to close off himself with Jesus in a kind of private bubble, for he will hear the Lord say: "*I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty and you gave me to drink . . . what you do for one of these least brothers of mine you do it for me*" (Mt 25:31-46). The disciple puts himself and the Master's feet, but always in the midst of the world and of people, especially the most wounded, the privileged place where the Lord speaks. As Frédy Kunz reminded us in his well known letter to a young friend: *Some day, my daughter, you will happen upon someone who is not at all beautiful who will draw your attention, as if a human castoff. When this happens, don't run away, don't be afraid; come close, kneel down, and say: "Speak, Lord!" And the Loved one will whisper to you incredible, beautiful things, and will speak into your ear a wonderful secret. That day you will receive the best gift of your life.*

Fr. Anizan understood this very well, and he showed it to us in a multitude of texts and examples as a mark that ought to identify us as Sons of Charity shepherds. To cite just one, let's think about his pastoral meditation on Matthew 15:29-39 (*Misereor super Turbam*, Selection of Letters and Spiritual Writings, p. 150ff): the Master and his disciples are in the midst of the crowds that are coming to the Lord, leaning on one another, looking for salvation. The Master welcomes them and heals them with a pastoral gesture *par excellence*, the com-passion of God, which is received with joy and praised by the people. It's a pastoral gesture experienced in community, as an example of the continuation of the sequence, in which Jesus invites the disciples to follow him in this compassion, which culminates in the Eucharistic gesture of the multiplication of the loaves.

*c) Communities rooted in a specific world.*

We said above that the subject of pastoral action is always communal, but that does not negate personal experience and sending, quite the contrary. A community that is rooted in a world, in a specific place, that shares the conditions of life of many other men and women, believers or not, that asks their questions and that confronts the same challenges: in a neighborhood, at work, at school, in the family, in the world of ideas, politics, economy . . . cannot in any way pretend to live in a "world apart." If it were to do that, it would be denying all possibility of an "intimate and fruitful" encounter in Jesus' style. Four characteristics appear to me to be essential for understanding this presence:

- The community's main concern is to bring forth life where it is most precarious or where it is wounded: the poorest people, the social fabrics that are the weakest or most destroyed.
- Its "intimate" presence is made of "com-passion" (Mk 6:34), of welcome, of availability, and of meditating and letting itself be guided by the example of Jesus' encounters in the gospel (Mk 1:40-45; Lk 7:11-17; Jn 4:7ff; etc.)
- Lets itself be "affected" by the encounter, makes itself vulnerable, as did Jesus before the woman with the flow of blood (Mk 5:23-24) or the Syro-phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30), because the Spirit acts through the other. Thus, a common history is made possible. It doesn't not come away from the encounter the same as it entered it. And neither does the other.

- From all that, words and gestures come forth that transmit enthusiasm, courage, and hope, and invite people to keep moving forward and to keep on believing in humanity before God and before others.

*d) Communities that have criteria for internal and exterior behavior.*

The Christian community that opts for a true encounter with God and with others, whatever its form and characteristics (parish, base community, neighborhood group, movement . . .) gives itself a series of behavioral criteria, both in its internal operation and in what it undertakes in its life. Thinking about what I know of the different communities where the Sons exercise their ministry, I would point out, without attempting to be exhaustive, some constants in these criteria.

#### **- Promoting the complementary and harmonious contribution of diversity**

For example, the diversity of the masculine and feminine, of cultures and backgrounds, of ministries and services, etc. Taking care, also, as our last Chapter invites us, to widen the circle of those with whom we collaborate, and not being afraid to work with persons or institutions of civil society or other religious confessions” (p. 10). This is especially important in today’s world, which is strongly tempted by fear to exclude those who are different, and by the unhealthy affirmation of one’s own identity. We as religious (people who opt for what is communitarian) can bring a lot to this aspect. This, of course, requires that we live this in a coherent manner among ourselves. It’s a permanent challenge for us.

#### **- Giving priority to welcome and reciprocity in relationships**

Learning to dialogue with the world in which we live: explaining it; being witnesses of God’s love in civic life and action; discerning the signs of the Spirit in the world. Communities open to all who approach them, whatever their apparent motives (for example, a popular religiosity or religious customs that haven’t been thought out, or a material or spiritual necessity). Proposed groups or places of encounter have a human scale where it’s possible to have interpersonal relationships among persons who know they need one another (inspired by Rom 12:4-10; 1Cor12:22-24). Groups that, at the same time, live closely connected to everything that’s happening around them, in the neighborhood, at work, etc. The Word of God only produces fruit in the contagion of relationships among people who are equal in dignity.

#### **- Being born together to a new identity**

The identity of sons and daughters who know they are loved by God. This implies that the Gospel reaches the center of the person and of life, the place where identity is at stake. Being less concerned to offer a doctrine than to touch and transform people’s hearts. Christian identity doesn’t proceed from a doctrine, but from the experience of an intimate relationship (“You are my beloved son”). Pastoral action is directed to consciences and their freedom. The question the community asks itself isn’t what do we do to recruit members, but rather what is happening between God and the men and women we meet. How do we reach their hearts so they can, if they wish, be reborn to a life with God? How is God acting in this person? The relationship is always triangular: he or she—I or we—and God. In this way the community removes the focus from itself. In other words, its concern is not to make followers, but how to serve the Spirit.

### **- Personal accompaniment and group encounter**

Forming apostles for encounter and for personal and communal discernment is probably one of the most important services that can be offered in our societies that are so individualistic and jealous of the *ego*. There are so many people in our neighborhoods and communities that are looking, in one way or another, for someone to listen to them, to help them see clearly in their lives, to discern with them the road to follow! Every apostle, every shepherd (priest or lay person), ought to be formed expressly in the art of accompaniment. Not necessarily to be “experts,” but rather persons of welcome, persons of meditation, people who know how Jesus accompanies and acts in the gospel, people who are knowledgeable about the questions our contemporaries are asking, with a minimum of “psychology.” Every group for reflection and exchange in some way ought to play this role. Naturally, this requires that we create options regarding the availability of time and the number of activities, as well as in the kind of actions that are given priority.

### **- What the Christian community proposes is the Gospel, the Word of God**

Therefore, the Word of God is central. Letting it do its work. Putting one’s self at its service, so people can listen to it and understand it. Offering it in a multitude of ways, sharing about it with others, letting yourself be affected by it, until you reach the point of prayer. Yesterday, as today, it is only the Word of God that can open “the doors of faith.” Perhaps this was one of the greatest contributions of Vatican II.

### **- Celebrating God’s action in history**

The Eucharist is at the center of the Christian community. When it is attended to and well celebrated, it creates a sense of gratuity, fiesta, praise, beauty and commitment. When the other aspects to which I have referred are lived in a community, the liturgical celebration acquires a special content and depth: Each person feels involved and brings to the celebration his life and the life of the world; there is a communal experience of God; song and praise that fill the heart. The Eucharist becomes a true home that affords hope and enthusiasm, where no one is alone, and where the Lord’s presence is perceived.

### **- Accompanying believers with wide boundaries**

What do I mean by this? I mean that the duty of the shepherd is not to start with a test of orthodoxy or good behavior of those to whom he is called to serve, but rather to understand what worries them and to offer the appropriate means for each person to keep on progressing in his or her faith. The seed of God’s Reign is growing, consciously or unconsciously, in many men and women. As Jesus says, it happens “without our knowing how.” The shepherd waits and seeks signs of the Kingdom, wherever they may be found, in order to help people to continue producing fruit. As *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us: “*Grace acts in an invisible way in all people of good will . . . As a consequence, we must maintain that, in a way known only to God, the Holy Spirit offers all people the possibility of participating in this paschal mystery.*” (No. 22, par. 5) Jesus praises the faith of many persons whom he encounters, those who are transformed by the encounter, (for example, the pagan Syro-phonician woman or the centurion), but who are not part of the close

circle of disciples; and we don't know what became of those persons. Others, however, seek to share the life and mission of Jesus. He asks them what they think of him, he educates them and sends them forth in his name. These are the disciples. But the Lord takes into account all those whom the he meets; all are accompanied, and the Spirit works in all of them. They form a "community" that has wide and movable borders.

## II. A few "heads up" for our religious life

In light of these reflections, and keeping in mind the orientations of our last Chapter, allow me to underline a few things. I invite you to reflect upon them in community and draw your own conclusions, in accord with each team's experience.

### 1. Prayer and meditation on the Word of God

Does it have to be said again? The one who brings us together is the Lord. What quantity and quality of time do we dedicate to interiorizing his Word and to contemplating his person? In solitude, of course, but **especially communally**, which is what identifies us as religious. Some teams still have problems in this fundamental aspect of our life. We often say it to one another, and we preach about it even more often: every apostolic and pastoral action is nurtured by this source; without it, pastoral action loses content, quality, and human and Christian relevance, and our life "disintegrates." No amount of frenzied action will fill this void.

This was recently recalled in a letter to the Institute scholastics, who often are overloaded with many activities, but I think it's valid for all of us: *"relationship with God in contemplative prayer is not just one more thing in our lives, but rather it is what will allow us to make unity of all the rest. It is where the spirit, head, and one's entire being, are prepared to welcome the Lord, who is present in all aspects of our life: in studies, pastoral work, community life, and all kinds of relationships. It is the axis around which everything will be unified and find its place. Contemplative prayer: naked before the Word of God, creating silence and emptiness within our selves, with an attitude of welcome and passivity, so that the Word can shape us—this is the basis of our life as religious. If you don't acquire that habit in this stage of formation, you run the risk of "dis-integrating."* Fr. Anizan puts into us the same desire he had from his first years as a shepherd in Olivet: *"In daily meditative prayer I will unite my spirit and my heart to Jesus Christ, in order to think, desire, and love what he thought, desired, and loved."* (J.E. Anizan, 1880)

### 2. Religious in the diocesan Church

Lately, we and other religious and shepherds in the Church, have become more conscious of this truth: Religious life is part of the diocesan Church and its mission. This might seem to be self-evident, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it is lived out well. It's a subject that appears to me to be especially important for religious life and for the Church at this time.

Put very briefly: We are not simply shepherds of a diocesan Church who exercise a series of responsibilities (pastoral or otherwise), according to the mission the bishop gives. We are that, but that is not what identifies us: What identifies us as religious is that we live an experience of God in community, in the way our founder did, enriched by our history. This leads us to discern together, at every moment and wherever we are, what God asks of us as apostles and shepherds

for the poor and the workers. This process of community discernment culminates in lines of action expressed in the mission which the Institute, through its superiors, asks us to fulfill. What the local Church lives and expresses in part of this discernment, since we are part of it. And the mission entrusted to us by the Institute is assumed by the bishop, who integrates it into his pastoral plan, without which it would be missing something.

This means that not only can we not refuse to elaborate and lay out some pastoral lines as Sons, but also that we have the duty to do so, and to do so as a community. Sometimes that can be an irritation in the whole of a diocesan project that emphasizes mostly other aspects, so it is even more important to fulfill our duty of enriching the mission of the diocesan Church. But, we already know that this requires much of us, especially spiritual quality, knowledge of reality, communal pastoral reflection, and love for the Church.

### **3. Together**

As I have just emphasized, this is what identifies us as religious and, therefore, what is most expected of us. But it remains a constant challenge. There are “excellent” apostles and “dedicated” shepherds among the Sons, but in more than a few places we continue dragging a big difficulty to be all this together. “Together” doesn’t mean that everybody does everything, but rather, taking time to reflect, discern, plan, evaluate and pray about our action communally. Personal “fiefdoms” are contradictory with religious life. Is it slower? Is it less “mine?” Of course. But it is also richer, more fruitful, and more prophetic. The Chapter recognizes our problem: *“All Sons of Charity live their commitments with passion, but in spite of all that, we have difficulty living this passion together, in team.”* (p. 9) Therefore, the Chapter *“invites all Sons to review, personally and in team, the state of our fraternity at the heart of our common mission. If it happens that we dissociate ourselves from the practice of our fraternal and pastoral charity, what are the reasons for that?”* (p. 8)

### **4. The theological thought behind our pastoral work**

In the letter to scholastics to which I referred above, I also told them: *“Sometimes we hear it said that the Sons aren’t made for intellectual work, given their vocation to be shepherds. That’s not so. There cannot be genuine apostles or shepherds if there is not permanent and sustained intellectual work. How could we understand our own faith without this work? And above all, how could we accompany and help the persons and communities entrusted to us to grow in faith, without this knowledge? How can we understand the questions and challenges put to us by the world and the people to whom we are sent without this intellectual effort? How can we continually update the charism that Fr. Anizan left us and which orients our life without this effort? There is no spiritual, community, or pastoral life without serious intellectual work.”* The Chapter, for its part, invites us to *“Elaborate a theological basis beginning with our pastoral practice.”* (p. 10) This is another of our traditional challenges which, contrary to what one might think, is an essential part of our pastoral charity. Therefore, it is not a question of personal “taste,” but rather it has to do with our vocation as Sons. The way in which each of us lives it out and how each team organizes itself to help one another is another issue. I’m convinced that our life with the poor and the serious intellectual work we do on our mission and action, together with prayer and fraternity are what will save us from apostolic and vocational sterility.

## 5. Attentive to the signs of the times

The Chapter also invites us to “*Open novel or more pressing apostolic areas, related to the evolution of our societies, such as: emigrants, the marginalized, male-female relationships, the unemployed, and the youth who are often an important part of the poor populations of our peoples. These are realities on all our continents, and they require that we have an appropriate formation. Other areas, more internal to the Church, remain open: faith formation, relationships with other religions; and they, too, require that we be equally rigorous.*” (p.10) What the Chapter is really asking us is that we stay ready to discover in every time and place the most important apostolic challenges, and that our pastoral charity be creative, depending on our means and possibilities.

From exchanges and reflections made possible by the Anizan Year, which we just finished celebrating, allow me to underline three especially important challenges that are mobilizing our pastoral energies today: “**Growing poverty**, which produces violence and beats down countless workers and humble people of our neighborhoods. **Welcome of the other**, of the one who is different, of the foreigner, in order to learn to live and grow together. **The absence of a God of love and mercy in the consciousness of many of our contemporaries.** Three closely linked challenges.” (Closing homily at the Lourdes Meeting)

I still consider the three to be priorities, but if I had to name one sector of our people that especially faces these three challenges, I wouldn't hesitate to say the **youth**. It is urgent that we launch or improve in each of our places a systematic and collective pastoral work with youth, based on our spirituality and our pastoral style as Sons. We shouldn't be afraid to affirm and develop a youth pastoral work with our orientations, which include, as mentioned above, working in a network with others, while bringing in this area of pastoral work (as in others) our grain of sand to the mission of the entire Church.

I end with placing our pastoral charity in Mary's hands, asking her to help us enter without reservation into the heart of her Son, the one and only model and good shepherd. May she enlighten us so we might make of our pastoral charity a “very special and fruitful encounter with the Lord and with others”

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