



Saint Jodard, 1st November, 2019

Final message of the second session of the General Chapter

Following the first session of the General Chapter of the Brothers of Saint John, which took place from 30 April to 10 May, 2019, the second session of the chapter took place from 22 October to 1 November, 2019. The chapter once again gathered 50 capitulars together in Saint-Jodard, France, from all over the world: Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe and Oceania.

This final message will present the principal decisions taken during the chapter and the path the capitulars took in arriving at those decisions. One hallmark of the atmosphere of the chapter was a desire to seek conversion, and special attention was paid to its ecclesial dimension.

Through the diversity and complementarity of opinions displayed, basic agreement emerged surrounding the areas that are important for the future of our Community. The second session was carefully prepared for by the Definitory (Brothers elected to guide the work of the Chapter) and by numerous brother capitulars who contributed. A working method that alternated work in small groups with plenary sessions enabled a progressive and collective elaboration of the decisions and directions taken by the chapter.

A. Charism and relationship to the founder

During the first session the chapter saw the importance of continuing along the path taken since 2013 to clarify our institute's charism and relationship to its founder, Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe. During this session, our work was supported by the help of a number of external

participants.

A psychiatrist and specialist in group psychology warned us about certain ways in which communities function, which can stifle people's freedom. She also made us discover a way in which a community that faces a trauma can act, which helps it to integrate the trauma into its growth. Our community body has been marked by abuse committed within our religious family. The path towards healing requires that we identify the wounds, seek help from people outside of the community, continue the re-reading of our history and continue to put safeguarding measures into place in order to avoid harmful behavior being reproduced. Brothers may feel deeply affected by the abuse, which discredits the entire Community. However, the chapter reminds us that the primary victims of the abuse are those against whom scandalous acts were committed.

On the basis of texts from the Magisterium (for example, *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 2¹), we sought to understand better the charism of a religious institute and the role of a founder. Sister Noëlle Hausman, a theologian of consecrated life, helped us in this task, presenting fundamental documents of the Magisterium on charism to us, as well as some elements of Johannine spirituality.

Mgr José Rodríguez Carballo, Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in Rome, accepted our invitation and came to meet the capitulars on 23 October. The Prioresses General of the Apostolic Sisters of Saint John and the Contemplative Sisters of Saint John, as well as their respective Councils, also joined this meeting. Mgr Carballo exhorted the Brothers and Sisters to discernment, lucidity and boldness. In particular, he asked us to revisit the history of our community and to view our charism as something dynamic, which must be regularly brought up to date. It is important to distinguish between the *charism of a founder* and the *charism of the institute* itself; the latter alone is discerned and approved by the Church.

In conclusion to his day among us, the Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life insisted on the confidence the Church has in us and the spirit of hope with which we should continue the work of the chapter:

“Do not be nostalgic for a past life, but be attentive to the life that manifests itself today in your communities.”

¹ “The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time. Such a renewal must be advanced under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church [...]”

“You are not alone. The Spirit accompanies you, provided you are ready to set out along the path before you. The Church and others can also help you walk this path. In the time of Ezra, the prophet urged the people not to look behind them but rather to get to work. I leave you with three words: discernment, revisitation, reconversion.”

Mgr Carballo put in writing the essential parts of his oral remarks in a letter addressed to the Brothers on 28 October (provided in the appendix).

We then embarked on a path of discovery in order to see how the Holy Spirit is now working in our Community through authentic spiritual experiences. This enabled us better to discern our spiritual patrimony and charism, which in turn gave us a new way of approaching the relationship we have to our founder.

We then drew up a statement about our relationship to our founder and elements of our charism. What follows is the text of that statement, which was approved by over a two-thirds majority of the capitulars:

Relationship to our founder

Following the General Chapter of 2013, our congregation entered a process of increasing awareness surrounding the abuse committed by Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe and of discernment in relation to the charism of our institute. In the second session of the 2019 Chapter, which took place from 22 October to 1 November, we arrived at a new stage in this process.

Monsignor José Rodríguez Carballo, Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, was invited to this second session. He wanted to address the chapter as a “brother” who had come in the name of his dicastery to give us a “word from the Church”. He reminded us of the essential points of his speech in a letter addressed from Rome to the Chapter on 28 October, 2019 (cf. the letter in the appendix). The letter highlights the following in particular:

“Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe is the founder of the Religious Institute of the Brothers of Saint John. In that capacity, he passed on to you a charism that was recognized by the Church. Nevertheless, Fr Philippe cannot be a charismatic reference for you, in the sense that a charismatic reference passes on a teaching and a role model for life. Indeed, you are well aware that Fr Philippe cannot represent a role model for life.”

The General Chapter welcomes Mgr Carballo’s suggestions and takes the following position in relation to the Brothers’ charism and relationship to their founder.

The charism is neither an abstract ideal nor something independent of us as Brothers

of Saint John. It is a life that unfolds in us, like a gift of the Spirit in the Church. In a religious community, the charism is actively held by the collective whole of its members. In our priories, our charism is alive, renewed, and progressively manifests its richness. The Brothers gathered in the General Chapter are given the special responsibility of clarifying the institute's charism, by invoking the Holy Spirit and always in dialogue with the Church.

Given that the charism is a life according to the Holy Spirit, Fr Philippe cannot be a role model for that life, because of the abuse he committed. Consequently, the Brothers will no longer refer to him as a norm in order to renew their charism today.

The Brothers acknowledge his role in answering the desire expressed by the first Brothers to form a community. Parts of our spiritual patrimony came to us through him, such as the reference to Saint John, a religious life that is both contemplative and apostolic, the importance of philosophy and the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

The Brothers want to shift Fr M.-D. Philippe from the center of their focus today; they unambiguously condemn his abusive actions (abuse of conscience, abuse of power and sexual abuse), as well as the dysfunction that was engendered by that abuse. We pray for all the people he wounded. We also, in charity, pray for him.

It is now up to us, as Mgr Carballo said in his letter, "to express [our] charismatic identity better[...] by grounding [ourselves] first and foremost upon the Gospel of Saint John, as it is read, meditated upon and prayed by the Church, particularly the Second Vatican Council and the recent Magisterium of the Church."

Principal concrete consequences

We no longer wish to make Fr Philippe the reference point of our formation. The text voted for in 2001 on the place he should occupy in the Brothers' philosophical and theological formation is no longer relevant. Nor can we any longer consider him a master in spiritual life.

Study of his writings should be undertaken with intellectual freedom, a critical eye and an openness of spirit. More broadly, our patrimony must be discerned in the light of the Church's Tradition and the Magisterium, so that we can retain our sound traditions and authentic intuitions and remove anything that would be contrary to the Gospel.

In the light of the Brothers' spiritual experience and the teaching of the Church (and taking equally into account the recent documents of the Magisterium, such as *Evangelii Gaudium*), the Rule of Life and our proper law (Constitutions and Directories) will be revised. For this task an *ad hoc* committee will be formed by the Prior General, with the agreement of his Council, in order to propose modifications for the next General Chapter. The General Chapter invites all the Brothers to embark upon this revision process, and asks the Prior General to promote the work to be done.

The General Chapter requests the drawing up of a document, to be made available to the Brothers in every priory, that provides a detailed chronology of the beginnings of the congregation and the documents that attest to the successive recognitions given it by the Church (including the recognition of diocesan right in 1986, the letter from the Congregation for Consecrated Life of 22 June, 2016 and the letter from Mgr Carballo of 28 October, 2019).

Within our priories, photographs of Fr M.-D. Philippe should be removed from public spaces, as well as common areas in the cloister. In addition, for the time being while we wait for discernment on these matters to take place, his books will no longer be made available for sale in our priories and his audio teachings will no longer be in circulation outside the Community.

Some of the elements of our charism

With the help of texts from the Magisterium, the General Chapter wanted to make explicit certain elements of our charism. We therefore started from what is lived in our priories, according to (I) our relationship with God and the relationship between Brothers, (II) our relationship with the Church and (III) our apostolic mission. Then (IV), from this shared experience, the capitulars identified certain essential characteristics of our spiritual patrimony. Building upon everything that has already been elaborated about our charism, this work needs to be extended to the whole Congregation.

I – Relationship with God and between Brothers

We wish to live a fraternal life in community, in service and simplicity, in a spirit of joy and sharing, in the search for truth and listening to the Word of God. The Conventual Chapter is the privileged place of cooperation and of discernment for our fraternal life and our apostolic, missionary life.

We recognize the Holy Spirit at work in our love for silent prayer – a place in which our friendship with Christ is renewed – and in our desire for conversion and growth in fraternal unity. We wish to develop this central dimension of our life through permanent formation in authentic spirituality and in a life of fervent prayer (silent prayer and liturgy). Called to be consecrated in the Truth (Jn 17:17), the Brothers deepen their desire for God by meditating on and preaching the Word of God and by their personal and communitarian search for truth.

II – Relationship with the Church

Experience tells us that our priories work in synergy with the local Church, and we are drawn to do so through the apostolic life that we live in common and through the confidence

bishops place in us. We especially like collaborating with our Sisters and our Oblates, the diocesan clergy, religious of other communities, movements and lay people. We have increasingly come to appreciate the benefits of welcoming the richness of other ecclesial realities. We willingly place ourselves at their service, while bearing witness to the fraternal life we live.

Many of our priories are a spiritual resource in their diocese and for other communities.

We believe that we have still more resources to offer that would increase exchange and cooperation with others within the intellectual domain, notably through our association with other institutes and in Catholic universities. We must employ concrete means to enrich these exchanges, particularly by making sure that Brothers are sufficiently competent and appropriately qualified, through the search for in-depth knowledge of the Johannine writings, of philosophy and of theology.

III – Mission

As Brothers living in community, we are grateful for the grace God gives us in the missionary energy that stirs us, thus enabling us to participate in the current missionary orientations of the Church.

We want to accompany people in their human and spiritual growth and lead them to friendship with Christ. With the help of the Blessed Virgin, we want to make our priories places where people find a warm welcome and a sense of the transcendence of God.

We maintain our vocation to spiritual accompaniment, but taking care to ensure that we are formed and supervised in this role.

We are attentive to the needs of a world that is changing rapidly. Some of our apostolates enable us to work in the peripheries of society. We wish to make our priories evermore places of dialogue and of service for the integral development of persons, in communion with Christ.

IV – Essential characteristics of our spiritual patrimony

Our patrimony is a common good that all the Brothers share, and which contributes to bringing them together.

We live a common religious life centered on prayer, fraternity, study and apostolic mission.

Our life takes its inspiration from the figure of Saint John and the Johannine writings. We have not exhausted all their richness. Our vision can always be deepened by further recourse to Tradition, as well as to current Biblical advances and contemporary theology.

Friendship with Christ, silent prayer and study of the Word of God are at the heart of our vocation and its renewal.

Fruitful dialogue between faith and reason and a rootedness in Tradition and the Magisterium give direction to our life of study.

At the same time, a desire to be of service to the Church's mission inhabits the other dimensions of our life. It is a catalyst for our apostolic zeal and creativity.

We feel an urgency to share our spiritual patrimony with the diverse cultures to which we have been sent since the beginnings of the community.

We wish to continue this work at the level of the Family of Saint John as a whole, in order to better express the common charism which unites the Brothers, the Contemplative Sisters and the Apostolic Sisters, while maintaining the specific characters of each branch.

The General Chapter also voted to suppress certain articles of our proper law relating to our founder: article 26 §2 of the Constitutions and article 60 §1.1 of the Directory.

B. Abuse

On day three of the Chapter, we listened with great seriousness to testimonies of abuse committed within the Family of Saint John: abuse of conscience, abuse of power and sexual abuse. The people who gave these testimonies asked that their anonymity be strictly kept. Some of the most noteworthy aspects that came to light from these testimonies are as follows:

- In certain cases, repeated abuse extended over long periods of time, even decades.
- Justifications were given that confused mysticism with the sexual domain.
- Abuse was covered up through an appeal to secrecy.
- In some cases, the religious authority seriously failed his duty of care, and even consented to the abuse committed.
- Victims have experienced great difficulty in speaking about the abuse they suffered, and a lot of time was needed for them to be able to communicate about it.
- In some cases, only an external third party (a confessor, for example) enabled victims to become aware of what was happening or had happened.

The capitular Brothers who listened to these testimonies expressed feelings of grief and of shame.

For several years, the revelation of abuse within the Community has given rise to efforts to seek out its causes. During the Chapter, we listened to a presentation that recounted a part of Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe's past. We learnt that in 1957, the Holy Office imposed sanctions on Fr M.-D. Philippe, which lasted for two years. He was prohibited from hearing confessions, from giving spiritual direction to nuns, from staying at or preaching in monasteries and from teaching spirituality. Fr M.-D. Philippe was judged to have been gravely complicit in the actions of his brother, Fr Thomas Philippe. In 1956, the Holy Office had prohibited Fr Thomas Philippe from exercising any priestly ministry, because he had led women to moments of sexual intimacy with mystical and theological justifications, sometimes going so far as to distort their conscience.

Fr M.-D. Philippe's sister, Mother Cécile Philippe, who was Prioress of the Dominican Convent in Bouvines, and his uncle, Fr Pierre-Thomas Dehau, were also deemed to have borne a part of responsibility for the actions of Fr Thomas Philippe. Mother Cécile was removed from her position as Prioress; Fr Dehau only received a canonical monition, because of his advanced age and ill-health.

In light of these revelations, the General Chapter asks the Prior General to establish an interdisciplinary committee whose mission will be to establish the link between these past facts and the abuse committed by the founder of the Family of Saint John and by some of its members. This task, which will be historical, theological and psychological in nature and which must involve experts, seems to be a necessary condition if we are to bring an end to this downward spiral that has lasted for 70 years or more, and which has not only caused untold suffering and grave scandal, but has also resulted in clouding the faith for many victims who were betrayed by Christ's representatives.

Identifying the roots of a deeper evil that went further back in time was very enlightening for the capitular Brothers, helping them to better recognize the source of these grave errors, as well as the places in which they were passed on, including our own Community.

We regret today – in the light of a progressive awareness of these issues, which has been taking place since 2013 – that some people – victims or witnesses, Brothers or Sisters – were not listened to or properly welcomed and accepted when they confided to us their concern, wound or scandal.

Different subjects relating to abuse were worked on during the chapter: communication about the perpetrators of abuse; accompanying victims of abuse and accompanying the perpetrators of abuse; reparation due to victims; public gestures asking for forgiveness on behalf of the Brothers. The fruit of these inquiries, as well as the discussions that followed, have given us a general direction to take when updating our internal procedures.

For several years, the Brothers have been actively engaged in a process of increasing awareness of the facts relating to abuse and their responsibility in relation to those facts. the principal stages that have taken place are:

- The revelation of allegations against Fr Philippe during the General Chapter of 2013;
- The report given at the General Chapter of 2016 by the commission set up to look into Fr Philippe's teaching and doctrine.
- The creation of a commission on abuse, which led to a report given during the first session of this General Chapter.

During this second session, the chapter emphasized the duty of prayer and reparation for victims. It unanimously adopted the following request:

The General Chapter asks the Prior General for a liturgical celebration to be organized by the Community to ask for forgiveness from victims. If possible, the liturgy will involve the entire Family of Saint John and, when the appropriate conditions are met, be held in partnership with the victims.

In anticipation of this event involving the whole Community, the capitular Brothers celebrated a mass together for the intention of all the victims.

C. Decentralization

A priority identified during the first session of the Chapter is the need for greater decentralization in the government of the Community. A historical glance over the decentralization reforms already undertaken over the past ten years or so shows that this question has been progressively coming to the forefront. It seems to us that the limits of what can be delegated to Vicars have been reached within the framework of our current law.

The second session dedicated two full days to collective work on this subject, marked by successive stages and starting with the fundamental question: "What model of government do we want with a view to greater decentralization?" Fr Philippe Toxé, a Dominican canon lawyer, responded to our requests for clarification on the provincial form of governing a religious community.

Before reflecting on potential changes, we started with a discussion about the advantages we find in our current form of government, as well as the reasons that have prompted us to seek new models. A preliminary study of about ten male congregations was made available to the capitulars. Our task consisted in elaborating models of government and then confronting them one

against another. A significant level of agreement emerged from these discussions: the “center of gravity for decision making” must be moved to the regional level, so that there can be greater proximity and communion with local priories, with the Prior General remaining at the service of the unity of the entire Community. For the time being, it is a clear orientation that is given, in view of constitutional changes to be determined during the next General Chapter, with the possibility of *ad experimentum* trials in order to prepare for future decisions.

The General Chapter also took up the question of the opening and closing of priories. It gave the Prior General its consent for him to proceed with closures. The Chapter tasked the Prior General and his Counsel with carrying out an overall apostolic strategy of action for the Community, taking into account the potentialities of the different places in which we reside. The vicariates will contribute to reflection about this strategy development.

D. Formation

Following the request made by the General Chapter of 2016, the Prior General created a commission tasked with drawing up a *Ratio formationis* for the Community. The commission was asked to formulate directives in relation to both permanent and initial formation. The work of the commission has to take into account the specific patrimony of our institute, the requirements of the Magisterium, the needs expressed by Brothers in relation to their formation and the specific issues and challenges of the modern world.

Attentive to the texts of the Church, the capitulars have come to an understanding that the formation of a religious is inscribed within a longer path that starts with baptism and continues throughout his consecrated life until death, having as its goal the person’s progressive configuration to Christ. This way of envisaging formation, which is new to some, enables us to understand that the heart of formation is first and foremost permanent formation, and that initial formation is only the start of that permanent formation. The current Magisterium of the Church insists upon the integral dimension of formation, which cannot be reduced to studies but simultaneously concerns human, spiritual, religious, pastoral and intellectual dimensions. This orientation does not invalidate what is specific to formation within our Community, but provides a vision that will help us better to understand and share our patrimony within the Church.

At the end of the discussions, the on-going work of the commission on the *Ratio Formationis* was approved by the Chapter. Specific directions were given for the next part of this work.

Other questions relating to formation were discussed: the status of the Master of Studies, the project to become affiliated with the Pontifical University of the Angelicum in Rome and the

keeping of records for Brothers in formation. Two decisions taken concern the formation of Brothers outside of France. For the Vicariate of Africa, the erection of a studium of philosophy was approved, as well as the possibility for young African Brothers to do a fifth year of formation in Africa so as to earn a degree in philosophy. For the United States, the chapter voted in favor of the possibility for young American Brothers to continue their studies in philosophy, after the novitiate, in a suitable place within their country of origin. These measures manifest the growing attention that is being paid to the needs of Brothers from different languages and cultures.

E. Old-age and dependence

In 2017, the Prior General formed a Commission to make preparations in the Congregation for the Brothers' advance in age and dependence. After listening to the Brothers' expectations on the subject, the Commission undertook an investigation with the help of different groups and people in related fields (Conference for Religious in France, religious congregations, nursing homes, doctors, legal and financial specialists, etc.) in order to evaluate which solutions would best correspond to our needs. The task was completed with the presentation of a long-term general action plan, which was drawn up with the help of the organization "Consol et Compagnie". The action plan will ensure that Brothers will be able to grow old in conditions that are dignified and respectful of their vocation. It involves three main parts: 1) development of a health plan that will promote a culture of attention to health and ensure every brother has the follow-up he needs; 2) preparation for the conditions of old-age, especially for French Brothers who, by 2030, will represent more than 80% of our members over the age of 75; 3) anticipation of solutions for Brothers living in other countries.

Just as in the past in order to welcome and form young Brothers the Community has been able to prepare places and invest on both the financial and human levels, today the Community must invest in the same way in order to accompany aging Brothers. Such an investment requires, among other things, that we create an "old-age and dependence fund", which, with the help of specialists, could meet the considerable expenses projected by the Commission.

The General Chapter approved the work of the Commission, giving it the mandate to implement, in cooperation with the Prior General, a project that will allow Brothers to grow old in a dignified way, with respect for their person and their vocation.

F. General Bursar's Report

The General Bursar, Br Gaétan, delivered a strong message to the capitulars, emphasizing

the scope of the challenges we face, such as that of old-age and dependence. Our financial standing has been weakened over the last year due to a significant fall in donations and an increase in living expenses. A significant deficit appeared in 2018 for the whole Congregation and we do not expect to see an improvement in 2019. This has forced us to draw on resources we do not normally have to touch, such as legacies, and contrasts with our situation before, when we were capable to self-finance. As a result, the Bursar asks that each Brother contributes to a swift balancing of the Congregation's expenses and receipts. A special effort should be made for the entries of living expenses and of transportation.

G. Votes on motions

The Chapter voted on various motions. Those we have not already been mentioned elsewhere in the final message are as follows:

- On liturgical chant: the General Chapter asked the Prior General to initiate an audit on liturgical chant in the Community, with a twofold objective: first, to create space for dialogue; second, to bring musical, liturgical and pastoral competence to the subject. The goal is to make recommendations to the next General Chapter in 2022.
- On the Regular Oblates in the Congregation: the General Chapter asked the Prior General to establish a commission to reflect on the life and status of Regular Oblates. This commission must undertake an audit on the life of a Regular Oblate today, listening to their experiences and proposing positive criteria in order to aid discernment about this specific vocation.

Conclusion

The capitulars are very grateful to the numerous people who helped the second session of the General Chapter run so smoothly. They are especially grateful to the Brothers of Saint-Jodard, the laypeople and Oblates who helped with material tasks and those who, through their fervent prayer, enabled the work of the chapter to be fruitful.

The capitulars understood that they must continue within their various vicariates and priories the path they have undertaken on the level of the Congregation. Nevertheless, it seemed of utmost importance to take certain preliminary lines of action during the General Chapter, without considering them inflexible, enabling all the Brothers to continue the work on these matters.

The capitulars give thanks for this second session of the General Chapter. The gravity of the decisions taken was accompanied by the strong sentiment that the Holy Spirit is guiding us towards a new stage in the life of the community. The challenges inspire each of us with a greater sense of responsibility. With confidence and humility we return to our priories, in order to live out our charism and serve in our missions.

Before she left, Sr Noëlle Hausman confided to us that she had been “*very impressed, especially by your underlying concord on every aspect of your discernment. As I look on from the sidelines, I can only hope to see you put out into the deep.*”² *Duc in altum [...], like the Apostle, moving forward, straining with your whole being towards the goal*³ *given to you by the Spirit.*”

**The following dates have been adopted for the next General Chapter:
from 26 April, 2022 (8:30pm) to 6 May, 2022 (6pm), and from 11
October, 2022 (9am) to 21 October, 2022 (6pm).**

**Appendix: Letter from Mgr José Rodríguez Carballo dated 28
October, 2019.**

² Lk. 5:4 and parallels.

³ Ph. 3:10-14.