



OPENING CONFERENCE

A very warm welcome to each of you to General Chapter 2016:

Life Unfolding ... Mission for the Emerging Future!

We gather together this morning to continue a journey that the Society has been on for over a year. Today we take up the part of the journey in which we as capitulants will focus the orientations of the Society for the coming years. This journey, which is indeed a journey of faith, will continue beyond us, as with all our sisters we will live out these orientations on international, regional, provincial and local levels.

In the next five weeks we will be reflecting together on what we have discovered of the life that has been and is unfolding among us and around us – its richness, its variety, its places of vulnerability, challenge and energy. We will discern how the Society is called to live our mission into the emerging future, a future which calls for creativity, courage and commitment so that God's immense, tender, strong and merciful love may shape that future. Welcome to this journey together!

Who are we as we gather?

We are 78 capitulants plus two invited members, from 27 provinces, districts or areas, and various international services. Our median age is 58. One of us was professed a year and a half ago, another over 50 years ago. For half of us, this is the first general chapter in which we have participated; half have been at a general chapter previously, most as capitulants and a few in full-time service to a chapter.

Given this variety, it is important to remember that each one has been called to this chapter through the confidence of our sisters. We need each one of you, your gifts, your experience, your questions, your concerns, your dreams. Thank you for responding to the call to reflect together with others whose experience may be very different from your own, so that together we may enable our charism and mission to unfold more fully in response to God's calls coming from the present and the future.

In addition to the capitulants there are about thirty people helping us in one way or another – rscj from various provinces, our collaborators from the generalate and elsewhere, in addition to the staff here at Centro Ad Gentes. We are very happy for you to meet these people and want to thank them for all work they have done in preparation and for the many ways they will assist us during these next five weeks.

The responsibilities of the chapter

Let us look together at the responsibilities of the chapter, at the purpose for which we have been called together here in Nemi. Paragraph 157 of the Constitutions describes the general chapter:

The General Chapter ensures and promotes both communion and vitality in the Society of the Sacred Heart in view of its mission. It represents all the members of the Society and has supreme normative authority within the congregation, in virtue of the Constitutions.

Thus we have the responsibility to ensure that what we do here promotes communion and vitality in the Society in view of our mission, and to do so with the awareness that the orientations we set and the decisions we take are binding on each rscj.

Paragraph 162 gives the more specific responsibilities of a general chapter:

- *it protects the spiritual heritage of the Society, and, in conformity with it, evaluates the progress of the Society since the last general chapter, in fidelity to the Constitutions.*
- *It gives orientation to the Society, being aware of the appeals and needs of the Church and the world, and guided by the Gospel and the Constitutions.*
- *It reviews the financial state of the Congregation*
- *It deals with issues which are of major importance to the Congregation.*
- *It elects the superior general*
- *It proposes to the superior general names of religious from among whom she chooses the members of the general council*
- *It ratifies the superior general's choice of secretary general and treasurer general*
- *It proposes modifications to the Constitutions and revises the Supplement to the Constitutions.*
- *It establishes the criteria to be followed for determining the number of delegates to the next chapter.*

Various parts of the preparation and the chapter itself have been designed in light of these responsibilities. The reports from provincials, the general council and the international services are oriented to giving us a view of the Society now and since the last chapter, including a response to how we have implemented the priorities of Chapter 2008.

In designing the orientations for the Society, we want to be attentive to the context of our world and its emerging future, where even since our provincial chapters closed, we have seen more violence, displaced peoples, new opportunities for peace, new decisions and new discoveries which have calls and implications for the emerging future. Many of the calls that have come to us from the provincial chapters have given us elements from which to begin our conversation together

From the preparatory work done by the provinces and by the general council and international services, and from our conversations here at the chapter, we will see if there are any issues of major importance which the chapter needs to address to better enable us to live our mission faithfully in these times.

We will spend time considering the financial state of the Society, not only presently, but also in view of our emerging future.

We will commit ourselves to cultivating throughout the chapter a spirit of discernment that will help us to choose with wisdom and trust the next superior general and her council.

These are the responsibilities of a chapter. Surrounding them, beneath them and beyond them will be the spirit that we create among ourselves which will help us to recognize the leading of God's Spirit, open us to her calling, enlighten us in setting directions and give us the courage to make choices.

Spirit of the chapter

The Constitutions also orient us concerning the spirit that we will need to develop as individuals and as the community of the Chapter.

§161 Each member of the general chapter exercises her responsibility in the process of decision-making; she acts in a spirit of discernment and with inner freedom. Each one, going beyond the horizons of her own province, keeps in view the good of the whole Body.

Each of us has a responsibility to act in a spirit of discernment, and together we want to become a discerning community. Thus we are each called to help build a community of the whole chapter, a community marked by those qualities which will facilitate discernment. We are grateful to the facilitators who will have this at heart, to the liturgy team who will help us to pray in a discerning way, and to those who will serve on the coordinating committee. Let us reflect on the attitudes that are asked of us.

She acts in a spirit of discernment and with inner freedom.

Let us each be attentive to what helps me to discern with inner freedom and cultivate those attitudes in ourselves throughout these days. Let us contribute to an environment which will help all of us to discern with inner freedom - by listening and asking questions with a desire to better understand and enter into the world of my sisters; by sharing my own experience and perspective in an attitude of offering, humbly aware it is not the whole, but that it is a gift for the whole and the body needs my contribution; by growing in ever deepening love for my sisters and our common vocation of living God's love .

At times I will need to be aware of and take care to manage my own vulnerabilities, insecurities or areas of unfreedom so that they can be transformed by the Spirit and can enlighten rather than cloud our discernment.

Each one, going beyond the horizons of her own province, keeps in view the good of the whole Body.

Most of us come to the chapter as provincials or elected delegates, bringing the perspectives and concerns of our sisters, our peoples and their contexts. We need that perspective and count on it. Yet, in the chapter we are no longer delegates of any one place. We are each and together capitulants of the whole, the group of sisters who have the responsibility to give orientations for our life and mission for this emerging future, in light of the good of the whole body. Thus we need to go beyond the horizons of our own province, region or our own area of expertise and develop a sense of the whole. Various parts of the chapter are designed to help us to do that: the extensive material that was sent ahead of time, the arrangement of groups, the processes that will help us come to know one another and our various realities, and more.

Let us prepare to be stretched – because we need to be, in order to take up our responsibility. Going beyond my own horizons will at times be very interesting, amazing even, and we will rejoice in the richness of the diversity and the fundamental unity we perceive. We will experience an openness of mind, of heart, of will, and a sense of joy and peace. At other times we may feel that going beyond my known world is stretching me too much, that I am losing my grounding, that I do not have the energy for one more new way of viewing something, and as much as I want to, it is hard to think or discern deeply with so much that I have come to know. In those moments we can recall that the Spirit is indeed

with us, and that a chapter as an expression of our internationality is a paschal event that asks of us real conversion as we become one body in Christ and an expression of the universal communion which God has already begun (Constitutions 156).

Entering through the door of the chapter

We come to the opening of our chapter, and while it is we who are gathered here, we are not alone.

We come from a journey which our sisters throughout the Society have been making during the past year. Some of our sisters have written to say that, thanks to the internet and the assemblies and open chapters, they have never felt so involved in the preparation for and the life of a chapter as they do this one. They are interested in what will happen and are accompanying us with their prayer and attention. They are already sending spiritual energy to us from around the world – and will be checking the webpage regularly!

We are surrounded by holy people who remind us that we are not alone, that others have journeyed before us and will be very present in our work here. Most importantly Jesus, who is offering to Mary and to us the bread and wine which will nourish us on this journey and which we will then go out to share with others. Sophie who is welcoming us and joyfully coming down the stairs to join us as we faithfully work to express and live her vision in this 21st century world. Philippine on the Rebecca, eagerly wanting to know what will be the next frontiers that will beckon our hearts and to which we will commit our mission.

Throughout the past year we have been on pilgrimage and now we have reached the “holy place”, and the “holy door” of our chapter. Each one comes as herself, sent by our sisters with her gifts and her experience of living our common vocation. We come with our sisters and with the peoples of our various cultures represented by the cloths carried from all parts of the world, cloths that will unfold, carry, brighten and shape our journey.

God welcomes us to this chapter with gratitude, gratitude that we come with openness and desire to see together how to be God’s heart for the world of our emerging future. In a special way in this holy year, God surrounds and strengthens us with a cloak of love and mercy as we begin to create a discerning community together.

Jesus is the door through whom we enter the chapter, the One who has called us to this vocation and whose path we want to follow ever more closely. In a few minutes, I will call each capitulant by name. As she responds and comes through the door into the chapter room, she does so intentionally, committing herself to take up the responsibility that our sisters have confided to us of searching together as a chapter body for the way that Jesus is calling us now to live out the love of his pierced, open heart. Let us welcome and pray for each one as she responds “Here I am.”

As we come into this chapter space, we do so with confidence that the Spirit precedes us and leads us. She dwells in our charism and mission, which will frame all our work. She inhabits each one of the capitulants with whom we will share this journey. As we each place our light on the altar, let us ask the Spirit for the grace we need as we take up this responsibility - openness, sensitivity, courage, discernment, great love ... as together we embark on this journey of the general chapter.

Trusting in the Spirit who calls us and leads us, I declare this General Chapter 2016 open.

Kathleen Conan rscj
Superior General
7 July 2016