

“May our Lord Jesus Christ be known and loved by all.”

We thank the Lord who summons us on this special day for all of us. We thank him for his Word that we have just heard that sounds so appropriate, so particular, so convincing to our hearts. Isaiah’s prophecy - about the coming of the kingdom of God, Paul’s awareness that presents himself at the same time as a remarkable and fragile missionary, and the missionary mandate of Jesus, told by the evangelist Mark, who, with trust and hope, entrusts the Gospel to those apostles who are still undecided and fearful. These texts are right for us, today, here.

We want to imagine Msgr. Conforti, on a day like today, a hundred years ago, sending the Fifth Circular Letter, later called Testament Letter, *“To the dear Missionaries, present and future, of the Pious Society of St. Francis Xavier for the Foreign Missions.”* We know that the purpose of this letter was to communicate the final approval of our first Constitutions by the Roman dicastery. In it, he first invited the Missionaries *“To thank the Lord,”* and at the same time drew the attention *“To the serious and solemn commitment we undertake in the eyes of God and the Church.”* (LT 1) It was July 2, 1921.

Today we are here in this shrine at our Mother House. We are here in spiritual union, via streaming, with all our confreres scattered throughout the Xaverian world, with the Xaverian sisters, the sisters of St. Joseph, with the lay Xaverians, with all our family members, benefactors, and friends. Today we remember this historical moment of our Family, and at the same time, we begin this year of grace, a jubilee year that will end on July 2, 2021.

Isaiah, Jesus, the apostles, Paul, Francis Xavier, Guido M. Conforti ... (and many, many others): they are our strong ties, their lives tell us that we are part of a story. We remember so as not to uproot ourselves from the soil that nourishes us, from the healthy and strong roots that generated us. We remember because we cannot risk becoming extraneous to ourselves. And, as Pope Francis said in these days, *“Memory is not a private thing, but it is the way that unites us to God and others.”*

There are three points that I would like to underline during this homily: to thank the Lord, recognize our weaknesses and our sins, and a word of hope...all of which can be summarized in the expression: **RESTART** .

1. **Thank the Lord.** There are many reasons for which we thank God from the bottom of our hearts. Thanksgiving stems from the awareness of the gift and of the good received. The constant presence of God marks our history. We are the fruit of the gift of God! With a heart filled with joy and gratitude, we say: *“Thank you, Lord!”*
Thanks **for the gift of faith** which enabled us to come to know Jesus Christ for His Word of Life. Thanks because we heard our names pronounced by Him. It is true, as we have just listened, that Jesus reproached his disciples, *“Because they had had little faith and persisted in not believing those who had seen him raised.”* Faith, despite our

doubts and uncertainties, is the greatest gift that God gives us. We are disciples of the Lord Jesus!

Thanks to **Jesus Christ**: the Father's icon. Thanks for the trust he has placed in us, so inadequate and fragile. He entrusted to us his missionary mandate: "*Go into the whole world and proclaim the message of the Gospel to every creature.*" He entrusted it to us, and therefore we are connected to him. Thus, through pure divine grace, we have become missionary disciples of the Lord Jesus.

Thanks for **these 125 years of life** of our Missionary Institute. Thanks for the approval, by the Church, of the first Constitutions. "*I invite you to exult and thank the Lord for this fact since it is clear evidence of holiness and timelessness of the Institute to which we have given our name.*" (LT 1) Conforti's dream, long cultivated in his heart, was recognized as inspired by the Spirit and wanted by God. By approving the Constitutions, the Church has officially entrusted to us, together with other missionary Institutes and Congregations, a particular trait of the one mission of Jesus Christ: the mission *ad Gentes*. To entrust means to trust.

Thanks for **the confreres** who, starting with Msgr. Conforti, up to the ones who recently left us – we think in particular of the deceased confreres, victims of Covid-19 – who offered their lives in one way or another, so that "*Jesus Christ be known and loved.*" It is interesting to remember how many confreres left for the mission, not knowing the conditions or the difficulties they were to encounter, and how they made "*that place*" the epiphany of the Lord. The cemeteries, scattered in the different Circumscriptions where many of our confreres rest, are witness of the total gift of their life.

Our martyrs deserve special mention. They are the most explicit and most significant expression of the Xaverian charism. The gift of their lives: in China, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Bangladesh, in Brazil, and Burundi, manifests the eloquence of the missionary vocation.

Thanks also **for all of us, for those who today form the Xaverian Family**: The confreres scattered in the four continents, the Missionary Sisters of Mary-Xaverian, the sisters of St. Joseph, the lay Xaverians, and the whole network of relatives, friends, and benefactors who accompany us and who are part of the evangelizing mission *ad Gentes* entrusted to us by the Church.

Mission continues thanks to many confreres, sisters, and lay people who testify with their lives, day after day, often in a discreet and almost anonymous way, wherever they are, the passion of God for humanity. They manifest this through the direct proclamation of the Gospel to non-Christians, social promotion, the defense of life and creation, in interreligious and intercultural dialogue/encounter, and in the prophetic denunciation of all that goes against God. For all this, we sincerely thank the Lord.

2. **Recognize our weaknesses and our sins.** These are part of our life and our history. These are personal, communal, institutional realities that prevent the action of God. They are an obstacle to the manifestation of the love of God. Far from us wanting to make judgments. Only God knows what is in the deepest recesses of the human heart. Still, we want to place these weaknesses of ours before the Lord, to let him

look at us with love so that we are able to start again (continue our journey, so to speak) with a contrite heart full of gratitude. It is necessary to be aware of our sins because only those who realize who they are can open themselves up to the action of the Spirit with a desire for conversion. Additionally, it is important to remember here that we form a single reality, a single body, and therefore what a member does, affects, positively or negatively, the entire body. For this reason, before the Lord, let us see together this reality of fragility which has various manifestations. I indicate some.

- **An individualistic way of being and doing.** “A defect that appears very widespread and causes the most difficulties is individualism,” wrote the GD in 1990, in the Letter entitled “*Demands of Our Missionary Vocation.*” Thirty years later, we must recognize that individualism continues to be present in the life of our Family. It can be seen in excessive protagonism, doing alone without involving others and without informing, in going on solo to the point of considering the brothers and the community as obstacles to personal fulfillment. As we wrote in our letter, at the root of all of this is the I (the EGO), capitalized!
It is challenging to let *I* die and be reborn as *us*. We prefer to go on as if one were eternal. Sometimes, the attitude of those who do not feel or do not want to feel part of a community project, part of a process done together, which requires time for study, reflection, and discernment, is clearly visible. We proceed onward detached *from the body* while remaining *in the body*. All this has a direct and negative impact on the quality of community life. We openly wrote about this in the letter for the Jubilee: individualism is the expression of a failed discipleship. (cf. Mk 8:34)
- **The ad Gentes.** The last General Chapters have explicitly denounced a decline in our Family’s passion for the first proclamation, making repeated calls for an urgent repositioning of our missionary presences. A good number of our activities are still directed towards people and human groups already reached by an initial evangelization. We still dedicate ourselves to generic pastoral activities, more rewarding perhaps, but undoubtedly less charged with prophetic thrust. The decrease in the passion for the mission *ad Gentes* is due to the decline in the intensity of the life of faith. This, in turn, results in the search for some comfort, the preference to stay with what you know and where you are, and therefore the lack of availability for the ‘Abramic departure.’
- **Xaverian identity.** Sometimes we feel and see a watering down of this identity, that is, of the inseparable union between apostolic missionary life and religious life, with the vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, as was desired by Msgr. Conforti. In some, this relativization is theorized while in others it is openly practiced without scruples or questions. This watering down is a real maiming of the charism: personal projects, private management of means without giving an account to anyone, attachment to a specific place or activity, thus lacking the necessary availability that takes into account the Xaverian project in its entirety.

- **The abuse of authority.** I refer myself to that way of doing of those who, having received the trust of the Church and our Institute, instead of putting themselves at the service of others as Jesus indicates, abuse this trust by using it as a power to dominate, to impose, to corrupt and to act without giving any account to those who have entrusted them with this responsibility. The abuse of authority concerns all areas of our life: the way we think, speak, act, handle our emotional relationships, the “private” use of material and economic goods ... Often all this “weighs on the shoulders” of the recipients of our missionary activity.
- **The life of personal and community prayer.** It ought to be our principal activity, sustaining our fidelity and our apostolic commitment. (C 43) You notice a deficiency, both at the personal and communal levels. Sometimes we settled for the minimum, minimum. *“If the tree is good, it bears good fruit.”* (Mt 7:17) Without an authentic life of prayer, there is no Christian life, and even less a consecrated life. We move towards worldliness, becoming performers, separating the public and private spheres.

3. A word of hope under the name of Restarting.

The journey that the 2013 General Chapter proposed to our Family was an invitation **to restart**, to restructure, to reposition ourselves, bearing in mind the example of our Founder seen in his countless **restarts**. (Of this characteristic of Msgr. Conforti, Don Angelo Manfredi spoke to us during the 2006 meeting on Xaverian Spirituality.) As a missionary Family, we are trying to restart and reposition ourselves with effort, but also with courage. We do it with the eyes of faith, which helps us to interpret the challenges we face with confidence, hope, and creativity, beyond our personal or Institutional weaknesses.

Restart

- First, from **our specific identity in the Church**: we are a missionary Family called by God to consecrate our life to him for the mission *ad Gentes*, leaving our native land, culture, and Church of origin. It is our identity in the Church.
- **From our roots**: from the love God has for each one of us: it is God who loved us first. (1 Jn 4:10) Starting again from the first love: *“It was about four in the afternoon.”* (Jn 1:39); begin again from that intimate union with the Lord Jesus reflected in the unity of the branch to the vine. (Jn 15:5)
- **(Restart) From the “dream” of God**, the kingdom of God, the messianic banquet of which Isaiah spoke to us in the first reading - To have in our minds and hearts the words of Msgr. Conforti: to bring *“our own modest contribution to the fulfillment of Christ’s wish: the formation of a single Christian family embracing all humanity.”* (LT 1) To make the world one Family in Christ is the ideal that sets in motion the divine power which the Spirit of God places in us. When there is no ideal, there is no God, and therefore there is no life.

These are the necessary conditions to **Restart**:

- **Live the Charism with clarity.** The charism, as a gift of the Spirit to his Church, must be lived in its totality and integrity. There is no room for shrinking the charism, or for adapting it to personal "needs." It is a charism, and it is a gift; it is a vocation. And we love it as the individual identity that the Lord has given to each of us.
- **Open the doors**, as it happened to the disciples gathered in the Upper Room. Let ourselves be guided by the Spirit to go and live and stay in environments, places, and existential situations where Jesus is not yet known or loved. (Mk 16: 15-20) There is the need to overcome fear, to remove human balancing acts, those *yes, ...but; yes, ...however.*
- **Leave worldly security** to rely totally on the providence of God the Father who takes care of the birds of the sky and the animals of the earth. (Mt 6:25-33)
- **Leave those areas, structures, work camps, apostolic commitments** that are no longer ours because they simply are no longer at the service of the mission ad Gentes.
- **Possess Apostolic missionary courage**, like the one that has accompanied many of our confreres and sisters. At the same time, let us not forget that this courage is a gift of the Spirit, and it is the fruit of our union with the Lord.
- **Stop thinking about yourselves**, (Mk 8:34) your needs, your compulsive concerns about your health, your search or your well-being, and, therefore, your security. Jesus asks his disciples to stop thinking about themselves. (Mk 8:34) When the concern for the EGO is great, then there is no longer faith, and therefore there is no longer God. One reduces one's life to human activity. A Muslim recently said: *"The Messiah awaited by the people of Israel did not present himself according to their expectations of power and prestige but came to free the people from the slavery of the "I/EGO."*
- **Be people in love, passionate about the God** of Love, and his plan of salvation for humanity. Have a passion that demands **ALL**: thoughts, words, works, feelings, heart. Single hearted people are united around God's ideal. In our hearts, there should not be a place for even the slightest fracture (crack).
- **Travel light**, ready to go, like Abraham, our father in faith, wherever the Lord tells us to go, without hesitation and doubts. Our life is a journey of faith; it is not a human journey. By vocation - Christian and missionary - we are nomads, not settlers, subjected to uncertainty, instability, and not in search of security.
- **Love our Xaverian Family** as one's family. Love the mission received from God. Love together with the confreres that the Lord places on our path in the different moments of our life. Love them as they are, to be able to love God through them. **There is no place in** our Family for lukewarmness, compromises, discouragement, existential fatigue, indifference and, even less, for fear and double life. God saved us in Jesus Christ. We live the joy of God's salvation, the joy of those who have found the hidden treasure.

Today, in our Family, we need creativity, continuous research, sharing, moving beyond the familiar paths. We need fraternity.

May this jubilee year be a year of grace for our missionary Family and, therefore, for each of us. Let us **RESTART** with the same joy and hope that accompanied Msgr. Conforti, when he announced the approval of the Constitutions by the Holy See *“to the dear Missionaries, present, and future, of the Pious Society of St. Francis Xavier for the Foreign Missions.”*

May our Lord Jesus Christ be known and loved by all.
Saint Francis Xavier and Saint Guido Maria Conforti pray for us.

July 2, 2020
Parma, Mother House