



CONGREGAZIONE DELLE SACRE STIMMATE DI NOSTRO SIGNORE GESÙ CRISTO

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**CALLING THE BICENTENARY ANNIVERSARY
OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE SACRED STIGMATA
OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST**

**To the Stigmatine Confreres
To the Lay Bertonian Family
To our Collaborator Friends**

Beloved,

On **November 4, 2015** we open the year of preparation for the **Bicentenary of the birth of our Congregation.**

It is for all of us the occasion of thanksgiving to God, remembering - that is, bringing to our hearts - the moment in which St. Gaspar and his first companions, in obedience to the will of God, that manifests itself in events, began together the formation of a new religious community.

I - Looking at the past: "I will bless the Lord at all times"

It will not be a year of boastful commemoration of the past, but rather a time to **contemplate** what the goodness of God has granted us to accomplish at the service of the Church. It's a going back to the roots of our history, to sing hymns of praise and thanks to the Father who has blessed us. It's the opportunity to know that we are a living part of a living family that has produced and still produces fruits of charity in the world. It's time to **give thanks** for the holy confreres who have gone before us, for the figures of apostolic missionaries who tenaciously sowed the Word in Italy, in Europe, in Brazil, among the expatriates in the United States of America; missionaries who reinforced the faith of small Christian groups in China and established the foundation for strong communities, accepting hardships and persecutions for His name; missionaries who "went everywhere" (*quocumque euntes*) - as Bertoni urged us - in Thailand, Africa, the Philippines, Chile, Paraguay, Georgia, India In the presence of God, it is good to remember our founder confreres' charitable works for the most poor, founders of new religious congregations, famous or unknown, silent witnesses or resounding preachers, exemplary coadjutor brothers, bishops ... confreres who have climbed a Calvary of suffering and illness, for years, with the spirit of holy abandonment;

professors and educators of generations of young people, animators of Oratories, spiritual leaders, scholars, musicians ... We have so many things to be thankful for!

Now we want to go back to our sources, where our little river began in small drops. In the month of May 1841 Father Gaspar wrote to Father Luigi Bragato, a Stigmatine sent to the imperial court of Vienna-Prague, a most precious letter for us. In it Saint Gaspar reveals the spirit in which he was writing the Constitutions for his children, that is for us (a job that will engage him in prayer, study and counseling for about ten years). He wrote words that express serenity and certainty of faith: the Lord will carry on His work in the best of ways, for His glory. It's surprising to see the tranquility, the lack of concern about the future development of the Congregation. Here is the text:

"Pray much also for all of us and for what I'm writing in small drops, if the Lord may want it and be for the advantage to His honor. We do our part, according to the grace God gives us; God will certainly do His part, nor do I want to know what he wants to do. I firmly calm myself down believing that God can do anything he wants and he's always doing what is best, even if it's far away from our narrow-minded views, and sometimes even contrary. *"I will bless the Lord at all times, always on my lips his praise"* (Ps 34.2).

Certainly he was keeping in his heart all the events of the past and he placed them together like the tesserae of a mosaic: the inspirations, the pastoral experiences that the Lord had asked him for through the people, the Marian Oratories, the young priests circle, the spiritual assistance of the companions of Magdalene of Canossa and Leopoldina Naudet, the students in the seminary; especially the successful mission of Saint Zeno Maggiore and the gift of the house and the little church of the Stimato "as a convenient place to house a Congregation of priests who live under the rules of St. Ignatius." And then the decree of "Apostolic Missionary" from the Holy See. For 25 years he had lived the experience of community with his companions, growing and walking together, exhorting one another to follow generously Christ, chaste, poor and obedient, praying together, preparing themselves together for a penetrating proclamation of the Word of God throughout the whole city of Verona.

"... And I do not want to know what God wants to do."

From the human point of view, what happened to him and his confreres in the following years would have plunged anybody else into despair and discouragement. So writes Father G. Stofella: "The Ven. Gaspar during this work of drafting the Constitutions must have looked intently at the shrinking of his community visibly reduced to extremes. Of the two theology students one died. Of the eleven priests three died and two of the most academically qualified returned back home. For a long time, no new-comers to the Stimato, either of students or priests. There were various defections among the lay brothers: two sibling brothers left after serving the Lord for 13 and 8 years respectively; others entered and went back.

Only one lay brother entered and persevered. Illnesses, tribulations, storms "(Ven. Gaspar Bertoni, p. 248). In short, ours was a difficult and painful child-birth.

But he used to repeat, and today we also can repeat: "God can do all things ... *I will bless the Lord at all times ...*".

Saint Gaspar, at a delicate moment for the Naudet's community, wrote her a message that applies to us, even today, "But a little step up, a little down: a straight one, a crooked one: we carry on following the foot-prints of the one who precedes us with his cross on his shoulder, and constantly cries: *Who wants to come after me let him deny himself, take up his cross on the shoulders and follow me*" (Mt 16:24; Letter 144).

II - Living the present: "***We do our part, with the grace of God***"

This year of preparation for the Bicentenary anniversary will also be an opportunity to **verify** our historic and dynamic fidelity to the "project" of God and to measure the "temperature" of our current missionary zeal. It's also a year to put in the hands of God our sins, our slowness, our defaults and fears, personal and community weaknesses.

Providentially, the dates of the celebration of this year practically coincide with the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis and this gives a particular tone to our commemoration and invites us to read our history as a journey of mercy that God is walking with our Congregation.

I've read with emotion the intention that the Pope announced for the season of Lent of this Holy Year: "To send out the *Missionaries of Mercy*, as a sign of the maternal solicitude of the Church for the people of God, so that they may enter deeply into the riches of such vital mystery for the faith ... They will be, above all, a living sign of how the Father welcomes all those who are in search of his forgiveness. They will be the Missionaries of Mercy because they'll make themselves, for everybody, "craftsmen" of humanity-filled encounters - source of liberation, full of responsibility in overcoming obstacles and start again the new life of Baptism ... The Diocese will organize "popular missions" so that these Missionaries will be heralds of the joy of forgiveness "(Misericordiae Vultus n. 18).

It is true that these Missionaries will be chosen and sent by Pope Francis, but how can we not see in this a close analogy with the "*Apostolic Missionaries, in obsequium episcoporum*" that our Founder has placed as the end of the Congregation? St. Gaspar saw us *as Apostolic Missionaries* in fact and in zeal - even without the official title of the Holy See - sent by the bishops to accompany every single baptized person to rediscover the beauty of Baptism that leads us to intimate communion of life with Christ in the Church, through the Eucharist. Saint Gaspar wants us to be MISSIONARIES free and without purse to go in the diocese and in the world, with the power of the contemplated Word.

Dear Confreres, in recalling the duty of the Apostolic Missionaries to evangelize with the various and proper ministries of our own vocation, allow me to emphasize the importance of the ministry of **the Sacrament of Reconciliation**, considered as a path that leads the person

to a firm resolution of conversion to start a new life. The "Confession" is a powerful form of the evangelical proclamation that goes to the heart of the individual. The Founder has trained a generation of "new confessors" and often speaks of this in the Constitutions (CF 38; 72-75; 162; 293; 277), placing it among the special ministries of the "Solemnly Professed" (CF 183: "*To accept the confessions of all, especially the poor, the children and bring them to the proper frequency of the sacraments*"). If the Church is a "field hospital", may the people of God find us among the nurses and doctors, well prepared and available to treat wounds, at all times.

Dear Laity of the Bertonian Family and Collaborator Friends. The proclamation of the Father's Mercy is also entrusted to you. In your families, in the workplace, in the various commitments that the Christian community requires of you, in your family conversation with all persons, at the bar ... feel to be sent, "going-out", anywhere. Often you can be where priests cannot enter. Often you can speak a more simple and effective word, because you learned it from the everyday life. A Christian who is not a missionary, is not a Christian. Let the experience we have of God's tenderness become concrete witness in the works of mercy, justice, liberation and healing.

III - To build the future: "*God will certainly do His part*"

What Bertoni left us in the Constitutions sounds to us like an energy boost: "The one who inspired and began the project, He will bring it to completion (cf. Phil 1,6), if we should not stand up by our strengths" (CF 185).

This is the foundation of our hope. As far as we are concerned we have the duty of looking intently at the hand of the Master (cf. Ps 123,2) and be willing to do all that He will tell us. The great historic changes now taking place must find us listening to "what the Spirit says to the Churches", not to be overtaken by history. "Times change and we Christians must continually change!" (Pope Francis' Homily, House St. Martha, October 23, 2015)

Some **initiatives** have already been scheduled to be implemented in this year of preparation for the Bicentenary and others are in the pipeline. I recall them briefly:

1) First ***International Stigmatine Week***, open to confreres throughout the world (Verona, April or May 2016).

2) World Youth Day 2016: preceded by a ***Stigmatine Youth Week*** organized by the Sacred Heart Province (Verona, July 16 to 25, 2016).

On the same occasion we will be celebrated the ***Bertonian music Festival***. The theme of the new songs is "*Difficult times: the most opportune ones*"; the motto: "*United by the same feeling, motivated by the faith.*"

3) ***International Stigmatine Community Experience***, reserved for young priests: June 12, 2016 - February 2017

4) Second ***International Stigmatine Week***, also open to all the Confreres (Verona, at the end of October - early November 2016)

5) *Pilgrimage - Meeting of the Lay Bertonian Family* for a few days, in time to be arranged.

6) ***Books - Publications:***

- a) Popular Biography of St. Gaspar Bertoni - Booklet (Ed. Velar - LDC)
- b) Historical Biography of St. Gaspar Bertoni, by professor *Ruggero Simonato*
- c) A Story not to forget, *Father Michele Curto*, Stigmatine (History of the Congregation from 1853 to 1953).

Each Stigmatine province is invited to think and perform other useful initiatives to know and make known our history (community retreats, conferences, articles in newspapers and magazines, video clips, brochures, etc.) and to communicate them to everybody.

Conclusion

The General Chapter states: " We consider an urgent need to re-discover our history, both concerning the life and writings of our Founder, as well as concerning the life of the Congregation.

Deepening and knowing our history make us realize the paths our previous confreres have trodden in different times and places until now. This will be a pattern and indication in order to faithfully plan our present and our future endeavors. Those, among our confreres, who were prominent and famous for their holiness of life and apostolic zeal, creativity and intelligence, remain a treasure we cannot allow to get lost; on the contrary, we should make it known and remembered with simplicity and holy pride. This is why we are invited to cherish more our history, our memories, never letting the things the Lord allow to fall into oblivion; we should share them with all our confreres and keep our community *chronicles* updated." (Doc. Prog. 2)

May the Holy Spouses, our holy Founder and all the confreres who have gone before us help us in the journey of renewal. And best wishes to all!

In the Lord, with gratitude,

*Fr. Maurizio Baldessari
and the General Council*

Rome, October 26, 2015