

Internationality - “I have come to set fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already lit!” (Lk 12:49)

- Father Fiorenzo Salvi, sss, Superior General from 1999 to 2011, one of the experts on the Congregation and the Founder, introduces us to **the depth of the concept of “Internationality.” His reflection unfolds in the meanders of this notion, ranging from the nature of our Congregation as pontifical and based on the Rule of Life, to its relevance and urgency today. It also opens up new and enriching perspectives for our mission.**

The theme of *internationality* has become central to the reflection of our Congregation for several years now. This means that this aspect is also part of the changes and new challenges of today's world, of the Church and of our religious family. The XXXVI General Chapter (6-24 November, Vietnam 2023) also discussed this issue and included this theme among the "urgent concerns that challenge us" in its *Final Message*.

This brief reflection starts from the awareness achieved on the subject and further opens the horizon.

Let us say in the first place that we are recognized by the Church as an "international" Congregation. In fact, our religious family is of pontifical right, that is, it has been approved and depends on the Apostolic See precisely because its mission is not carried out in one country, in a diocese or in a particular territory, but extends to the whole world (cf. RL 1; 3; CIC 589-590). If our mission extends to the whole Church, it is carried out in close collaboration with the Dioceses and the territory where our communities operate (cf. RL 35).

Secondly, we are an "international" Congregation because it is composed of members who come from every part of the world, without exclusion, with the same rights and duties: "Gathered in the name of the Lord, we are called to live in the Church as brothers and sisters" (RL 1). The *Rule of Life* "unites us in the same plan of life and mission" (RL 6).

We could say – with extreme simplification – that our Congregation has lived its international identity with different accents, in at least four stages of its history.

I. The *first stage* can be identified in the years from its foundation, in 1856, to 1931.

In these years our religious family is led and refers to a central government: the Superior General and his Council have direct responsibility for all the religious and all the communities of the Congregation. They decide where to set up the new foundations and, for this purpose, they directly appeal to religious from different countries. They thus form "international" communities, if by this term we mean religious of different nationalities.

In these years numerous foundations were created that made the Congregation present in different nations, becoming more and more "international", if by this term we also mean its presence in different countries of the world. Here are these progressive foundations: 1856 France (Paris); 1867 Belgium (Brussels); 1882 Italy (Rome); 1890 Canada (Montreal); 1895 Austria (Bozen); 1900 USA (New York); 1901 Holland (Baarle-Nassau); 1903 Argentina (Buenos Aires); 1907 Spain (Toulouse); 1908 Chile (Santiago); 1919 Germany (Baelen); 1919 Switzerland (Le Noirmont); 1926 Brazil (Rio de Janeiro); 1927 Uruguay (Montevideo); 1929 Australia (Melbourne).

From 1856 to 1931 the Congregation extended to 15 countries of the world and to 3 continents: Europe, America (North and Latin) and Oceania!

II. A *second stage* could be identified in the years from 1931 to 1971.

With the growth in the number of religious and communities, the need for greater autonomy is making its way to facilitate governance, community management, development and the opening of new foundations. Thus, in 1931, the Provinces were born, realities made up of a certain number of communities that normally live on the territory of a nation or neighbouring nations. The top five are: France,

Italy, Canada, USA, Holland (1931); this was followed by: Germany (1937); Belgium, Spain, Argentina (1949); Switzerland, Brazil, Australia (1955); Tyrol (1961).

If this important change favors the possibility of living the Eucharistic mission with greater attention to the particular needs of the territory and the local Churches, the communities continue to live a lifestyle and to express the Eucharistic mission in a *homogeneous* and *similar form* throughout the Congregation. The point of reference is the Constitutions and regulations issued by the General Council. We can say that in this stage of its history, the Congregation expresses its "internationality" by living a form of presence and mission that is well characterized, appreciated and recognizable in every part of the world.

In these forty years, the growth of vocations is extraordinary; the highest point was reached in 1967. It is precisely the fruitfulness and growth of the Provinces that encourages a further "international" openness of the Congregation, especially in Africa, Latin America and Asia. The new foundations are now supported and accompanied by the Provinces (Mother-Provinces) and their religious.

This extraordinary development reaches the 5 continents:

Holland: 1935 Great Britain (Leicester); 1948 Mozambique (Maputo); 1967 Portugal (Lisboa);
Spain: 1951 Colombia (Popayan); 1953 Cuba (La Habana); 1967 Puerto Rico (Caguas);
Belgium: 1953 Burundi (Gitega);
USA: 1955 Philippines (Manila); 1959 Uganda (Masaka); 1969 Ireland (Dublin);
Australia: 1955 Sri Lanka (Colombo); 1964 India (Mumbai);
Italy: 1958 Democratic Republic of the Congo (Kinshasa); 1962 Senegal (Dakar);
Canada: 1958 Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville); 1962 Peru (Lima); 1947 Venezuela (Caracas);
Vietnam 1973 Vietnamese religious founded the new presence in Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh).

From these new foundations, 7 new Provinces were born in the following years: Great Britain-Ireland (1987); Philippines (1993); India; Sri Lanka (2005); Democratic Republic of Congo (2007); Vietnam (2008); Colombia-Peru-Porto Rico (2011).

III. A *third stage* can be identified from the first drafts of the *Rule of Life*, 1971, until 2011.

The advent of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962-1965) brought a rethinking of the whole of religious life and its mission in a world and a Church in profound change. Each religious institute is asked to rethink and reread its own charism in a "creative fidelity", as if the Founder were present in our time and, therefore, to review and rewrite its own Rules. The fruit of this long and difficult discernment flowed into the drafting of the *Rule of Life*, definitively approved in 1984, after ten years of experimentation (1971-1981). These were the years characterized by a profound rethinking and updating of the lifestyle and mission of our Congregation, now expressed in the *Rule of Life* (and *General Statutes*), and launched in the *Mission Project*.

In this new season in the history of the Congregation, the autonomy and responsibility of the Provinces are accentuated so that they can express a mission that is more inculturated, rich, creative and responsive to the needs of the Church and society. In this stage, subsidiarity in government, decentralization and autonomy of the Provinces are favoured to the maximum.

However, as the years go by, one perceives the importance of better harmonizing the multifaceted face of the Congregation and proceeding on a common and shared journey. This goal could be well summed up in the binomial: *unity in diversity*. Collaboration between the Provinces of the same continent is encouraged by intensifying the role of the Geographical Conferences. Common centres are being set up for the formation of candidates for the Blessed Sacrament life (as, for example, has been carried out in Africa and Latin America). If, on the one hand, the Provinces remain protagonists of the mission, they

walk together and recognize themselves in the common furrow traced by the General Chapters.

To facilitate this "convergence", it is agreed to celebrate the provincial and regional chapters in the same year, so as to facilitate their connection with the indications of the general chapters. In this way, an attempt is made to harmonize better and better the two souls of "internationality": that of local identities, and that of congregational identity.

Starting from the 80s, in Europe, North America and Australia, a progressive decrease in the number of candidates began, while they were in full development in Africa, Asia and, in part, in Latin America. The effects were not felt immediately because the religious were still numerous and in good age, but, with the beginning of the new century, the difficulty of guaranteeing the continuation of their foundations arose in these Provinces. In this phase, a new aspect of internationality is born and makes its way, stimulated by this new situation.

IV. The *fourth stage* could be the one from 2011 until today.

The theme of internationality is on the agenda of the XXXIV General Chapter (Rome, 2011). We speak of "international solidarity" in reference to different levels of collaboration: formation, economy, resources. There is a growing awareness of the importance of more intense communion and sharing. Some experiences are already underway in the Congregation of inserting religious in the Provinces in personnel difficulties, the formation centers also welcome candidates from other provinces. However, the problems should not be ignored: "We already know the challenges and related problems arising from the movement of religious in initial formation from one continent to another. The experience of religious going to help communities unable to carry out their work is not without problems (as we have learnt). Certainly, an appreciation of the capacity of a charism to bring about the interaction of persons of different cultures and races is valuable and helpful in a new phase of religious life. However, we know how this path cannot be taken for granted and

brings with it also problematic and painful aspects” (XXXIV Gen. Chap., *Acts* p. 105)

General Chapters XXXV (Chicago 2017) and XXXVI (Ho Chi Minh 2023) also deal with and insert indications on internationality into the Final Message. However, the dimension of an "internationality *ad intra*" remains predominant. Currently, "staff solidarity" is an established practice and is bearing fruit. One thing is certain: we cannot safeguard all the existing communities, especially in the long-standing provinces (Europe, North America, Australia), but those strategic presences that have a real perspective for the future. Precisely for this reason, I think it would be important to also open new horizons and follow new paths. We must ask ourselves if this is not the season in which to invest our young resources also in new community foundations in countries where our Congregation is not yet present and which could render a fruitful service, thus also developing and encouraging "internationality *ad extra*". One fact seems significant to me: from 1973 to today, and therefore in the last 52 years, the only new nation in which the Congregation has established its presence (we could add the foundation of 2004 in the State of Hawaii, which is however part of the USA) is Cameroon, in 2005 (Bertoua-Ndoumbi).

This brief overview of the Congregation's journey makes us understand that the theme of *internationality* is not new: at every stage of its history, our religious family has experienced this dimension in different and original ways. Today, as in the past, the challenge of an "internationality *ad extra*" is entrusted above all to the young part of the Congregation, full of enthusiasm, creativity and courage. There are still many countries waiting for our presence. Sometimes it is better and more fruitful to dig new wells than to restore old ones! If in Europe we are still present in 11 out of 27 countries, in Africa we are present in 6 out of 54 countries, in America (North, Central, South) in 8 out of 35, in Asia in 4 out of 49, in Oceania in 1 out of 14! The harvest is plentiful, and there is no shortage of workers!

Fr. Eymard was fond of quoting the text of Lk 12:49 often, comparing the "international" mission of the Congregation to the fire to be spread that Jesus came to bring to earth. Among the many texts, this is enough to communicate his ardour and encourage us not to be afraid to open new horizons: "Let each one, according to the gift of his grace and under the guidance of obedience, consecrate himself with a joyful heart to the greater glory of Jesus Christ in his sacrament, so that the desire of the Lord when he said: "I have come to set fire to the earth, and what is my desire but that it should burn" [Lk 12:49]. Let them, therefore, be like the incendiaries throughout the *world* of that heavenly fire which is the Holy Eucharist" (RR 44t, 2).

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FATHER FIORENZO SALVI, SSS

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Ponteranica, Italy