



BROTHERS OF
SAINT JOHN

Message from General Chapter 2022

First session from April 27 - May 6, 2022 in Troussures

The first session of the General Chapter of the Brothers of St John was held from April 27 to May 6, 2022 at the priory of Troussures, Picardy, France. 51 brothers from all over the world came together. Here is the final message for the first session. The second session will take place from October 11 to 24, 2022, also at Troussures.

The particularity of this Chapter is that it was based on the preparatory work done since 2019 by 16 Commissions. Many brothers and sisters of the Family of Saint John and people from other areas of the Church were involved in this preparatory work.

- Opening

The General Chapter opened with a day and a half of recollection during which we reflected on Johannine spirituality. Brother Gabriel-Mary, who is completing his doctoral thesis in spiritual theology at the Angelicum Pontifical University in Rome on this very theme, shared with us the fruit of his work over three conferences, interspersed with group sharing. He highlighted the historical development of this Johannine tradition, its richness and also the importance of not isolating it from the rest of the Church's tradition. Brother Gabriel-Mary helped us to realize the beauty of this heritage and further awakened our desire to deepen our understanding of it.

- The Prior General and the Master of Studies' reports.

In accordance with what is set out in our Constitutions, brother François-Xavier, Prior General, presented us his report, followed by the Master of Studies' report, presented by brother François-Frédéric. Their aim was to show the key notes of their terms of office: visits to the priories, governmental decisions, things to give thanks for, problems encountered and challenges facing us in the future.

For brother François-Xavier, "the main challenge for the Congregation has come from the revelation of the abuse committed by Father M.-D. Philippe and by brothers, the seriousness of which we have come to realise over a period of time." The other challenge is the transition towards decentralized government.

In his report, brother François-Frédéric spoke to us from the perspective of an integral formation, which besides our academic studies involves areas of human, pastoral, spiritual and religious life. He also spoke of the richness and challenges of decentralization with regard to formation, and especially the need for brother formators.

These two reports were followed by answers to questions asked by Capitular brothers.

- Commissions

A good deal of the preparation of General Chapter 2022 had been entrusted to commissions which worked with experts from other areas of the Church and consulted with brothers from the Congregation. The Capitular brothers thus benefited from reflections matured over a period of three years and on which they were able to express their opinions.

- Charism

We worked on a text presenting our charism as Brothers of Saint John. This is the culmination of work done by the Commission for the Charism since General Chapter 2019, of different consultations (of the brothers as a whole and of the different regional chapters), as well as of exchanges during the present Chapter. It was a question of providing, in a brief document, an updated expression of our identity as Brothers of Saint John. The text adopted (see appendix) has three parts: the essential elements of our spirituality, our witness in service of the Church, and our way of life. This text will be sent to the Dicastery of Consecrated Life in Rome which wished to have such a document. It now serves as a reference to express our identity.

- Fundamental texts

The Rule of Life written by Fr. M.-D. Philippe has until now been one of the fundamental texts of the Congregation. It contains significant elements of our heritage. As the first expression of what kind of life the brothers wanted to lead, it has played an important role in the vocation and spiritual sustenance of many of us.

General Chapter 2019 affirmed that "if the charism is truly a life according to the Holy Spirit then, because of the grave abuses he committed, Fr. M.-D. Philippe cannot be a model of that life. Accordingly, the Brothers no longer refer to him as a norm for bringing up to date their charism today." Now that the brothers are aware of the abuse, and also of the shortcomings and ambiguities in the text itself, General Chapter 2022 therefore considered that the Rule of Life can no longer be a reference for our life and took the decision to withdraw it from the Constitutions (cf. C. 9-25), to no longer mention it in the Vows Formula (cf. C. 38), nor to read and commentate it during chapters (cf. D. 85.7).

General Chapter 2022 recognized the primordial character of the Constitutions as an expression of our vocation and way of life, and wants to focus the work of reform for the coming years on them.

For the same reasons, the Chapter chose to end communal recitation of the two prayers written by Fr. M.-D. Philippe: the prayer of consecration to Mary, "As the Father has chosen you", and the prayer to St. John, "O John, Shining Star of the Church".

Looking to the future, the Chapter suggests that ideas for prayers, both from the tradition of the Church and those written by our Community, be sent to the Commission for Fundamental Texts by September 30, 2022. In addition to this the Chapter has requested that a collection of prayers be compiled under the responsibility of the brother liturgist of the Congregation.

- A penitential approach to the abuse victims

General Chapter 2019 requested that, when the conditions were met, a celebration be prepared for asking forgiveness of victims of abuse committed by our founder or by brothers themselves. Since then, a commission has been working on this subject with the help of Dr Isabelle Chartier-Siben, a victimologist and the founder of an association for victims, "C'est à dire". Dr Isabelle was invited to speak at the Chapter and she insisted on quality and authenticity when asking forgiveness, and presented the prerequisites to be observed. In particular, we need to recognize the acts of abuse with exact words and become fully aware of "the suffering and destruction inflicted on the victims". We realized that the challenge was not primarily to organize a celebration asking forgiveness, but to take up our responsibility at every level (congregation, priory, personal) and to commit ourselves in different areas: penance, prayer, reparation, remembrance, and finally asking forgiveness. During the second session, we will need to address the following two questions: "What gestures and steps seem appropriate to me in order to move forward on the path of recognizing the abuses and the sufferings experienced by the victims? What steps in asking forgiveness could we envisage in order to put our collective and individual responsibility into practise?"

- Meeting with the Prioress General and the Directress of formation of the Apostolic Sisters

Sister Claire de Jesus, Prioress General of the Apostolic Sisters of St John, and Sister Dominique, Directress of Formation, were invited by Brother François-Xavier to address the Chapter. This meeting followed the latter's visit to the Apostolic Sisters' General Chapter last November. The Prior General communicated to the capitular brothers that he had asked forgiveness of the Apostolic Sisters' Chapter for the disrespectful and seriously abusive behaviour of certain brothers towards sisters. The two sisters reminded us of these painful facts in a thoughtful but candid way. After having told us of their joy in cooperating with the brothers, Sister Claire de Jesus and Sister Dominique also shared with us the difficulties encountered in this cooperation, in formation and in common apostolates. In particular, some sisters suffered from clericalist attitudes on the part of certain brothers who did not treat them with respect. This exchange left a deep impression on the Chapter, invited us to reread our common history and committed us to a better adjusted, more respectful and fraternal relationship. This will be a fruitful path for the witness of the Family of St John and our cooperation in the mission.

- Decentralization

For several years now, a process has been underway in our community for the decentralization of government and the constitution of provinces. This movement is now part of the synodal path to which Pope Francis invites the whole Church. We therefore continued our reflections, integrating the consultations of

¹ <https://cestadireweb.org>

the last Vicarial and Pro-Provincial Chapters. The elements which have been most appreciated come from experience: for the past three years, three of our large regions (Africa, the Americas, and Northern Europe) have experimented with the status of "pro-province". The feedback from brothers who have experienced this status has been positive, especially because of the greater awareness of responsibility on the part of the regions.

Our Chapter adopted the legal framework of a derogatory status to our current Constitutions which could be used for the next six years in the case of an effective transition into provinces. This transition will be submitted to the vote of the General Chapter 2022 at its second session.

- Formation

Within the framework of the reflection upon unity and cultural diversity in our formation, Brother François-Frédéric, in his function as Master of Studies and in the presence of the Capitular brothers, asked forgiveness with regard to brothers who came from other countries to do their formation in France. Indeed, even though for years now an important effort has been made in our formation houses throughout the world to better take into account the variety of cultures, we had to recognize that this has not always been the case, that some brothers have suffered from it and some remain hurt. We still need to make progress in welcoming our brothers and being open to their cultural characteristics.

In connection with decentralization, we have reflected on the future of initial formation in our community. In recent years, several houses of study in philosophy have been developed (Simbock in Cameroon, Cebu in the Philippines). Questions concerning the international framework for our theological studies and the unity of our formation have now arisen. Work upon these questions has now started and will be pursued in the second session.

During work on our future *Ratio Formationis*, a text presenting ongoing and initial formation, we studied the "dynamics of growth" according to the different dimensions of formation: spiritual, human, intellectual, religious, community and apostolic. During the second session, we will have the opportunity to express to the Prior General, by means of a vote, our opinion upon the promulgation of the text of the *Ratio Formationis*.

Moreover, the Chapter has decided, on an experimental basis for 6 years, to replace the office of Master of Studies with that of a brother-in-charge of integral formation.

- 2nd session of the General Chapter

In addition to continuing the themes of the first session, the Capitular brothers will meet in October to work on new topics related to the following commissions: Interdisciplinary Commission (historical, doctrinal and psychological analysis of the abuses which occurred in the Family of St. John), Commission for Doctrine (critical examination of books written by Fr. M.-D. Philippe), Commission for the *Ratio Studiorum* (a complementary document to the *Ratio Formationis* concerning studies), Commission for Old Age and Dependency, and Commission for Liturgical Chant. We will also undertake an important task that will occupy us in the years to come: the revision of our Constitutions. The Capitular brothers will also elect the Councillors of the Prior General and the brother-in-charge of integral formation.

- Conclusion

In brother François-Xavier's words, we believe that we need to write "a Gospel story similar to the story of those men who wanted to follow Christ but who did not really encounter him until the day when they realized that they were sinners. It was precisely there that Christ wanted to meet them and share his life with them, a life that he gave them the mission to announce." In this sense, the Prior General gave us a spiritual interpretation of the "mourning process" we are experiencing. We are invited by Christ to the radical change of Paschal joy.

We are very grateful to the brothers of the Priory of Troussures and the team of lay volunteers. Thanks to them this Chapter was able to take place in the best of conditions. The Capitular brothers give thanks to the Holy Spirit for all that they experienced, especially the frankness in speech and mutual good will, and entrust to God the Community and its apostolic fruitfulness.