

THE FIRST GENERAL CHAPTERS OF THE CONGREGATION

From 1824 to 1860

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Dealing with the theme of the First General Chapters of the Congregation, in accordance with the first registers, I begin by clarifying that in the beginning, the functioning of the Chapter was very different from the present day. The Chapter Assemblies – or Council meetings of today – were meetings to discuss different issues: the admission of the young to receive the habit, professions, appointments or nominations, etc. They were usually monthly meetings or more frequent. The Superior General would gather the religious elected as members of the General Chapter to examine a question where a decision needed to be made. The number of these religious, called the elected, was small (less than a dozen); in fact, the increase to a minimum of 20 members will be a requisite of the Holy See in order to approve the Constitutions of the Congregation in 1848. All of them lived near the Superior General, who called them very frequently for a meeting each time a decision needed to be made.

In the first General Chapter that began on January 6, 1824, five religious participated with M. Mary Saint Ignatius: M. St. Bruno (widow Fernand), M. St. Peter (widow Dioque), M. St. Xavier (Chipier), M. St. Gonzaga (Chardon) and M. St. Andrew (Ramié). In it they discussed the theme of the petition of the approval of the Constitutions, a theme which will also be discussed in the three next General Chapters: the second (October 1, 1829), the third one (October 10, 1834) and the fourth one (February 9, 1837); in it is determined that the religious members of the General Chapter will not be less than 10, and that there be only one Novitiate for the whole Congregation in the Mother House. In the new approval of the Constitutions and Rules by Mgr. de Pins on April 7, 1838 it is required that those elected be at least 10.

In the book *Registre des Délibérations du Chapitre Général de la Congrégation – Partie Administrative* on August 6, 1840, Mother St. Andrew gathered the members of the General Chapter to put the first proposal to them: to transfer the establishment of the Providence to a larger place which would be bought. The present location was too small for the number of people and for the work that was going on there. This is unanimously approved.

On September 15 of the same year, the Chapter members approve, by a majority of votes, the purchase of the house of Rubod, in the Croix Rousse, a place sufficiently big for the Providence, and also had the approval of Mgr. de Bonald, Archbishop of Lyon; but on January 9, 1841, on the advice of the Archbishop, they decided not to keep the house of Rubod, because it was located in a troubled area that offered no sense of quiet - in fact, it was dangerous..

On February 25, 1841 the Superior General, M. St. Andrew, calls the members of the General Chapter together to let them know that she had asked the Archbishop if he could provide another house for them in a safer place other than that of the house of Rubod where they could transfer the place of the Providence, or perhaps he could buy some land where a sufficiently large house could be built for the whole establishment and which would allow for future development.

The Archbishop approved the petition, but after his written response, a person respected by all the members of the General Chapter confirms that he has heard the Prelate say that perhaps it would be better to transfer the Boarding School there rather than the Providence of Fourvière. In order to comply as much as possible with the Archbishop's wishes and to increase the establishment of the Providence by the construction of a new building and enlarge the Boarding School in Fourvière in a place sufficiently separated from the Providence, as the Constitutions demand, and to have a particular house for the Mother House separated from every other building, because of the possible number of Novices, the Superior General proposes to dedicate the southern part of the Fourvière locality for the construction of a house destined for the Providence. In the event of being able to secure a more suitable location from the neighbours, a wall would be built which would totally separate the two houses, with an external door close to the House Pochet, part of the Providence esplanade.

The General Chapter approves this as being the only decision that can be taken; only one member is not in agreement. The proposal of the Superior General obtains the majority of the votes and it is decided that they will ask the Chaplain to consult the Archbishop about this possibility. On March 31 Mgr. de Bonald gives his consent for the construction of a house for the Providence on the southern part of our establishment; The Superior General communicates this to all the members of the General Chapter and proposes that the construction should begin as soon as possible, and this was unanimously approved .

On August 2 of the year 1841 the Superior General calls a meeting with the members of the General Chapter to communicate to them a proposal made by Mgr. Rossat, Vicar General of Gap and General Procurator of the Missions of Tibet; to respond to the ardent desire

of Mgr. Borghi, Bishop of Agra, who is looking for six religious to work in his Episcopal city to teach the girls of Hindustan inhabitants, to start a Boarding School and a Providence there: Mgr. Borghi would pay all the expenses, including the travelling expenses. Poor girls would be accepted free of charge in the establishment. The Bishop would also be responsible for the expenses of the religious by offering a food allowance. He offers a large building for the house and he also promises that a priest will commit himself to taking care of the spiritual needs of the establishment.

The members of the General Chapter believe beyond doubt that the desires of Mgr. Borghi are a call of Divine Providence, who wants to use our small Congregation to work for the salvation of the poor people in India, and so they approve the proposal unanimously.

But in order not to rush the decision, the Superior General proposes that a Novena be made to examine before God if this undertaking is not beyond our powers, to ask that God's will be done, asking Him not to permit our unworthiness to be an obstacle. The decision is postponed and at the end of the Novena all the members accept the proposed mission and ask Mgr. De Bonald, Archbishop of Lyon, for his consent. On August 15, the Feast of the Assumption, Mgr. de Bonald gives his consent for the mission to Agra.

On December 8 of the same year the Superior General again gathers the members of the General Chapter to tell them that the favorable moment has arrived to ask the Holy See for the approval of our Constitutions and Rules, a proposal which is approved by the Chapter, a decision is made to change the name from *Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary*; a name which many other Congregations bear, to *Congregation of Religious of Jesus and Mary*, and to ask for the approval of the change of name to be given before our religious leave for the mission to Agra. The General Chapter approves it unanimously, and on January 4, 1842 it is approved by Mgr. Allibert, Vicar General of the Archbishop of Lyon, in the name of Cardinal De Bonald.

On April 13, 1842 the Superior General gathers the members of the 5th General Chapter to discuss the foundation in Remiremont in the Vosges, at the request of the Bishop of Saint Die: a Boarding School which would be ceded to us by an institution which wants to leave the city; Mother General proposes to buy a place for the Boarding School and Novitiate. The foundation was unanimously approved.

On January 22, 1843 Mother St. Andrew again convokes the General Chapter, following the advice of Cardinal De Bonald, in order to propose some changes to the Rules and Constitutions and obtain the approval of the Holy See.:

1. That the Congregation be governed by the authority of the Superior General and of the Diocesan Bishop in each one of the Institutions.
2. To substitute the Roman rite throughout the whole Congregation for that of the dioceses where each house is located.
3. To facilitate the government of the Congregation by dividing it into Provinces, and name a Provincial Superior in each one, under the authority of the Superior General. It is also agreed that there be a Novitiate in each Province.
4. The auxiliary Sisters ("sisters of a lower class") will have recreation in a place different from that of the choir religious.
5. The religious who participate in the General Chapter will not be less than 20.

The decisions are approved by all the members of the Chapter.

On August 27, 1844 the Superior General, at the request of Mgr. Borghi asks the General Chapter for approval for a new foundation in India, and this is unanimously approved.

There is no reference in the Register of the 6th General Chapter (February 13, 1847)

On March 26, 1848 it is registered that our Constitutions, recently approved by His Holiness Pope Pius IX, agree that the number of those elected will never be less than 20. But given that article 23 of the Constitutions says that those elected cannot be sent to live in any establishment of the Congregation nor carry out any stable work there, rather they have to remain in close proximity to the Mother House. This difficulty is presented to the Cardinal Archbishop of Lyon, who agrees that we are dispensed, for the moment, given the impossibility of keeping this article of our Constitutions, and that later this question can be presented to the Holy See. In accordance with this decision, they proceed to the nomination of the newly elected in order to get as near as possible to the number agreed in article 18.

On May 28, 1850 Mother St. Andrew gathered the General Chapter to communicate to it the proposal of Father Vionnet to found an establishment in San Andrés, near Barcelona; it is to be the first foundation in Spain. All the members of the Chapter agree that one of our Spanish religious ought to go to investigate the place accompanied by one of the older religious to see if what is being offered by the Mayor, by the City Council of San Andrés would be sufficient to found the establishment. The promises made by the City Council are assured for our Sisters on

condition that a class is provided free of charge. The decision is approved by the General Chapter and receives the approval of Cardinal De Bonald.

In 1854 (the Register does not indicate the date or month) the Superior General gathers the General Chapter to examine some articles of our Constitutions that present some difficulty, especially in the missions in India. It is not explained what the difficulties are, it is only said that the members of the Chapter ask for the light of the Holy Spirit, examine one by one the articles mentioned in detail in the petition to the Sovereign Pontiff, and that Cardinal De Bonald, Archbishop of Lyon, will personally present the petition to be approved in Rome.

On August 24, 1855 Mother St. Teresa, Superior General, informs the General Chapter of the proposal of the Bishop of Quebec, in Canada, to accept a mission in his Diocese. The proposal is approved by the majority of the votes, and it is decided to ask for the vote of the Chapter members (those elected) who are absent and to entrust this to a Novena to St. Joseph.

On December 10, 1856 Mother St. Teresa proposes to the General Chapter to accept young girls in the Ladies' Residence to educate them and form them in this service, a proposal unanimously approved.

On February 26, 1857 the 8th General Chapter accepts the petition of the Archbishop that the choir religious will not be called "Madame", but "ma soeur" - 'my sister',

"D'après le désir général exprimé par son Eminence lors de sa dernière visite de ne plus employer le nom de Madame à l'égard des Religieuses de Chœur, le Chapitre Général s'est soumis bien volontiers au désir de Monseigneur et il a été annoté que le titre de Ma sœur serait substitué à celui de Madame. »

On April 27, 1857 the Superior General who at the present moment is in San Andrés (Barcelona) proposes to the General Chapter to establish a second house in Spain, in Tarragona. The General Chapter approves it on condition that the religious be sent from the house of San Andrés and that France will not be asked for anyone following two years of Revolution. On the 9th of December of that same year Mother St. Teresa gathers the General Chapter to examine the request of Mother St. Pothin, Provincial Superior from Spain, to pay 5,000 francs a year for the purchase of the house that they have built in Barcelona and this is unanimously approved.

On August 30, 1859 Mother St. Teresa gathers the members of the General Chapter to present the petition of Mother St. Cyprian, Superior of Pointe Levy, near Quebec, asking permission for a second foundation in Canada for which the Parish priest has already built the house, which for the moment will be used for a day school; the General Chapter approves this unanimously. On September 26 of the same year Mother St. Teresa presents to the General Chapter a letter from M. St. Paul. Superior of Bombay, asking for the approval of a new establishment in Puna and permission for two religious to go there and begin the work; this was approved unanimously. And on November 7 the General Chapter authorizes Mother St. Cyrille to purchase a plot of land in Tarragona to build a house.

On March 25, 1860 the Superior General gathers the members of the General Chapter to inform them of a possible foundation in England (Ipswich), which already has the approval of the Archbishop. Mother St. Teresa will go there the first days after Easter. On her return, on August 6, she gathers the members of the General Chapter who are present to inform them about the welcome and acceptance she received in England. She describes the little house, beautiful and well furnished: even though it is small, it will be sufficient to begin, and later a larger building can be built. She explains to the members that she has promised to take possession of the house and all the members who are present approve it.

So far this is the information contained in the Registers of the General Chapters.

As we can see, the General Chapters at the origin of our Congregation are quite different from those that we have just celebrated at the moment of our second centenary.

It would seem import to highlight three points:

1st. How important it was for our General Governments to know the opinion of those who were elected (members of the General Chapter) on different affairs which would in any way affect the whole Congregation. We can see the number of times that those who were elected are gathered to discern about proposals before any decision is taken on them.

2nd. The priority given to the attention to the Providence as a constant point of reference of the first General Chapters.

3rd. The openness to Mission: The Congregation fully supports the foundation in Agra.

"He who began this work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1, 6, Constitutions 93). We trust in the Lord, who will give us light and strength to continue the mission to which Saint Claudine dedicated herself completely.