

**MESSAGE OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL TO THE CAMILLIAN
PROVINCE OF FRANCE**

What in particular do I expect from this Year of grace for consecrated life? That the old saying will always be true: “Where there are religious, there is joy”. We are called to know and show that God is able to fill our hearts to the brim with happiness; that we need not seek our happiness elsewhere; that the authentic fraternity found in our communities increases our joy; and that our total self-giving in service to the Church, to families and young people, to the elderly and the poor, brings us life-long personal fulfilment. None of us should be dour, discontented and dissatisfied, for “a gloomy disciple is a disciple of gloom”. Like everyone else, we have our troubles, our dark nights of the soul, our disappointments and infirmities, our experience of slowing down as we grow older. But in all these things we should be able to discover “perfect joy”. For it is here that we learn to recognize the face of Christ, who became like us in all things, and to rejoice in the knowledge that we are being conformed to him who, out of love of us, did not refuse the sufferings of the cross.

(Apostolic Letter of the Holy Father Francis to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, 28 November 2014, II, 1)

Fidelity in discipleship occurs through and is demonstrated by the experience of community, a theological reality in which we are called to support each other in our joyful ‘yes’ to the Gospel. “It is the Word of God that inspires faith and nourishes and revitalizes it. And it is the Word of God that touches hearts, converting them to God and to his logic which is so different from our own. It is the Word of God that continually renews our communities”.

(Rejoice! Circular Letter to Consecrated Men and Women, n. 6)

***Dear Fr. André Pernet, Provincial Superior,
Esteemed Religious Brothers of the Provincial Council,
Dear Religious Brothers of the Camillian Province of France,***

I had the privilege of making a (pastoral and canonical) fraternal visit to your Camillian Province together with Fr. Laurent Zoungrana, the Vicar General of the Order, on 4-13 April 2016. We visited your various communities: Théoule-sur-Mer (4-5 April), Lyons (5-8 April), Arras (11 April) and Parigi-Bry-sur-Marne (8-13 April). During our visit, we met your communities and offered our religious brothers opportunities for individual meetings as well. At the end of our stay we engaged in an overall assessment with the Provincial Council. During our journeys and during the visits we were accompanied by the Provincial Superior, Fr. André Pernet, to whom we are very grateful for his kindness.

During our community meeting, we spoke about the Camillian *Project* for the Revitalisation of the Order with its three priorities that will accompany us during the course of this six-year period: a transparent organisation of our economics, the animation and promotion of vocations and formation, and communication. We also spoke about the advent of Pope Francis, a grace for the life of the Church and the world: he has given us the gift of the year dedicated to *consecrated life* (2015) and the extraordinary jubilee Year of Mercy (2016).

During the year dedicated to *Consecrated Life*, Pope Francis in his apostolic letter addressed to all consecrated people reminded us that ‘we do not only have a glorious history to remember and narrate, we also have a history to construct! Look to the future, into which the Spirit is leading you still to do great things’ and he added ‘we must look to the future with gratitude...live the present with passion...and embrace the future with hope’.

Accepting the invitation of Pope Francis to remember with gratitude, we want here to recall the roots and the history of the Camillian Province of France so as to offer up our thanks to God.

Some Aspects of the History of your Province

It is interesting to observe that before the establishment of the presence of the Camillians in France in 1877 with Fr. Luigi Tezza, there had already been two Camillians of French origins: Fr. Nicolas Clemente of Naix-aux-Forges and Fr. Jean-Hilaire Cales (Calas) (1573-1636), both contemporaries of St. Camillus and both from the diocese of Toul. Fr. Hilaire was known above all for his conversion which took place in Rome. He was born in Mandres-aux-Quatre-Tours, in the diocese of Toul, to a family of noble lineage. Moving from Paris in 1589, 'Hilaire Cales, a faithful and impassioned servant, member of the distinguished *de Guise* family, came to Rome to ask the Holy See for the rightful punishment of the murderers' of Henri de Guise, the Duke, and his brother a Cardinal.

During his long stay in Rome, he formed a friendship with Fr. Clemente, a Camillian religious who came from the same diocese. 'This good Fr. Clemente introduced his compatriot to the Founder, St. Camillus de Lellis, who made a sign of the cross on his forehead and soon welcomed him as a novice...Hilaire so edified his friends and his teachers that two years later he was admitted to the profession of vows'. Ordained in the year 1600, it is said of him that he 'engaged in the formation of men and saints...he gave himself body and soul to service to the sick. He saw them as gems and it was for this reason that he served them giving of himself totally in this work'.

But it was with Fr. Luigi Tezza that the Camillian charism began to take root in French soil and greatly developed. Luigi Tezza was born in Conegliano (Treviso, Italy) on 1 November 1841. It is said that his vocation grew in harmony with the life and the profession of his father, Augusto: this last was a medical doctor and enjoyed a fine reputation because of his care for the sick and his professional qualities. He was very well known and sought after because of his qualities and his skills. He died on 1 January 1850 when Luigi was only eight years old. In the year 1855 Luigi asked Fr. Luigi Artini, the Camillian Superior of Verona, to receive him into the Order of St. Camillus. Luigi, still a novice, took part in the 'vestition' of his mother Caterina on 21 August 1857 at the Monastery of the Visitation in Padua, to which she had retired after her son had left home. Tezza made his first religious profession on 8 December 1858 and was ordained a priest on 21 May 1864.

In 1871 Fr. Luigi Tezza was sent from Rome to Cuisery, near to Mâcon, in France, as the master of novices. He not only attended to formation for young candidates for the religious life but also accompanied and supported the development of the Camillian foundation in France, exercising ministry at the sanctuary of Cuisery and various nearby parishes.

With other Camillians, not being able to build a house for elderly priests in Cuisery he chose to build a nursing home in Lyons in 1872. This was the first time that the Order of St. Camillus had founded a social/health-care work in France. After the opening of a third community in Lille, the Camillian foundation in France was entrusted to Fr. Luigi Tezza who was elected the first Provincial Superior. With the closing of the religious Orders by the French government, on 29 March 1880 the Camillians abandoned France and settled in Belgium with the exception of Fr. Tezza who stayed in Cuisery and between 1882 and 1885 was appointed the Superior at Lille.

During the General chapter of 1889, Fr. Luigi Tezza was elected Consultor and Vicar General, as well as Procurator General, of the Order. During this mandate, in 1892, he founded the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Camillus together with Mother Giuseppina Vannini. Subsequently, he returned to Lille as Superior in the year 1898. On 12 April 1900 he went to Lima (Peru) where he stayed until his death which took place on 26 September 1923. The local people already bestowed upon him the title 'apostle of Lima' because of his heroic witness in serving the sick and the poor. Known for his life lived under the sign of the most authentic holiness, Pope John Paul II beatified him in 1997. He is an example of authentic Christian life in the Church and in particular in your religious Province.

History tells us that ‘in 1935 the Order of the Ministers of the Sick had 1,311 members in the world. Of these, 380 were in the Province of Lombardy and Veneto, 366 in the Province of Germany, 208 in the Province of France, followed by the Province of Spain (145), the Province of Rome (115), the Province of Piedmont (97). The Camillian Province of France had nine community foundations: Tournai, Exaerde, Lyons, Théoule, Angers, Marbach, Niderviller, Arras and Bry-sur-Marne’ (Jean-Marc Ticchi, *Histoire de la province française de l’Orde de Saint Camille de Lellis*, L’Harmattan, 2014, p. 182).

The contribution that the Camillian Province of France offered to the creation of the Camillian Provinces of Germany, Spain and Ireland of the Order should be inscribed on our roll of honour. Your Province gave to the Order as its Superior General Fr. Francesco Vido (1846-1926) and as members of the General Consulta Fr. Luigi Tezza, (1841-1923), Fr. Stanislao Carcereri, Fr. Robert Jordan, and Fr. Jean Jacques Eichinger who died in 1988 during his mandate. Such a glorious past deserves thanks and a renewed sense of gratitude to God who has been the source of the birth and the development of your Province.

The Current Situation of the Province of France

At the present time, your Province has 18 religious, many of whom are elderly and need care. There are also two young religious from Burkina Faso who offer you their support. You also enjoy the privilege of having the oldest religious brother of the Order, Fr. Peter Grayer. With his 96 years, he offers us an excellent example of how to grow old with dignity and elegance. It is admirable to observe his active participation in the life of the community of Bry-sur-Marne where he makes his contribution to fraternal life, taking part in the various spiritual activities and transmitting serenity notwithstanding his age.

You have four communities and four works managed by *associations* of a Camillian spirit. This managerial style of works has relieved you of the worry of their direct administration and allows you to concentrate on direct Camillian ministry, even though some of you are members of the Governing Council of each one of these works.

At the community of Bry-sur-Marne we experienced the moments of suffering of two religious – this was a strong human experience which involved our feelings. This is a particular situation which requires constant sensitivity and care. Together we exchanged views and discussed whether it is possible to identify a solution to this situation. We suggest that specialised (canonist) consultation could help to define the pathway that is the least painful for everyone. We are aware that human life is marked by lights and shadows; we lived a moment of *shadow* with you in prayer in the awareness and the hope that there will be light at the end of the tunnel.

It is important for you to cultivate an increasing sense of unity, dialogue and sharing in your lives together. As we are reminded by St. Paul, we are called to bear the burdens of each other. We remember that one of our religious brothers during this visit observed that we should pass from being an ‘autocratic church to being a self-critical community’. This also applies to our religious communities and this conversion would work to the benefit of everyone.

We spoke about the mission of Davougon in the Republic of Benin. This mission – whose ownership and management passed from the Vice-Province of Benin-Togo to your Province – is experiencing a new dynamic, new challenges and new problems: conflicts must always be faced up to with wisdom, prudence and transparency so as always to promote the dynamic of dialogue. As regards this mission, one must recognise the support given by your Province to Grégoire Ahongbonon, with the presence at his side of a religious – Fr. Thierry De Rodellec.

Grégoire Ahongbonon is an aggregate member of the Order who is engaged in a pioneering and prophetic activity. Called the *friend of the mad*, he is involved above all else in convincing the families of these people to free them so that they can go away with him. They are then received into institutions that he has been creating for these patients for some time. Gradually, with very simple pharmacological treatment, together with a milieu rich in love and dense with

respect, these people learn to live and work with a basic level of autonomy (*cf. internet: Grégoire 'l'ami des fous'*).

During our stay in your province, we went to the beautiful city of Aix-les-Bains (which is an hour's train journey from Lyons) to visit the family of Marie Christine Brocherieux, the international president of the Lay Camillian Family (LCF). Madame Marie Christine has dedicated the recent past to caring for the health of her husband. We spoke for a long time with her family and shared lunch with them. We noticed in Marie Christine a wish to return to her activity of service for the international Lay Camillian Family. We also discovered the talent of this married couple for painting artistic icons.

From Marie Christine we learnt about the important presence of the Lay Camillian Family in Bry-sur-Marne: the group is made up of about twenty members, of well-wishers, and of supporters through prayer (amongst whom the women religious of Chambéry). A new group of five members is being formed with Simone. The LCF in France, led by Monsieur Eric Dieudonné (the president), is accompanied spiritually by Fr. Alexander Balma and is well organised.

It meets on average once a month. It is involved in the translation of texts for formation not only for its members but also to help the members of the Lay Camillian Family of Francophone Africa. It organises two spiritual retreats every year. Through mediation and the service of Christian, the vice-president, the LCF took part in, and offered its contribution to, the *Synode diocésain de Créteil* in the section for pastoral care in health, whose theme was suggested specifically by their action: 'with him, taking care of each other'.

The Lay Camillian Family in France is very active at Lourdes and offers the fruit of its Lent sacrifices to missions, praying with the rosary with reflections in a hospital every last Saturday of the month and organising and sharing lunches when there are important events: on Christmas eve with the religious community of Bry-sur-Marne, and on the feast day of St. Camillus of 14 July, with all the associations that work in hospitals.

Reference should also be made to the fact that the LCF in France last year experienced a community desert with the religious of the community of Bry-sur-Marne, suffering from it indirectly. Feeling a part of a great family with the religious, it perceived immediately the need to pray in particular for the Camillian community. Despite the many difficulties that it encounters, the Lay Camillian Family lives its identity and its service well and envisages also being able to spread around our communities in order to hold high the torch of the charism of Mercy which was received from Camillus de Lellis.

What is the Future of your Province?

What hope are you embracing, following the suggestion made by Pope Francis? What does 'waking up the world' mean for us, according to the words reiterated by the Pope and taken up by the Vatican Congregation for Consecrated Life as the title for one of its documents that was drawn up looking forward to the special year dedicated to consecrated life? In the dialogue and exchange of views that we had with you, we observed your unanimous awareness of the fact that you are few in number, a low number, and almost all of you are elderly with few possibilities of development at the level of vocations. You are rightly worried about the future and some of you emphasised that it is unlikely that in the future young men will want to join an elderly community. This reminds us of what the Superior General Fr. Calisto Vendrame said to our religious brothers of a Camillian Provincial community: "you are concerned about planning your funeral!" Certainly our death will also arrive, but in the meantime we are encouraged not to give up, not to place obstacles in the way of Providence which can always surprise us. We must not lose hope; let us try not to have hope stolen from us (*cf. the message of Pope Francis to young people*).

We discussed this subject for a long time and it seems to us in practical terms that the future of this charism can survive in France through intense sharing with lay people such as the Lay Camillian Family. We observe that the LCF is to be found only in Bry-sur-Marne where there is a

good sharing of the charism with the religious community. Is it not possible to extend this experience to the other three works of ours (Arras, Lyons and Théoule-sur-Mer) and/or elsewhere, even where there are works that are not directly Camillian? Is this not perhaps a way of making the Camillian charism, which is so much appreciated in France, survive? Today as a part of the dynamic of the emphasis of the Church on openness to the laity, do not the support and the development of the Lay Camillian Family emerge as the only hope for your future, speaking in human terms?

Lastly, during the course of the final meeting of our visit with the Provincial Council we invited the Province to take into consideration at its next Provincial Chapter the debate – for you and for other Provinces of the Order – about returning to the status of a Delegation (this is a new reality) or perhaps the Province has another suggestion to make. To end, we wish to thank all of you, and each one of you, for the welcome that you gave us.

May the Virgin Mary, our Heavenly Mother, St. Camillus de Lellis, the founder and protector of our Order, and the Blessed Luigi Tezza, the founder of the French Province of the Ministers of the Sick, continue to intercede for you so that you receive the light that is needed to live this moment of your history and so that you have the strength to walk forward bearing authentic witness to the charism of merciful love!

Rome, 15 April 2016

Father Leocir PESSINI
Superior General

Father Laurent ZOUNGRANA
Vicar General