**The Foundation of the Congregation**

**of the Missionaries of the Holy Family**

**INTRODUCTION**

Dear confreres! At this time when we celebrate the 125th anniversary of the founding of the Congregation of the Missionaries of the Holy Family, let me share with you the essential elements of the Foundation. It will be a bit long, but take this opportunity to make known to you all, first of all to our young people in formation, to adapt these essential elements for the future according to the circumstances in which we work.

With the foundation of his work, P. Berthier was to respond to a real need of his era. *"My experience, after 30 years of missionary activity, he says, has given me to meet in Christian families, young people between 14 e30 years, intelligent and religious, eager to devote himself to the missions, but for which there was no institution that could prepare them, because the existing apostolic schools did not admit those candidates who had more than 14 years, unless they have already done some literary studies."* (Document for the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, on 26 March 1896).

30 years of missionary activity, of which P. Berthier speaks, begin with his work in La Salette. So, he thought already very early on that foundation. But he was waiting for a sign of Providence before launching on such a venture.

This sign was from Cardinal Langénieux, Archbishop of Reims, who invited him in 1894 to give a retreat to his priests. P. Berthier was for the opportunity to talk about his project to the Cardinal. The Cardinal encouraged him and promised to speak of it to Pope Leo XIII; what he was not delayed to make! In fact, a few months later, P. Berthier wrote to the Cardinal: *"I well received your letter, posted in Paris, it consoled me ...". "The Superior General has understood that the Pope has authorized me to undertake this work ... and allowed me to devote myself to the search for candidates; and I will think of it. But I cannot point out anything at the moment with the latter without explain in what this work consists and what it is if one engages entering it.*” (Letter dated December 4, 1894).

A year later, the Cardinal detailed in an official document the purpose of the work, as follows:

"*P. Berthier presented to the Pope in writing the usefulness of his Institute, which aims to bring together young people of different nations who could not do their studies with a prospect to become missionaries, but who have always still desire: if it so to prepare the latter to the apostolic life, first through studies of age-appropriate, following a regular novitiate, then for the pronounce of simple vows, and finally for the classic studies of philosophy and theology. The Institute would have its own independence as befits an objective of such importance. Its members will consecrate themselves first to found houses in different regions and countries where they accept of young people of a certain age, but that they feel increasingly called to an apostolic life; later, when their number will be developed well, present them to the Propagation of the Faith to be sent on a mission.*" (Document of December 25, 1895).

We have here all the elements concerning the purpose of the work of P. Berthier, that is the foundation of an independent religious institution with the aim of welcoming young people of different nationalities, who have reached a certain age and in poor condition, with intention to train them in various houses of the Institute in the missions.

In a letter written by P. Berthier in that time to Mr. Bidaut, a benefactor, about admission of a young man, it is very clear what the purpose of his work. The young man wanted to go as a missionary in Bulgaria. P. Berthier wrote to Mr. Bidaut asking him to pay a visit to this young man to ask "where did he study, if he knows Latin, if he wants to become religious, if he wants to commit to the formation of young people, late vocations, what is the purpose of my work, that he is not allowed him for a long time anchors to devote himself to Bulgaria. Tell him well that I do not accept anyone who does not want to devote themselves to the development of this work "(Berthier Archive: letter of 1896).

The first concern of P. Berthier was to respond to the desire of young people, to welcome them in a house of formation adapted to their age. Only after this first objective will be achieved it could devote to the foreign missions. But for a long time you will have to focus on the receiving and training of these young people. So the bishops of Canada, Switzerland and Poland have learned from the part of P. Berthier who is not a question, before 1909 in their dioceses to open houses of formation par late vocations.

One obstacle to the engagement of the work came from the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith when P. Berthier, using the intervention of the Bishop of Bois-le-Duc, asked the Cardinal Prefect of this Congregation, Cardinal Ledochowski, permission to retain the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel of the barrack. The Cardinal, no doubt unaware of this new foundation, he answered without blooms, who did not understand the whole meaning of this work; but if it is, as it seems, a college of elders priests and without more forces that would like to go to the foreign missions, it is a work that does not make sense nor useful. " (Letter dated February 28, 1896, P. Berthier archive). And the Cardinal asks the Bishop to guide the zeal of this priest to some more useful things and to dissuade to completely abandon what he started. In response, by the intermediary of the bishop of Bois le Duc, P. Berthier sent to the Propagation of the Faith a detailed report about the purpose and history of his work.

Cardinal Ledochowski responds to the Bishop that he can establish this college at the service of his diocese and gives him permission to keep the Blessed Sacrament. How much it is up to what the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, it does not have to be accorded the privileges, because it does not recognize this work. (the ratio is 5 March 1896, the Cardinal's answer of 13 March 1896).

"*This outcome saddens me*" (letter dated 17 March 1896), P. Berthier wrote to the bishop and asks the Cardinal Langénieux, who had presented to the pope purpose of the work and received some encouragement, what had to do now. The Cardinal encouraged him to continue and put everything on the lack of information. In Rome, the documents were not sent by the State Secretariat to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.

P. Berthier followed the advice of Cardinal Langénieux and wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Propagation of the Faith: in it he describes all the steps in particular with Pope Leo XIII; He exposes again the different elements of the purpose of the work which were presented to the Pope who had approved and for which it had received very clear encouragement. (Letter dated February 26, 1896). After these clarifications, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith authorized the founder to continue his work.

However, the question of purpose back on the carpet when in 1903 P. Berthier asks the Propagation of the Faith the "Decretum Laudis". The Congregation first asks for a revision of the Constitutions according to the norms of canon law. Cardinal Gotti, the new Prefect of this Congregation, asked the Founder to describe again the purpose of his work and said among others: owing to the age of candidates is it opportune for them to make him make religious vows? ... send them on missions? Would it not be better, from the point of psychological, let them make a simple promise, as is the case for "the Foreign Missions of Paris?"

And the cardinal adds, "these candidates are still well suited to conduct the necessary studies in regard to the priesthood?". These are points that make trouble for the Propagation of the Faith, and the Congregation asked of clarifications. (Document of 06.06.1903).

To these controversial issues, P. Berthier responds the following: "All wants to religious life and have only one desire **to consecrate their lives to the Lord** for offer themselves for apostolate with more safety and effectiveness: it would be contrary to their expectations of having to give up religious life to which they aspire ... are all in their prime, the major part is master of several living languages, what can only be of benefit to missionaries ..." (Document of 06.06.1903).

After that, P. Berthier received from the "Propagation of the Faith" an encouragement equivalent to "Decretum Laudis", to say the P. Perrin, the general superior of the Missionaries of Our Lady of Salette .

If you can say, therefore, that the thoughts of the Founder concerning the purpose of his work have not changed from the beginning to the end. The first purpose (the objective) was to multiply the late vocations and form them ... Shortly before his death, the Founder wrote again to the bishop of Bois-le-Duc who asked for the "Propagation of the Faith" a Report on account of the work: "*22 candidates were ordained priests; there are just enough for the two apostolic schools we have. As we intended to found other schools of its kind for late vocations, we thank God, there are still numerous, well we need more priests to carry out the plan of the work that the Sovereign Pontificate blessed ...; to find these vocations so we can increase the number of missionaries, this is the main purpose of the work; and experience tends to show more and more that it is really a practical purpose*." (Letter of the month of July 1908).

After this historical summary covering the formulation of the goal of the Institute, it may be said that nothing was changed since the drafting of the Constitutions of 1895. The number 16 says: "*This Institute has as a special purpose of training missionaries, and multiply the number through the apostolate of vocations, especially late one. This is the reason for its existence and is also the most effective means to work for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.”*

The number 18 clearly says that the missionaries can serve missions in Catholic countries and even administer parishes provided they do not forget the main purpose of the work, we know the promotion of apostolic vocations.

Therefore you can say that the goal of the Institute consists of three elements:

- Religious life,

- The promotion of the "late" vocations "and (or) those from" poor conditions "

- The missions.

These three elements are of equal importance: remove one is to change the very essence of the Institute wanted by the Father Founder.

You must not forget that at the time of the Founder existed of establishments who admitted "late" and "poor condition” vocations; there were also others who were preparing "missionaries". In his book "Le Pretre" (p 225, 4th edition) Father Berthier also indicated of such houses. If in spite of that, from the beginning, P. Berthier wanted a specific work, which projects were subjected to Cardinal Langénieux and have received encouragement from Leo XIII, it was because the eyes of P. Berthier, these establishments were not in a position to receive all these vocations and to respond to the wishes of the latter; or these houses were not preparing the missions, or if you were addressing only those of France, or, and is the most significant point, did not constitute religious life ... so for P. Berthier, it was clear that his work was to form at the same time of "religious" and "missionaries".

Early and rapid death of P. Founder left a work in development and construction. P. Berthier has not seen the departure of its first missionaries nor the formation in other countries, sustained that he had planned for 1909.

His disciples had to adapt to new situations: other institutions admitted the "late vocations and poor condition" to lead them to the religious and missionary life.

The project of P. Berthier had won prejudices and skepticism in encounter such vocations. In purpose to the booklet "The Work of the Holy Family" P. Berthier wrote again to each benefactor "*it is a short note in which you could not say all, but I hope one thing enough so that readers are reconciled to the idea of the late vocations* ..." You can say that this objective has been achieved.

Today, in our old Christian countries, the situation is again completely different: no longer the vocations of "poor condition " to consult, but rather "poverty of vocations." It means that we live in a secularized society, in which there is not only a great religious ignorance, but also a real indifference to the Christian faith. And society in which the consumption of goods of all kinds took the first level. The spirit of solidarity and responsibility in front of others has declined a lot and in front of the institutions rather distrust reigns.

***In this situation, what can you tell us P. Berthier?***

Based on these three elements that characterize the purpose of the foundation of P. Berthier, I would like to offer some suggestions. First, it seems to me that the most important is good to reflect the word "charism"; because at the beginning of the foundation there was a "charism" whose responsibility not only rests to the Founder, but also to all the "disciples" and, as the same P. Berthier says, "to all whom the Holy Spirit leads to this work ", because it is true that the Holy Spirit especially leads everyone to this congregation.

Each member has his own charism, different from that of the Founder. But all the gifts find themselves in the purpose of continuing, in which all members of the Institute strive to get into the Founder's view and give shape to his own projects.

Charism is not a talent "lifeless", that one puts into the ground to keep it. The guidelines for the mutual relations between bishops and religious says in No. 11 of "Mutuae Relationes" (15.5.1987): "*the charism of the Founder seems to have a certain experience of the Spirit which is transmitted to the disciples, who live similar, which conserve it, they will deepen and develop to the same extent in which grows the Body of Christ grows constantly, too.*"

The charism is to develop as a plant that comes out of corn, sprout, and becomes something entirely new. Each of us is responsible for the gift of the Holy Spirit, before the Church, before those who come after us, because they have the right to know the peculiarities of the Institute.

A real charism is prophetic, not in the sense that the Founder would have predicted the future, but what he has recognized, in the light of faith, the Lord's call that he received through "the signs of the times" and also in need of his era. He acknowledged at the same time that charism has to remain after his death by his disciples.

We know the charism of our Founder through his letters, writings, constitutions, and official documents with the aim of his work and that were decisive for the approval of its foundation.

We also know this charism through the spirituality of the Founder, that he comes from the best writers of his time, and he himself says, for example, those that are called "French school [RB1]" (Bérulle, Olier, St. John Eudes ) with their very special devotion for the Eucharist and the Sacred Heart of Jesus by St. Vincent de Paul, by St. Alphonsus Liguori, by Sta. Teresa of Ávila ... his devotion to Mary has been influenced by P . Giraud, his master of novices. The devotion to the Holy Family that has developed well over the last century owes much to the exhortations of Pope Leo XIII in the field.

You should note also that P. Berthier took the spirituality of the Holy Family and the La Salette message in their missionary dimension: these are all is the typical, personal. And this is added to the call coming from the needs of the Church and society of his time, the message of La Salette, the intervention of Pope Leo XIII. Others have taken on their behalf other way the calls of their time. P. Berthier responded with his own charism: he self devoted to "small", the "despised", to increase the number of those who will have to transmit the message of Our Lord of La Salette

***How to actualize the three enumerated elements that characterize the charism of the foundation of P. Berthier?***

1. **Religious life**

It is always actual. But we must emphasize the aspect that P. Berthier wanted for our religious life. He would not do by his disciples; of "monks"; he wrote to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith: "*Everyone wants to live the religious life and tend to consecrate their lives to the Lord as a means to exercise their apostolate with more efficacy and safety*."

Our religious life is, therefore, in relation to the apostolate. The efficacy and safety mentioned by P. Berthier, he understands them not as human resources; he understands them in the manner of St. Paul who preached the Word of God with effectiveness and safety.

In truth, through the Apostle Christ proclaim himself; the apostle is sent only serving the only Messenger, the Missionary of His Father.

P. Berthier reminds in No. 13 of his Constitutions and also in the preface of his book "The worship and imitation of the Holy Family." From his relationship with Christ he draws the strength necessary for his apostolate. In his booklet "on exercises" he says: "*Prayer is the most effective means of personal sanctification, the largest requirement of the priest, the most effective source for the conversion of sinners and the salvation of souls."*

Our religious life must be a path that unites us more and more to Christ and to our missionary model, the Holy Family. As religious we do not have to look first of the methods and recipes, but always our personal conversion that must unite us relentlessly ever more closely to the Gospel.

**2-** **Increasing the number of missionary vocations**

At the time of P. Berthier, the only "hierarchy" sent mandate to announce the Gospel. There was a strict separation between the priest and the layman. According to the ecclesiology of the time, it was incomprehensible to entrust some ministry to the laity. But to this day, Pope John Paul II, in the post-synodal letter "Christi Fideles Laici" published in the feast of the Holy Family, the 12.30.1988, speaks of an authentic service of the laity: there are ministries that flows by baptism and confirmation. (n ° 23)

There are no exclusions from the offices and services in the Church. The laity are not the bridge between the Church and society; they are the Church itself. Their "being in the world" is "being in the world of the Church, and the Church as a whole must exist in this world."

"Gradually," or "slowly" said Cardinal A. LORSCHEIDER after the synod on the vocation and mission of the laity, "*we have surpassed the concept of a laity that is specially dedicated to what is in the world; it is better understood that it is expected the whole Church, because the Church as a whole is sent to this world and to this world, even if the laity are called to live it in a specific way*.”

The essential purpose of the formation of the laity is to auto-support also to discover their vocation and personal mission to help themselves realize it in their everyday life.

Nowadays, P. Berthier would not fail to take up the pen to help lay people to become aware of their responsibilities, train them in this regard, as it has for the laity of his time.

**3- The mission**

"Christi Fideles" focuses closely on the union between "mission" and "communion"; it is said: "*Communion and Mission ... penetrate and condition one another; Communion is both the source and fruit of mission; and communion is missionary and sending (the mission) made for communion*" (No. 13). Under the word "communion" one means the mystery of the Church to the extent that the members in which are bound to Christ and to one another as branches to vine tree.

In my opinion, this view corresponds to everything from the missionary spirituality of the Holy Family as intended by P. Berthier. He writes in the book "The worship and imitation of the Holy Family", "The Holy Family is the source and model of every apostolate".

In the Holy Family, communion is perfectly realized. His spirit animates the Church which always tends more towards this "communion". It would not be indicated to explore this aspect of the Holy Family, which corresponds well to what is our "charism", and this especially in our houses of formation and where they give spiritual retreats.

From this perspective we must consider the "new evangelization". "Christi Fideles" says that this "new evangelization" is put as a challenge (is requested) from 'indifference, secularism, atheism reigning in our society, especially in our "first-world" society (this word in relation to the third-world and the fourth-world). And where popular religion still exists, there is a threat of loss to the moral and spiritual level in comparison with the secularization and the development of sects. Therefore, it is imperative everywhere to renew the Christian substance of our society. But this presupposes above all the renewal of Christian substance of the communities living in these countries, in these countries. " (n ° 34).

As we see, the new evangelization is founded on the pastoral care of families and Christian communities. It should not fail to report it! However, alongside this "new evangelization" of the Church's mission has not changed, which is to proclaim the Gospel to all those who do not yet know Jesus Christ.

This mission must be understood and implemented in a spirit of greater solidarity among all members of the Church. "In our day, the Church - on the grounds of Evangelization - the Church ought to take a big step forward and to begin with a new stage of history in her missionary dynamism ... Those we call "young churches" need of the forces "of the Churches elderly"; those old churches need the witness and the impulse of the younger, the way that the one and the other venturing alternates ". (n ° 35)

We can ascertain how much our personal and community life becomes a unit in this inseparable bond that constitutes the charism, spirituality, mission. Our relationship such as MSF to apostolic service of the Church is undoubtedly modest ... nevertheless, evident in the growth of the Church and Kingdom of God. We remain firm, then, our objective: "As sons of the Venerable Father Jean Berthier, one family, one mission ".

P. Patrice Ralaivao MSF