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Bicentennial of the Birth of Our Founder, Fr. Théophile Verbist *Message from the Superior General*

Dear confreres,

There was rejoicing in the house of Guillaume Verbist on June 12, 1823. His wife Catherine Troch had given birth to twins Théophile and Edmond. And it was Théophile who would contribute a lot to the revival of the missionary work of the Church in the nineteenth century.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the situation of the missions was disastrous. This was caused by several factors. We can mention the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773 and the French Revolution in 1789. Only about three hundred missionaries were left in Africa, America, and Asia. By the year 1820, a religious revival was developing in France. Very soon, it also acquired a missionary dimension. Some Belgian priests became involved in missionary work in North America. Later, Jesuits, Redemptorists, the Oblates, and the Sisters of Notre-Dame de Namur followed. New missionary associations and congregations were founded, among them the Congregation of Scheut.

In letter 319, written on November 25, 1866, and addressed to the Holy Childhood in Brussels, our Founder mentions that the realization of his missionary vocation owes its first inspiration to the Holy Childhood.¹ Our Founder was for several years chaplain of a community of Sisters of Notre-Dame de Namur in Brussels. The fact that he must have received news from the Sisters who had left for the missions in the United States was another source of inspiration for his missionary vocation and plans. However, probably the most important source of his missionary plans was his closeness to the Lord. "According to an oral tradition of the sisters, their chaplain conceived his plan for a missionary foundation whilst praying before the Blessed Sacrament in their chapel."²

The Congregation was to work for the salvation of souls and to take care of orphans in China. In a letter to his sister Élisabeth, he mentions that he could now realize his goal as a priest: for the love of the good Lord, work for the happiness of his creatures.³

¹ Daniël Verhelst, Hyacint Daniëls et Nestor Pycke, eds. *La Congrégation du Cœur Immaculé de Marie (Scheut). Édition critique des sources*. Tome II B. *La correspondance de Théophile Verbist et de ses Compagnons 1866-1869*. Leuven: Institut Ferdinand Verbiest, K.U. Leuven, 2007, p. 1060: "Associé pendant quelques années, Mesdames, à vos pieux travaux et richement récompensé par Dieu dans l'organisation d'une Œuvre qu'il a béni et qui doit son inspiration première à la Sainte Enfance..."

² Nestor Pycke. *Théophile Verbist's Adventure*. Leuven: Ferdinand Verbiest Institute, K.U. Leuven, 2009, p. 33.

³ Daniël Verhelst et Hyacint Daniëls, eds. *La Congrégation du Cœur Immaculé de Marie (Scheut). Édition critique des sources*. Tome II A. *La correspondance de Théophile Verbist et de ses Compagnons 1865-*

I believe this is still what a CICM missionary is called to do: to minister to people out of love for God and the happiness of God's children. We may do this by engaging in a variety of activities conceived in prayer and in line with the dream of our Founder and an updated understanding of doing mission.

Mission can be described as showing Jesus' loving face to people. How do we, members of the CICM Congregation, do this today? Like Jesus, we are called to oppose evil in all its many forms. We will promote justice and see to it that the rights of God's children are respected. Closely linked to this is protecting the house of humanity. We live in God's beautiful garden, and we should spare no effort to keep it beautiful and make it even more beautiful.

Another way of loving God's children is respecting their religious convictions. We will also try to enter into their religious experience. I am convinced that it is difficult to do so if we ourselves do not enter deeply into our very own Christian faith. Do we meditate on the writings of our great Christian mystics? I have the firm conviction that the great Catholic theologian Karl Rahner was right to have claimed: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all." He meant that Christians will either have a dynamic, immediate, and intimate relationship with God, or they will be bereft of faith. Faith and missionary ministry need the nurture that comes from encounters with the Divine and experiences of the Holy. Living in the presence of our Lord should be the basis of all that we do and say.

Anthony de Mello describes the role of spiritual practices in this brief exchange between a wise teacher and a disciple.

Disciple: "Is there anything I can do to make myself enlightened or a 'mystic'?"

Teacher: "As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning."

Disciple: "Then of what use are the spiritual exercises you prescribe?"

Teacher: "To make sure you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise."

I would still like to mention another way of loving God's people. Do I enter into the culture of the people among whom I am living? Do I eat their food? Do I read their literary works? Do I try to enter into their way of thinking? Let us consider these words from St. Paul: "*Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.*"⁴ Thus, Paul limited his own rights and freedoms in order to connect and reach people with the Gospel of Jesus.

We, members of the CICM Congregation, are not in the first place parish priests in another country. But, like our Founder, we are called to show Jesus' loving face to God's children who have never met the Lord and maybe will never become his followers. Am I ready to go where I am most needed? Do I accept an invitation of my Superiors to take up a more challenging missionary task? Our Founder and hundreds of our confreres did not hesitate to be missionaries in challenging circumstances. Hostile government and people and sicknesses only strengthened their missionary zeal.

1866. Leuven : Institut Ferdinand Verbiest, K.U. Leuven, 2007, letter 277, p. 854: "Il me semble qu'ici du moins je puis atteindre le but que je me suis proposé en devenant prêtre: travailler avec fruit par amour du bon Dieu au bonheur de ses créatures."

⁴ 1 Cor 9,19-20

Dear confreres, June 12, 2023, is the 200th birth anniversary of our Founder, Father Théophile Verbist. Let us enter our Bicentennial celebration, which will run from November 28, 2021, Feast of our Congregation, until November 28, 2023, with gratitude and joy for God's faithfulness. More importantly, let us emulate the missionary enthusiasm of our predecessors. It is the most beautiful gift we can give to our Founder Théophile Verbist on the Bicentennial of his birth. Let us take this Bicentennial opportunity to immerse ourselves in the sources of our charism so that we may reflect upon, embrace, and embody it in all that we do today and tomorrow. Let us firmly recommit to imitating him who left the comfort of his native Belgium to work in favor of the poor abandoned children and their happiness in this world.

Likewise, the Bicentennial of the Birth of Théophile Verbist is a reason to give thanks to God. We thank God for his life, his missionary ardor, and his charism. We give thanks for the foundation of our Congregation. This Bicentennial affords us a time of Grace for the more than 750 living members who make up this great religious family. For all of us, this Bicentennial aims at being not just a time of celebration. It is a valuable opportunity offered us to look back with gratitude, to look at the present with confidence, and to work for the future of our mission with the energy and novelty of the Gospel, living the mission entrusted to us with renewed vigor and conviction on behalf of the abandoned, the orphans, the youth, and especially those most in need, even amid sometimes unsettling happenings like the current pandemic.

This event should also evoke the memory of so many confreres who heroically gave their lives for this missionary ideal in the most challenging and extreme conditions in the world. We should continue to keep the memory of their sacrifice alive!

In 2023, we will celebrate our 16th General Chapter. Following the example of our Founder, I appeal to you, my dear brothers, to keep alive the missionary zeal, the spirit of charity, unity, obedience, patience, evangelical simplicity, and true friendship with God and one another. Everything else is worldliness. The flame of God's greater glory still spreads through us today, burning away all complacency and filling us with an ardor that focuses us, which we have within, which focuses us and expands us, makes us grow even as our number diminishes. Therefore, like Théophile Verbist, let us reach out, in mission, with the same sense of commitment as Jesus, the Lord of the Mission.

With this message, I now declare the Celebration of the Bicentenary of Father Théophile Verbist's Birth open.

Happy Bicentenary to all.



Rome, November 24, 2021

CHARLES PHUKUTA

Charles Phukuta, CICM
Superior General