

**November 28, 2021**

***Readings: Phil 2, 1-11; Mt 28, 16 b-20***

Homily by Jozef Matton, CICM

General councilor

On the occasion of the Foundation Day of our Congregation (November 28, 2021), the Superior General wrote a message to all confreres of the Congregation declaring open the celebration of the bicentenary of the birth of our Founder Father Théophile Verbist in 1823.

On this day, 159 years ago, the missionary adventure of Théophile Verbist officially began. On November 28, 1862, Cardinal Sterckx, Archbishop of Mechelen, signed the first approved and accepted statutes. Verbist was 39 years old.

It became an eventful story, with its ups and downs, its joys and sorrows, a story of God and people, of God with his people.

Théophile Verbist, in the circumstances of that time, with the ideas and visions of that time, made the mission that Jesus gave to the twelve more real.

Just as in today's Gospel, it began with a small group. In August 1865, only four of them went on a mission to China.

These four confreres took to heart the mission that Jesus had entrusted to the apostles.

Over the years, some 5,500 other young people expressed their desire to follow Jesus in their turn as religious missionaries in our Congregation, following the example of Verbist.

In the old booklet of our Congregation, we can find a lot of information about the history of our Congregation. For the most part, they are the true stories of confreres, written by confreres, some more romantic and colorful than others.

But these confreres, I think, wanted to write about how men, members of the Congregation, believed in and dedicated themselves to an ideal and were even willing to sacrifice much for that missionary ideal, no matter what the context.

And when we pray every day for the deceased confreres, we also know that for many of them, the missionary adventure did not last long: illness, war, etc. have been the lot of many confreres, sometimes even very young.

I still remember that several years ago, in a short document we gave the layperson we appointed as responsible for our community in Kortrijk, we tried to describe and give him an idea of who we are as CICM religious missionary and what he may expect from us and also what we expect from him.

We wrote, among other things, that ***“we expect flexibility and a lot of understanding for, despite the fact that we, as religious missionaries strive for an ideal, we often fail in its realization: we are weak idealists.”***

We have experienced ourselves, I think, that the history of our Congregation is a history of people, for people and, above all, with people. And where people are involved, there are failures and mistakes. We are all human beings.

This means that in addition to beautiful achievements, there are also failures and mistakes. There is brotherly solidarity and, unfortunately, narcissistic traits, tensions and quarrels sometimes, but also forgiving and forgetting and continuing together the same way.

In his letter to the Philippians, Saint Paul indicates that being a Christian, living as a Christian, and bearing witness as a Christian includes humility and humanity.

Jesus himself took on his condition as a human being, but he remained faithful to his commitment in all his humanity.

In those almost 160 years, confreres, men of flesh and blood, have tried in all their humanity, in all their strength and weakness, to bear

witness to this divine and human Jesus, in the first place by being people among people and with people. The Superior General wrote on this in his above-mentioned letter.

Towards a fruitful future, the Congregation and the various Provinces will have to make choices, let go things and dare to take new initiatives, make choices.

It would be a pity to be so preoccupied with the internal problems of the Congregation that we no longer see the missionary challenges that surround us or have the strength to respond to them. Throughout the history of our Congregation, confreres have never been afraid of taking on new challenges.

In our Congregation, there are currently about 765 confreres who continue to build and write this history, contributing to what CICM is today.

When Jesus sent his apostles on mission, he could never have foreseen that it would become what it is today.

But these twelve people proclaimed and witnessed this Good News with their lives. In the course of history, groups of people have emerged in the church who have wanted to take some aspect of the mission more intensively to heart, regardless of the circumstances or situations, but reading the signs of the times.

CICM is such a group that has taken to heart this last call of Christ and has set out on the road. Verbist did not foresee what CICM is today either. For example, that CICM confreres from different countries and cultures are present in the four corners of the world.

May we continue to work in the same spirit and with the same inspiration as Verbist, each according to his abilities and talents, to give a concrete face to the dream of a new heaven and a new earth for people in the world.

But for this, we also need a spiritual renewal. Good structures and much money are not enough.

Honestly, it is very painful to see today that personal ambition, personal enrichment, power, and influence are sometimes more

important than the corporate commitment to the mission and congregational solidarity for some confreres. As a result, the three religious vows have lost all their value and religious inspiration.

Dear brothers, CICM is not like that. The future of CICM cannot be like that, even though we all have our weaknesses.

Within some weeks or months, the Superior General will write another letter to all confreres to convene the 16th Chapter that starts within one year and a half. That is, the General Assembly with the representatives from the different Provinces.

But the Chapter started already for each of us. The theme of the Chapter is: ***Witnessing to the Gospel in a changing world.***

Documents are already sent to help us all to reflect and pray individually and in the community on our mission and the future of the Congregation. We must ask some important and urgent questions, individually and as a congregation as a whole.

- ✓ Is evangelizing in a CICM spirit still our joy?
- ✓ Are we ready for reconciliation on several levels of life?
- ✓ Are we ready to live and engage in an intercultural context that bears witness to the universality of salvation?

I want to finish with a quotation of the letter of our Superior general.

*“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 (...) Like Théophile Verbist, let us reach out, in the mission, with the same sense of commitment as Jesus, the Lord of the Mission.” Amen.*