



BROTHERS OF  
SAINT JOHN

# Message from General Chapter 2022

## **Second session from 11th to 24th October 2022 in Troussures, France**

*The second session of General Chapter 2022 was held from October 11 to 24, 2022 at the Our Lady of Cana Priory, in Troussures, France. It had been five months since the elected brothers from the different vicariates and “pro-provinces” of the Congregation came together for the first session.*

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of this second session, having meditated together on a passage from the 1st Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:9-17), the capitular brothers reflected on the present state of our Community. They underlined the paradox in its current situation: the most visible things in our community are all the consequences of the crisis that we are going through, and yet we still see real apostolic and fraternal vitality, as well as the fruits of reforms undertaken.

Throughout the General Chapter, we exchanged varied and lucid opinions on our history and on abuse cases without concession, enjoying great freedom in our discussions. The Chapter was thus able to appreciate the large scope of the work of renewal that has already been accomplished. Encouragements were received from the Church through the intermediary of Archbishop Eric de Moulins-Beaufort and from Bishop Benoît Rivière, as well as from the different experts who have been supporting our work and discussions.

Some of the topics discussed during this second session, such as the governmental decentralization and new organization in formation, had already been addressed during the first session. The intersessional period had allowed the commissions to gather additional information. Thanks to this work, the members of the Chapter were able to develop their reflections and come to decisions. Other topics currently being worked on in the Congregation were also discussed.

## **I. Past, Present and Future**

### A. Interdisciplinary Commission

General Chapter 2019 noted that the historical roots of the abuses committed in the Community go back to long before our foundation. It therefore created a commission with the task of finding the reasons for abuse in the Family of Saint John, in connection with the personal past of Fr. M.-D. Philippe. This group included brothers and experts from outside the Community tasked with carrying out historical, theological, psychological and systemic research. Its work has allowed for a better understanding of what has happened and has thus contributed to the ongoing reform. The conclusions of the commission will be made public soon in a report. Here are some salient points from this report:

- Historical section: The commission confirms that there is a link between Father M.-D. Philippe's past, his teaching, his grave acts and the abuses committed by brothers. The numerous testimonies show that, through his multiple roles as teacher, spiritual director, confessor and later as founder and

Prior General, Father M.-D. Philippe bears central responsibility in the development of a culture of abuse.

- Theological section: The commission brought to light on the one hand the justifications given for the abuse and, on the other hand, how these justifications found support in certain aspects of Fr. M.-D. Philippe's teaching, which actually contains omissions, imbalances and sometimes even deviated perspectives. This doctrine has thus contributed to the clouding of people's consciences. In situations of spiritual ascendancy, having recourse to this teaching allowed abusers to lead their victims into a state of confusion and to incite them to abdicate their own reflection. Victims ended up accepting acts their conscience would normally have led them to refuse.

One crux of this toxic doctrinal system is a distorted conception of the Holy Spirit's action. Trust placed in those persons who present themselves as instruments of the Spirit led them at times to abdicate their own thinking and their prudence. It is thus that what were actually intrinsically evil acts came to be accepted as purported acts of charity or of friendship.

- Psychological and systemic section: Developing the way in which the abuse contaminated the community structure, Dr Dominique Struyf, child psychiatrist and systemic therapist, showed that strengths were tragically mixed together with harmful elements (idealistic beliefs with no connection to concrete practice, absence of a system of sanctions, etc.) in the history of the Congregation. Today, renewal requires the continued identification and purification of these toxic elements. In order to achieve this, the Congregation must rely on its genuine strengths and creativity. The very dynamism of this process, that mobilizes us to come to terms with our past, testifies to this vitality. Hope for the future is rooted in this dynamism.

### B. Forgiveness Commission

During the first session the capitular brothers had begun to study the conditions necessary for the Community to make a sincere act to request forgiveness from victims of abuse committed by brothers. We deepened our reflection on this during the second session: how can we ensure that all the members of the Community can take this step in truth? It has become apparent that the Congregation must continue to realize more deeply the gravity of the abuse that has been committed:

- It must never be forgotten that abuse a brother commits upon a victim, since it is an invasion of the latter's intimacy, leaves that victim deeply scarred. For each victim, there is a before and an after.
- In this reflection process, it became clear that we need to look at brothers' past experience among themselves. Everyone was invited to reflect on how they themselves had suffered from the system that led to abuse, and how some had become its instruments. Many wounds have been inflicted by brothers upon one another through various forms of abuse (be they spiritual or sexual, abuse of authority, or disrespect towards cultural differences). Chapter members made the choice to undertake among themselves a clarification of truth, allowing everyone to express their pains and requests for forgiveness.

The Congregation wants to persevere in a process of penance and request for forgiveness. The Chapter therefore voted to carry on the work of the Forgiveness Commission.

### C. Doctrinal Commission

Commissioned by General Chapter 2019, the Doctrinal Commission's objectives were to discern the elements in the works of Fr M.-D. Philippe which are not suitable for moral and spiritual formation, dangerous due to their ambiguous or erroneous character, and conducive of deviant behavior. It was composed of two

theologians, from the Dominicans and the Institute of Our Lady of Life, as well as brothers and sisters of St John who did the critical re-reading. It presented to the capitular brothers the results of its work on *Retracing Reality - a philosophical itinerary* (an introduction to philosophy). The commission concluded that this book, which does offer a good pathway towards first philosophy and wisdom, cannot serve as a reference tool for initial formation in ethics, in particular because of its ambiguities which can lead to identifying friendship love with passionate or conjugal love, as well as the highly insufficient explanations of ethical discernment. The complete results of this study will be given to the Priors General of the Family of St John and made available to the brothers and sisters in the near future. The discussion following this presentation confirmed the need for the decentralisation of Fr M.-D. Philippe, as decided at General Chapter 2019.

As a result, General Chapter 2022 voted to extend the decision not to sell his books in our priories.

#### D. Present and future

The Chapter wanted to take several moments to invite each brother to express himself personally on the rich though painful past and the present state of the Congregation, as well as on the challenges that lie ahead. This sharing was a key moment of the Chapter. They gave rise to hope. The capitular brothers hope that all the brothers of the Congregation will be able to experience a similar process.

Recommendations came out of this reflection, for example: to set up a team for listening to brothers who wish to be heard; to study the *Ratio formationis* and the report of the interdisciplinary commission in priories; to work within the provinces on the themes of vocations, caring for one another and for oneself, and the use of each brother's talents; to have a professional historian write the history of the Congregation.

#### E. The meeting with Archbishop Eric de Moulins-Beaufort, Archbishop of Rheims and President of the French Bishops' Conference:

Archbishop Eric de Moulins-Beaufort shared his analysis of the challenges facing the Church in the West due to the changing orientations of a post-modern society. The capitular brothers appreciated this overview which touched on different topics connected with our apostolic life. He spoke about the way the French bishops see our Community and its pathway: on the one hand aghast at what has been revealed, and on the other hand with admiration for the work we have undertaken. The Chapter expresses its gratitude for this encouraging visit.

## **II. Formation**

#### A. Unity and diversity in formation

To seek both unity in formation as well as a diversity of locations means we have to unite various requirements which are pulling in different directions. How can we honor both the need of the brothers to do their initial formation in a language and culture close to their own, and the importance of creating formative communities with qualified formators, offering an experience of interculturality and becoming a living expression of our charism?

In order to answer this question, the capitular brothers drew up a list of fundamental directives which should enlighten all others decisions concerning the organisation of initial formation:

- Primary attention should be given to the good of each brother in formation. This includes taking into account the cultures of origin and the language used for teaching.
- Unity of heart and mind on the subject of our charism should permeate all our formation centres, in particular through the usage of the *Ratio formationis* and the *Ratio studiorum*.

- We need to prioritise and spread out the founding of our formation centres over a period of time.
- The existence of a Studium within the Congregation and which serves its influence as a “living school of philosophy and theology”, is very valuable.

Having established these directives, the Chapter then adopted the following orientations:

- It welcomed positively the request for the foundation in Rome of a generalate college of theology in English as an answer to the specific needs of the brothers from Asia and Europe. The Chapter voted for the preparation of this foundation, asking the Prior General to establish it when the right factors are in place.
- It welcomed motions brought by the pro-province of the Americas proposing to begin the foundation of formation priories in the United States and in Mexico. The objective here is to make it possible for American and Mexican vocations to do their initial formation entirely in their respective countries. The Chapter didn't give statutory status to this considering the fact that, in accordance with the provinces' derogatory Statute (art.24), it now falls to the provinces, with the consent of the Prior general, to erect these priories of formation.

### B. Ratio studiorum

The Chapter familiarised itself with the work done to create a *Ratio studiorum* which states the goal, means and organisation of studies in our Congregation. It highlighted a certain number of points in the intellectual formation which give us life and which we want to pass on to our brothers, no matter where they are formed.

From the discussions on intellectual formation, the capitular brothers also identified the conditions and criteria according to which the formation of the brothers could be carried out in cooperation with other institutes of philosophy and theology.

### C. Ratio formationis

The capitular brothers continued their review of the work of the commission charged with the drafting of our *Ratio formationis* which details the elements of integral and ongoing formation. They paid particular attention to the formation characterised by the charism of the Institute. They praised the progress made with the text which has gained in relevance, clarity and conciseness since the initial version. They supported it with a vote of confidence for the completion of the draft. The final version of the *Ratio formationis* is expected by the end of December 2022 and will then be promulgated by the Prior General.

The promulgation of the *Ratio formationis* will *de facto* repeal the former *Formation charter* (1994) as our *Ratio formationis*. The status of the Charter will still need to be discussed at a future General Chapter.

The Chapter also reflected on the project of a "time of consolidation" for the brothers 10 to 15 years after the end of their initial formation. The Capitular brothers authorized the Prior General to begin experimenting with this idea as soon as the situation of the Congregation permits. This was favorably received by the Chapter. The idea is that brothers will be able to take a break in their apostolic life to follow a 3 to 6 month program. During this time, they will be invited to look back on their first years of assignment in the light of the Gospel and of our own vocation, in order to consolidate what they have learned and to find a new impetus in life and mission.

The Chapter asked the Prior General to establish a commission to define the formation program specific to non-cleric brothers and brother deacons.

#### D. Formation Structures

In accordance with the new orientations on formation, the Chapter has established the “General Head of Formation” (GHF) to replace the “Master of Studies”. Elected by the General Chapter, this brother will have the task of promoting integral formation (human, spiritual, intellectual, apostolic and religious) as a constitutive dimension of our consecrated life. For this reason, and given the importance of his function, he will be a member of the Prior General’s Council.

### **III. Government**

#### A. Commission for Decentralization

General Chapter 2019 heard the growing desire of the brothers to decentralize our government structures so that they would be more conducive to brothers’ participation in decision-making. To this end, “pro-provinces” were created as an experiment. In General Chapter 2022, a derogatory Statute was voted during the first session in order to specify, for the next six years, the ways the Provinces would operate should they be erected. This derogatory Statute is in effect since 22nd October 2022.

The different regions each prepared and presented an analysis of the present state of affairs in their region, in terms of human resources (the brothers needed to cover governing posts, missions and means of formation), the number of vocations and financial autonomy. The capitular brothers thus gained a better view of the challenges, energy and wishes each region has.

Turning to France, the Chapter weighed up the pros and cons of splitting this region by 2 or 3 or not splitting it at all. The capitular brothers decided to erect the three Vicariates of France as a single Province in order to reflect the unity of culture and history, to facilitate assignments, to organize the structures of formation, the pastoral ministry of vocations, the management of the bursar’s office, and finally, in order that the region as a whole might carry the challenges of mission together.

In accordance with the request of the two regional Chapters of North and South Europe, General Chapter 2022 voted to merge the two regions into a single Province of Europe.

Finally, the Chapter voted to erect the provinces of Africa, the Americas, Europe, and France. In accordance with the wishes of the Asia-Oceania Vicarial Chapter, General Chapter 2022 asked the Prior General to erect this vicariate as a “vice-province” so that he might foresee their needs in terms of means required for mission and a sufficient number of formators for the new vocations. For the time remaining until the Provincial chapters, the Prior general has appointed administrators for the provinces and vice-province: brother Jean-Philippe Diouf for the province of Africa, brother John-Michael-Paul for the province of the Americas, brother Ignaz-Maria Ringhofer for the province of Europe, brother Geoffroy-Marie de Beaurepaire for the province of France and brother Justin Lee for the vice-province of Asia-Oceania.

#### B. Foundations: Eyang and Lyon priories

The Province of Africa presented to General Chapter 2022 the St John University Institute which comprises four Institutes of Higher Education and has been founded at the Congregation’s initiative near the city of Yaoundé, Cameroon. The number of students is already high and growing rapidly. This requires the constant presence of brothers in order to run the rectory and chaplaincy. The Chapter therefore voted to found a priory on the Eyang campus, in Obala diocese.

In September 2022, in agreement with Archbishop de Germay, an apostolic house was established in Lyon, France, to accommodate the brothers who are pursuing their studies at the Catholic University of Lyon (UCLy). This house also permits our apostolic involvement in this diocese to continue, despite our departure

from Saint-Jodard. The capitular brothers have validated the foundation of this priory and have decided to attach it to the Province of France.

## **IV. The brothers' life**

### A. Liturgy

The commission for "Liturgical Chant" informed us of the work they have done over the past three years. To start with the commission conducted a survey among the brothers and then did a historical investigation into the origins of the specific directions chosen for our liturgy. They then got liturgical experts involved and finally they consulted with the Roman Dicastery for Divine Worship. The results of all this reveal that, differently to what we thought, the choices the Congregation made (the structure of our offices, the selection and translation of the Psalms and the liturgical calendar) had not been validated by ecclesial authority who are now asking us to conform our liturgy with the law of the Church. The experts' converging reports highlighted that the way in which we adapt melodies to text does not sufficiently respect the French language, that the Psalm and Canticle texts we use are a mixture of different translations, and that hymnes, responses and intercessory prayers have been reduced to a minimum in our liturgical Offices. The survey among brothers showed our attachment to a certain sobriety conducive of contemplation, but that our often dreary way of singing the Office, coupled with the fact that it is a difficult Office to sing, does not lend itself to the participation of the laity.

Keen to find a way out of the dead-end resulting from seeking our liturgical identity in details which set us apart from others, and responding to the commission's recommendations, the capitular brothers voted through the following reforms:

- The Congregation adopts the structure of the Liturgy of the Hours and its four-week distribution of the Psalms.
- The Congregation chooses the texts of the Psalms exclusively from among the translations authorised by the Bishops' Conferences.
- Though grateful for Magdalith's commitment to us and for the quality of her musical work as also for the work of the brothers who assisted her, the Chapter voted to cease the exclusive usage of her compositions in favour of melodies which are easier to sing and more widely known.

A Commission for Liturgical Reform will be appointed to guide this process. It will help each Province and linguistic group as they discern translations, hymns and melodies. This process will last until General Chapter 2025 so that there be the time necessary to coordinate the work among ourselves and with our sisters, should they so wish.

The capitular brothers also voted to better integrate the Instruction *Calendaria particularia* (1970) in the development of our liturgical calendar. This Instruction requires of us to reduce the number of solemnities, feast days of secondary patron saints and memorials proper to our Congregation. On the question of the secondary patrons of the Congregation, the capitular brothers decided that for the time being they will be celebrated according to their rank in the Calendar of the universal Church. The reflection on our choice of one secondary patron saint will continue until the next General Chapter.

### B. Economic evaluation and perspectives

The Covid period, during which the apostolic activities were considerably reduced, could have lead one to think that the financial situation of the Community would have deteriorated. However, thanks to the efforts of all to reduce expenses and to the generosity of our benefactors, our finances have remained in the black.

However, Brother Gaétan, our outgoing General Bursar, indicated that new factors - the war in Ukraine, inflation, the energy crisis - threaten to weaken our finances. For this reason, he reiterated his request for us to be careful in our management of community expenses.

### C. Commission for Health, Old Age and Dependency

We need to anticipate the issues raised by aging. The best preparation is prevention and the maintaining of a sufficient level of physical activity and a healthy lifestyle. The Congregation is envisaging the organization of accompaniment of elderly brothers in several stages, from “low-level dependency” (medicalized rooms in apostolic priories) through to “high-level dependency” (rooms in a nursing home). The Commission will continue its work following an operational plan which the Chapter validated. Provinces are encouraged to take health issues into account and to foresee for brothers’ old age.

### D. Congregation Law

- General Chapter 2022 decided to limit the right to elect (active voice) and to be elected (passive voice) for brothers who are the object of a civil or ecclesiastical procedure or condemnation, as well as for brothers who are dispensed from residence. In these matters, the Major Superiors - the Prior General and provincials - may modify the reach of the judgement.
- A commission was created with the purpose of studying what, in our congregation law, might be in contradiction with the indications given by General Chapter 2019. Whilst doing this the commission realized that there was a broader task to be done of reworking our Congregational Law itself. At the commission’s suggestion, the Chapter voted to set up a committee to conduct the future work of restructuring our Congregational Law. This vast undertaking will extend over several years and involve all brothers as much as possible.

## **V. St John Family**

### A. The meeting with our Contemplative Sisters

General Chapter 2022 received the visit of Sister Marie-François, Prioress General of the contemplative sisters, and Sister Annick, their head of studies. With simplicity and humility they shared with us the new hope they carry within them. In the very midst of great fragility, their General Chapter 2022 was a turning point which felt like a resurrection. Sister Marie-François surprised the capitular brothers with a request for forgiveness (concerning A. Parmentier - Sister Alix - for the role she played in certain cases of abuse as sister of St John and Prioress General) and with her thanks for what the sisters have received from the brothers. Hearing these words we could not but think of the debt we owe our sisters due to the abuse committed by brothers. On behalf of the brothers, Brother Francois-Xavier thanked them and replied by expressing our request for forgiveness towards the sisters for spiritual or sexual abuse.

### B. Oblates

The Commission of Secular Oblates of the Family of St John (formed in November 2020) reported on its work to General Chapter 2022. Its purpose is to “re-energize the Oblates, allowing them to review their vocation, charism and organization.” There are 750 Oblates, half of whom are in France.

A large number of Oblates responded to the questionnaire sent out by the Commission. Some observations and proposals emerged from this questionnaire:

- That the oblates organize themselves autonomously,

- That they have their own governance and formation,
- That they form “fraternities” for fraternal sharing and commitment to mission.
- A “Charter of the Secular Oblates of the Family of St John” will be drafted which will replace their Rule of Life and Directory.

The capitular brothers are delighted to see many of their Oblate brothers and sisters actively participating in the renewal of the St John Family as a whole.

### C. St John Family

In 2017, the Dicastery for Religious Life (CIVCSVA) proposed that the brothers, sisters, and oblates be united in a “Federation”. This proposal is at the origin of a new reflection about the future coordination between our institutes. The Family Council, which brings together the authorities of the brothers and sisters, has adopted a regulation specifying, for example, that the presidency of this council will be occupied in turn by each community.

General Chapter 2022 expressed their agreement with the proposals made by the St John Family Council:

- The progression of the St John Family towards recognition as a “Federation”.
- The continuation of work on our community culture and the relationship between the brothers and the sisters.

The Chapter responded favorably to the request of the St John Family Council to create a commission of brothers and sisters with the purpose of proposing a text to the brothers and sisters' General Chapters 2024 and 2025 which expresses our common charism.

During the Chapter a desire emerged for the oblates' participation in the St John Family to be taken better into account and clarified with relation to our common charism and the future “Federation”. These thoughts were submitted to the St John Family Council.

### D. The meeting with Bishop Benoît Rivière, Bishop of Autun, Chalon, Mâcon and Ordinary of the Brothers of St John

Bishop Benoît Rivière exhorted us to live our trials from within those of the Church at large and to share the hope contained in *kerygma*. Quoting Paul Ricoeur, he reminded us that in Christ, who died and rose again, the describing of sin is only the reverse side of words of deliverance and hope. Recalling the recent past of our Community, he said: “It is as if the Lord is discreetly showing us that it takes a lot of impoverishment, trials and tears, for what was contained from the beginning, but so distorted by sin, to begin to appear. It is as if a smoke screen has completely dissipated in order that the true face of a beautiful community emerge, a community God wanted and which belongs to him alone”. He also confirmed that “You have the right to walk within the Church today as you are, free from complexes and taking your place as a community of purposely apostolic religious”.

On the subject of vocations, he added: “If you wait until everything is in order, until the housework is completed and your texts are sparkling clean, you’ll be waiting until the Parousia itself. [...] If there are some men who are true in their desire to join you and if you discern in them a true human maturity, do not turn them away. You are sent to serve Christ and his Church, not to seek vocations. These come by other means than we imagine. If you are passionate about Christ, the Institute will have a future known to God and that does not belong to us.”



## **VI. Elections**

The Chapter elected brother Jean-Polycarpe Seys as the first General Head of Formation (ref. II.D.).

Decentralisation meant that General Chapter 2022 also had the task of electing counsellors for the Prior General. According to the derogatory Statute of the provinces these counsellors will help the Prior General in the governing of the Congregation but will no longer have authority over a region. The Chapter accepted the Prior General's request that his Council comprise five members. Beside the newly elected General Head of Formation, the following brothers were elected: brother Honorat Vallette d'Osia, brother Ignaz-Maria Ringhofer and brother Jovien-Andréa Seudjang Kouamo. A fifth member will be appointed by the Prior General.

The Chapter reached the end of its work by establishing a list of priorities in the different areas of work for the coming three years. Establishing the provinces was, in the minds of the capitular brothers, the highest priority.

## **Conclusion**

The capitular brothers extend their most heartfelt thanks to the brothers, sisters, oblates and to our friends for their prayerful support and especially to the brothers, sisters and laity in Troussures who welcomed us so well. They are grateful to Erwan de Gevigney and brother Marie-Jérôme for their committed work as Chapter secretaries. The quality of the Chapter's work was also rooted in the commissions' work and in the replies brothers sent to the preparatory consultations. Together with them we give thanks to the Lord for giving us the light and the strength to do this work.

All the texts and decisions made during these two weeks of General Chapter are a part of an important milestone in our Congregation's pathway of reform. It is down to both our Superiors and to all brothers to put it into practise. Thus we shall return to the Lord's call in our lives to serve the Church.

The Chapter fixed the dates for the next General Chapter which will take place after the provincial Chapters and the vice-provincial Chapter of Asia-Oceania.

- First session: from 28th April to 9th May 2025
- Second session: from 13th to 24th October 2025

The Chapter began a reflection on the usage of French and English at the next General Chapter.