

# CCH CONFIGURATION REPORT TO THE 2024 GENERAL CHAPTER

This General Chapter is celebrated during a “Year of Prayer” called by Pope Francis in preparation for the Jubilee Year 2025, the theme of which is ‘Pilgrims of Hope’. Here is how he describes that hope whose pilgrims we are called to be:

*‘Hope is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross: “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life” (Rom 5:19). That life becomes manifest in our own life of faith, which begins with Baptism, develops in openness to God’s grace and is enlivened by a hope constantly renewed and confirmed by the working of the Holy Spirit’ (Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, 3).*

## **The Reality**

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This Configuration is what the General Regulations call ‘a Configuration composed of more than one juridical entity’ (*General Regulations 97, 1*).

Since the last Chapter, the number of juridical entities in the Configuration has reduced from six to four, with the suppression of GABR, whose six members are now under the guidance of the Superior General, and IOS, whose members have joined PATR. Other Passionist presences within the territory of the Configuration are the community at Highgate, London (under the Superior General), the Congolese Passionists in Belgium and the Filipino Passionists in Sweden. The four provinces of the Configuration (ASSUM, PATR, SPE and VULN) have different profiles and challenges.

VULN (South Germany and Austria) has 24 religious with an average age of 46, in four communities. There is a strong commitment to community life and to formation in this entity. In recent years there has been a development of the ministry of missions and retreats which also involves strong lay participation. There are also two shrines and two small retreat houses in the Vice-Province.

ASSUM (Poland and Ukraine) has 42 religious in nine houses; the average age is 57. Since the last General Chapter, the Province has closed its house in Czechia and intends to open a second house in Ukraine. Much time, energy and resources have been devoted to responding to the war situation in Ukraine. There are eight parishes, one shrine and one retreat house. The religious are engaged in a variety of ministries. A lot of work has been done in promoting Passionist spirituality and a knowledge of our saints among the laity.

PATR has seven houses in Ireland and Britain, an English-speaking mission in Paris and three religious ministering in Sweden. There are 51 members of the province. There

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are also four religious from other configurations who are ministering in the province. The average age is 72. The province has six parishes, two retreat houses and a shrine; the shrine of Blessed Dominic is also within the territory of the province but no Passionists are living at this shrine. Care for sick and elderly religious is provided in the community in Dublin.

SPE has two communities: one in the Netherlands and one in Germany. The province has 14 religious with an average age of 79.5 years. Some religious minister at the province's shrine and some others are engaged in parishes. One religious has an academic theological ministry. Care of the elderly is a significant commitment for the province. The province is looking at suspension and later integration into a larger reality as an option for the future.

### **The Past Six Years - What were we doing?**

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'The Configurations are principally organized to promote dialogue and cooperation between the different parts of the Congregation, and to foster initiatives and common action for the life and mission of the Congregation'. (General Regulations, 95) They do this 'to achieve Solidarity in the three areas of Personnel, Formation and Finances' (ibid.). Perhaps 'Mission' would be a better word than 'Personnel' here.

#### **Mission**

CCH has identified four areas for solidarity in Mission; these are: shrines; outreach; retreat houses; peace and reconciliation. At present the main emphasis here is on our shrines as a focus for action in solidarity, with the creation of a shrines website for the Configuration and meetings of our shrine directors.

#### **Formation**

Three of the four provinces have religious in initial formation, some of whom took part in the Encounter-Pilgrimage for Young Passionists in 2022. This year, the Configuration had a follow-up encounter for those in formation in the Configuration. Meetings of formators from across the configuration also take place to promote dialogue and cooperation and to exchange experiences. In recent years the work done by Fr Martin Coffey, General Secretary for Formation, on promoting the General Programme for Formation has occasioned dialogue among the formators in the Configuration. We thank Fr Martin for his work on the Programme and for the meetings, including those on Zoom, which were held to reflect together on the Programme.

Ongoing formation at the level of the Configuration is supported through the Minsteracres 'Passion Seminars'. Since 2015, the Configuration has been organising a reflective theological seminar every two years at Minsteracres Retreat Centre in England, with talks given by members of the Configuration and other invited speakers. This initiative was created and sustained by Denis Travers when he was General

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Consultor. The seminars are open to our religious, Passionist sisters and lay associates. Recent themes were 'Love and Suffering – Exploring the Memory of the Passion' (2019) and 'Contemplating the Passion' (2023). The 2021 Seminar was cancelled because of Covid. The Passion Seminars at Minsteracres have had participants from MAPRAES, PASPAC, CPA and CJC Configurations.

### **Finance**

Solidarity in Finance at the level of the Configuration is principally focussed on the House of Mercy in Ukraine. The entities of the Configuration provide financial support to the House of Mercy which is operated by ASSUM Province with the Daughters of Charity. This project provides accommodation for elderly people in need of care, operates a mother/child service, and gives assistance to those with drug or virus problems.

The situation in Ukraine and also in Poland has been dramatically altered by the war in Ukraine. The House of Mercy and the monastery in Ukraine welcomed refugees and those displaced by the war; so also did all our monasteries in Poland, providing accommodation, food, clothing and medical supplies. Provinces and parish communities of the Configuration provided financial and other support to ASSUM in this crisis, as have other parts of the Congregation. The war in Ukraine and its long-term effects will continue to challenge those working in the region and beyond for many years to come.

### **Challenges**

Another challenge we face lies in how we respond to JPIC in the context of climate change. The former IOS Province had taken concrete steps in this area through advocacy and promoting awareness of the issues. They also worked to lower their carbon footprint and divest from fossil fuels. The level of interest in this issue varies across the Configuration.

Difficulties and challenges in the region of Northern Europe could be listed: secularisation, the scandal caused by child (and adult) sexual abuse, the challenges of safeguarding and professional standards, the ageing membership of most of our entities, the fall in religious practice (accelerated by the pandemic), religious illiteracy among the young, the small number of vocations. In fact, these challenges exist across Europe and in other regions such as North America and Australia.

This age has been described as the time not just of 'Liquid Modernity'<sup>1</sup> but of Metamodernism which 'oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and

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<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. Bauman sees our time as characterised by uncertainty and change where each one must construct their own identity.

plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.<sup>12</sup> According to Vermeulen and van den Akker, 'Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find.'<sup>13</sup> This is the context in which we live our religious life and carry out our mission.

A specific challenge which our Configuration faces is how we will respond to the situation in those countries where our Congregation seems to be disappearing. In this context, Belgium – the cradle of our Congregation beyond the Alps – comes immediately to mind, but there are also other examples. Do we just watch this happening or do we propose some concrete response? Will we respond with empathy or apathy? Do we believe that our disappearance will impoverish the life of the Church in some way? Or do we see ourselves in those places 'embarking on the path to completion'?<sup>14</sup> Certainly, this is something we need to study at Configuration level – but also at the level of the Congregation. Models of responding are available from other religious institutes, such as the 'St Laurence of Brindisi Project' of the Capuchins. What are **we** going to do?

### **Where to go? The Way Forward**

At the last meeting of the Configuration, we looked at the idea of a 'Passionist Mission Plan' which was proposed in the document 'Renewing our Mission – A Call to Walk Together' after the 2022 Synod of the Congregation. The members of the Configuration hope that the General Chapter will 'work on an apostolic plan' which 'can provide the signposts for the Synodal Path we will follow together as a Congregation over the next coming years.' (Renewing our Mission, III, p.17) We asked ourselves the question 'As our presence in Europe diminishes, what should remain? The following is what was said in response to this question at our last meeting:

*To answer this question, we need clarity about our identity and our mission. We have our own spirituality but it is not always well known and understood, even within our Congregation. At every General Chapter, there are requests for a deeper theological reflection on and formation in our spirit and our purpose– for a programme or place where our understanding of our charism can be developed – for a centre or a forum, but this hunger remains unsatisfied .*

*What, then, should remain? 'The Church... entrusted us with a mission: to preach the Gospel of the Passion by our life and apostolate'. (Constitutions 2) Keeping the charism alive is the focal point. Our young brothers come to us because of the charism and a living connection to Christ. That will continue to be attractive, and people will come to us because of the possibility of getting to know Jesus. The binding aspect in all our provinces, no matter how different they are, no matter what challenges they face, has to be the task the church entrusted us with.*

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<sup>2</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker (2010), 'Notes on metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2:1, 5677, DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example Cees van Dam, Theo Sponselee and Ad Leys (2010), 'Explorations on the "Completion" of Religious Institutes', *RCRI Bulletin*, 2012, no. 8, pp. 9-27.

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*Blessed Dominic went without a plan, without money, without people, without all the means we have at our disposal now. But he went and started his "job", finding his resources along the way. We should have more of his spirit, more missionary thinking. Also, our founding fathers came with this spirit, dealing with so many obstacles. But the mission was the reason they came and kept on. This mentality needs to be put first.*

*We are a missionary Congregation, but the advantage of our founders was that they had a clear concept of their mission and a clear sense of identity. They knew their message and their goal and worked hard for that. For Blessed Dominic the goal was the conversion of England through preaching the Passion. This sense lived on and made our congregation attractive for people. Having a clear idea of our profile is essential. Our founder established in the church a unique spiritual school which stands on its own. We have not yet discovered the core uniqueness of this. Had we, it would be easier for us. Our task is to re-discover our sources, which we can call upon, our inner spiritual sources, which we should dedicate much more time to reflecting upon. That is what would be missing if the Passionists disappeared.*

As I listened to these comments of the provincials of our Configuration, I was reminded of something that Father (now Cardinal) Aquilino Bocos Merino CMF had said in his address to the Passionist Synod in 2010: 'The secret of the process of restructuring is in the formulation of a Project for life and mission, with its priorities.' From 2010 until now we have been accompanied on our journey by a series of words and phrases: 'Restructuring', 'Configuration', 'Renewing our Mission', 'Synodality', and now 'Transformation'. However, perhaps we have lacked a unifying Project for Life and Mission which could act as the golden thread holding everything together. Maybe we will find that golden thread during these days.

Our Configuration approaches this General Chapter with hope. May it be a hope which does not disappoint, which is 'born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross' (*Spes non confundit*, 3). In his letter for the Jubilee Year 2025, Pope Francis reminds us that 'Hope finds its supreme witness in the Mother of God. In the Blessed Virgin, we see that hope is not naive optimism but a gift of grace amid the realities of life.' At the foot of the Cross, 'in the travail of that sorrow, offered in love, Mary became our Mother, the Mother of Hope' and 'amid the tempests of this life, the Mother of God comes to our aid, sustains us and encourages us to persevere in hope and trust.' (*Spes non confundit*, 24)

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### CCH Configuration - Statistics 2024

There are four entities in the CCH, from West to East:

1. PATR: Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales, Paris (France), Sweden;
2. SPE: the Netherlands, northern Germany;
3. VULN: southern Germany, Austria;
4. ASSUM: Poland, Ukraine.

Number of religious 135

Average age 64

Number of Professed students 12

Number of novices 5

Number of houses: 23

Number of languages: 4 main languages + 4 others

	<b>ASSUM</b>	<b>PATR</b>	<b>SPE</b>	<b>VULN</b>	<b>CCH</b>
Religious	42	55	14	24	135
Average Age	57	72	79.5	46	64
Students	4	3	0	5	12
Novices	1	0	0	4	5
Communities	9	8	2	4	23