



# SVD 18<sup>th</sup> GENERAL CHAPTER

THE LOVE OF CHRIST IMPELS US - 2COR 5:14  
rooted in the Word, committed in His mission  
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## GENERAL CHAPTER PARTICIPANTS MEET AND LISTEN TO POPE FRANCIS

**A** special audience with the Pope has always been one of the highlights of the General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word. For the 18th General Chapter taking place from 17 June – 14 July 2018, this event took place on 22 June 2018 in the Pope Clemens VIII Hall at the Vatican.

At 13:00, Pope Francis appeared before the 155-member contingent of SVD priests, brothers and lay partners who had traveled from the Ad Gentus Center in Nemi, where the General Chapter has been going on, to Rome in order to meet and listen to the Holy Father. Despite a heavy schedule of multiple audiences on a Friday, Pope Francis entered the room with a bright smile to meet the SVDs who were equally enthusiastic to see him.

After a brief introduction by Father General Superior Heinz Kuluke, SVD, Pope Francis proceeded to deliver a talk in Spanish that corresponded with the theme of the General Chapter, “‘The Love of Christ impels us’ (2 Cor 5:14): Rooted in the Word, Committed to His Mission.” In addition to reminding the members of the Society about the missionary nature of the Pauline phrase which was selected for the theme of the Chapter, Pope Francis made his exhortations with three concise points.

### **Trust in the Divine Providence**

First, Pope Francis called upon the Divine Word Missionaries to renew their trust in God’s providence through daily acts of prayer and the celebration of the sacraments. In addition, this trust is reflected in the courage to take risks, placing confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Proclaim the word of God**

Second, the Holy Father reminded the SVDS about their charism of proclaiming the Word of God to all people, regardless of place, time or culture. Divine Word Missionaries, said the Pope, need to use all available means in order to meet the challenge of proclaiming the Word to those who have not known Christ yet.

## Form a community of brothers in mission

Finally, Pope Francis exhorted the Society of the Divine Word to live out their missionary charism as community of brothers who are united to each other in fraternal love. The ability of the SVDs to walk together in this manner despite their diversity and inter-culturality presents tremendous evangelization value in the world today. The Holy Father emphasized that only when the SVDs achieve love and unity in community can they venture out to be with others and work to address the many issues relating to peace and justice.

## Roots and cemeteries

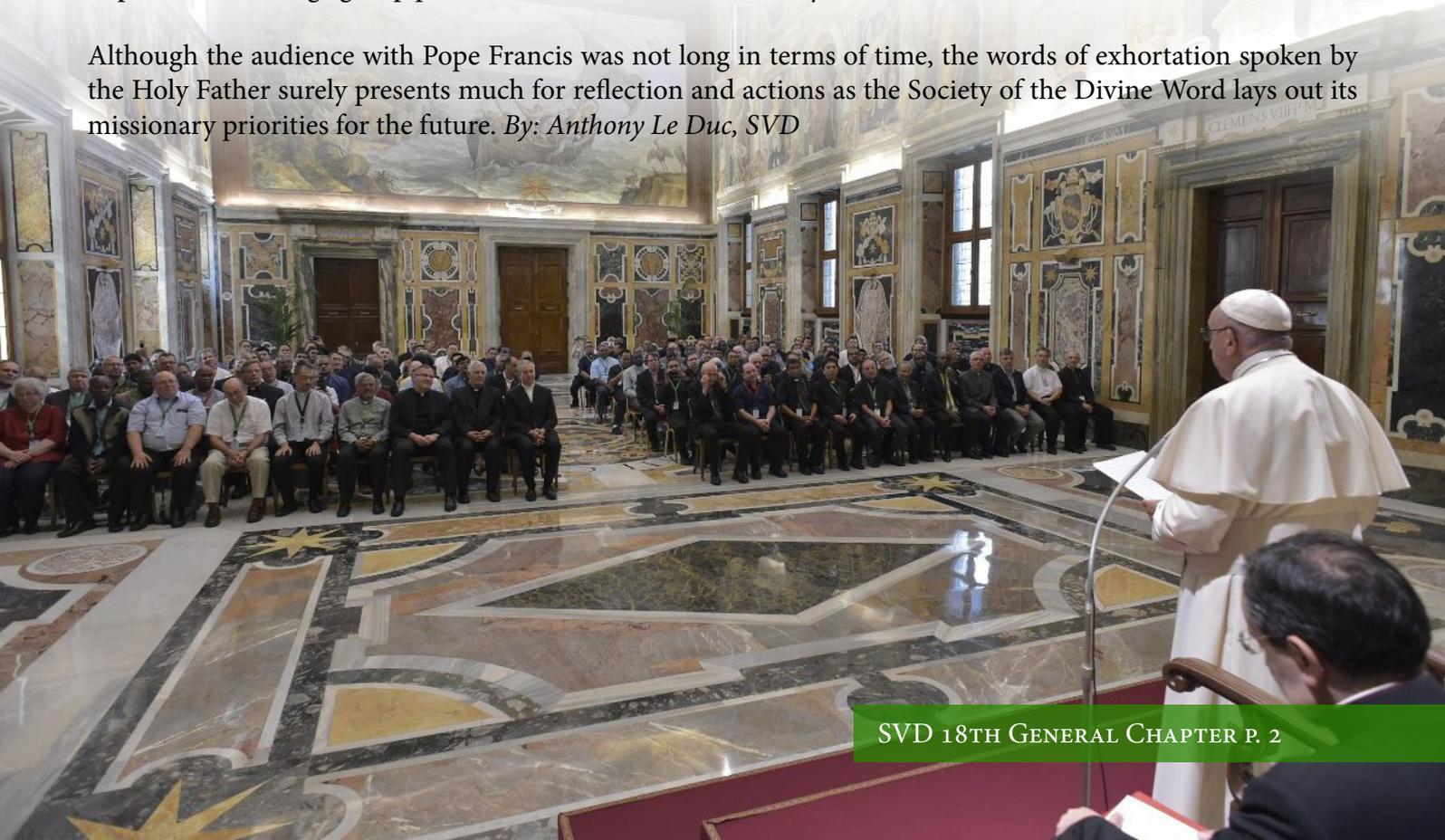
In addition to speaking from prepared texts, Pope Francis also took several opportunities to speak off hand, exhorting the Divine Word Missionaries to return to their roots in concrete acts of care and love, and to remember SVDs who have served out their missionary lives and are buried in faraway lands of Africa, Asia, the Amazon and around the world.

The passion displayed in the voice and mannerism of the Holy Father was felt distinctively by the SVDs who were present in the room. Brother Bernd Ruffing, SVD, Chapter delegate from the Province of Germany commented, “Pope Francis’ smile really touched me when he entered the chapel and connected to all of us. I think there were also special moments when he didn’t follow the script, and I really felt that he spoke from his heart. When he gave me his hand, I felt a special energy coming from him. The opportunity to participate in an audience with the Holy Father was truly a special grace.”

The outward mannerism displayed by Pope Francis was of great value in this encounter. Due to the event taking place entirely in Spanish without translation, not all those in attendance were able to understand the content of the Holy Father’s talk. For Len Uhal, an SVD lay partner who was invited to be a part of the chapter, it was a special experience nonetheless. “It was a true blessing,” he said. “While he spoke in Spanish and I understood little of what he said, being in the presence of a world leader who advocates service to the ‘least among us’ inspires me to re-commit myself to be a missionary disciple of Christ and serve those whom Jesus puts in my life.”

In the final moments of the audience, each member of the contingent had the opportunity to shake hand with Pope Francis. A large group photo was also taken with the Holy Father seated in the middle.

Although the audience with Pope Francis was not long in terms of time, the words of exhortation spoken by the Holy Father surely presents much for reflection and actions as the Society of the Divine Word lays out its missionary priorities for the future. *By: Anthony Le Duc, SVD*



This was our first full work day. After the morning meditation on Mt 3:16-17 and 11: 25-30, Fr Heinz led off the session with a state of the union synopsis of the SVD in the modern world including what has been achieved over the past six years and what still needs to be done. At the heart of his message was the Christ-centered task of putting the last first. In response to his presentation we were to ask three questions: What surprises me? What new questions are raised by the presentation? and What is missing? And then ask: How does all of this foster the love of Christ in us and move us forward on His Mission for Humankind.

## JUNE 18 - MONDAY

Although the presentation was by power-point we were emphatically urged to read his full paper which goes much further into the essentials like what needs to change in our work, what will make us more authentic witnesses of mercy and compassion, how to address the injustice, pain and suffering in the world and foster our commitment to the poor and to the environment, and how to work with other religious and secular bodies. In other words, how to be more useful instruments in God's hands. He outlined the three tasks of the Generalate: animate, assign personnel and monitor our infrastructure and finances stressing the importance of optimal leadership and shared responsibility where trust and credibility are crucial.

Our time is short, so we must spend it with the people; not structures. The world's poor are the future of the Church. Our mission is simple—prophetic dialogue. This takes many forms—biblical, formation and education. We must align our structures to meet the new needs of our world today. The Love of Christ impels us to do His work. We are about renewal which is really conversion—changing old habits, and even our missionary direction by letting go of the old. We need to think outside the box. Our static relations need to become dynamic—we need to be with the people. Our leadership requires deep conversion. To support this our finances need to be professional and be based on solidarity.

Statistically we sound quite successful. We have just passed the Dominicans as the 6th largest religious order. We have 6,000 members in 84 countries. More than half our members are Asian. Our average is younger (50.15). Our elderly members are 15%. Our future is in Africa and Asia. >>>





<<< Our membership of brothers is going down but priests are stable. But our successes must not stand in the way of our future. We have emphasized interculturality but we still have far to go. 90 percent of our members are responsible 8% could do more and 2% are irresponsible; but leadership must not focus on them. We must focus on our elderly by caring for them. Approximately the same number of SVDs have died as are alive and well today—and they are praying for our missionary efforts. We already have some examples of Mission life in Bishops Finnemann and Novak, Fr Zelazek and Sr Maria Michael SSpSAP and the 22 SVD German and Polish martyrs. But we need more.

The major tasks before us involve: personnel, finance, and infrastructure. We are expanding in Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia especially in the areas of education and more specialized ministries like refugees, but we are decreasing in Europe and North America.

Formation uses up 50% of all our money. But we need to invest even more in our formation centers—they are our future. All our provinces must become self-sufficient and we must think outside the box to achieve this. We need to stress our connections with the laity and lay mission partners giving them a sense of ownership for this is the way to grow mission spirit.

Following the General's presentation we broke up into our basic groups to process and digest what we heard and try to answer the three questions raised by Fr Heinz and offer our group reports back to the plenum. In the plenum we voted to confirm the agenda and then Fr Heinz offered answers to the questions that the basic groups produced, such as: What do we do about all our outdated structures? How can we motivate our confreres, especially for leadership? How can we empower our lay brothers? How can we promote vocations? How can we renew ourselves? How can we involve our Lay partners in shared programs? How can we manage our retired confreres? What about the option for the poor? How can we strengthen our communities? What about the challenges of administration and formation? How to handle negativity among confreres? What should be our leadership style?

Fr Kuluke then offered some of his feelings and experiences after having completed his six years as General. He stressed the "ethic" of responsibility over that of obedience—it is important to be responsible for God's work. We need to share our resources for poor, be resourceful, place people where they are needed and when possible turn it over to others. We must take on more and give up our established parishes and institutions. We are moving in the right direction toward family and youth! The rich provinces are giving to the poor. Leadership must be shared in teams; must involve consultation and solidarity. But we must also acknowledge our prophets and listen to them. He offered his heartfelt thanks to his team and to all of the leadership team. He looks back over the 6 years to see that many good things were done and many important decisions were made. Future leaders should get to know all the confreres and as a result will have to get used to living in airports and sleep in many beds. All around the world SVDs are doing extraordinary work changing world for better. Finally he thanked us all and asked for our forgiveness for his failings especially his impatience for change.

In the final hour of the day the process of the development of the Working Document of the Chapter was presented and then was voted upon and accepted. The process involved input from all of the PRMs as well as several Councils, Caucuses and committee work. Any new ideas will be introduced and incorporated as the chapter moves along. Then zonal groups chose their candidates for the planning commission and proposing committee.



**JUNE 19 - TUESDAY**

**I**n order to prepare ourselves spiritually for the important task ahead of us, we had a full day of recollection. Reflections were presented by Fr Ommerborn SVD and Sr. Maria Cristina SSpS. Each of these was followed by ample time for prayer and meditation. In the late afternoon we went back to our basic groups for a session of “life-sharing” and discernment which was followed by Mass. After supper we enjoyed a “Chapter Social”.

The theme of the two reflections, “Discernment from the founding fathers’ generation to today,” was a spiritual preparation for seeing the challenges that lay ahead of us as SVDs. Fr Ommerborn offered the first reflection on the life and words of Fr Arnold Janssen. Fr Arnold’s Trinitarian self-understanding and the consecration of his life to the Holy Spirit were key, and he wanted all SVD members to have this same generous spirit. According to Cassian, this is the base for discernment. Arnold knew he was called by God and that in following the lead of the Spirit he was doing the will of God. We all need the Holy Spirit to discern God’s will so prayer is essential for discernment. Arnold’s advice was quite concrete. He said that we must always first be asking God, then evaluating the situation, getting the advice we need and being happy in one’s choice. The goal is always to seek spiritual profit gauging where you can do the most good. Accept gifts from the rich but don’t be beholden to them. Always respect local nationalities while valuing your own, and if you make a wrong decision change it. Mission is a risk. If doesn’t succeed accept that it is not God’s will and move on. Test all things and hold fast to what is good. Let Arnold’s advice always inspire us!

Sr Maria Cristian SSpS said discernment is an introduction to fostering spiritual renewal. The journey of the chapter will lead us to joy in change if we discern our goal before beginning the game. A sacred task is before us. It is a team effort guided by the Holy Spirit. Be aware of the forces pro and con within and let God help us decide. How do we make decisions? The way we choose is based on our values, relationships and spirituality. Right decisions depend on these. Today we hunger for spirituality. In order to respond to our times we need profound spirituality--God in our hearts. Jesus’ spirituality combines prophecy and mysticism, rooted in Trinity participating in God’s mission. Having God’s vision for humanity. We discern in different ways. Some say, intuition tells me! I see clearly! I do what I want! We must listen to our hearts; be faithful to ourselves. A loving and trusting relationship with God—a process by which we examine our spiritual state. Which way brings us closer to God? We need training and practice for discernment. Pope Francis stresses that for spiritual discernment we need to let the Spirit guide our actions to truth. Ask: What does God want and what does humanity want for the world today? We need to be born of the Spirit, based in the scriptures and living in the Spirit. Attitudes for discernment include listening, praying, and “dancing” Spirituality is dancing with our desires, longings and fire within—that gives the joy of living. Its opposite is having lost all enthusiasm to live. Elements include: Time: take time to discern. Trust that God’s hand is there and self-awareness. Discernment is the fruit of God’s love.



JUNE 20 - WEDNESDAY

Today was sunny and beautiful, but also a full work day. We began with morning prayer as a plenum in the great aula and continued for an hour in our basic groups with a bible sharing. The bible sharing followed various methods or variations of the lectio divina method where scripture is read and confreres say a word or phrase that stands out for them and, after short silent reflection, each shares an experience related to that word or passage. Our sharing I can say really started to bring us together. It is amazing how densely packed we find sacred scripture when it is shared like this.



After a short break, we gathered again as a plenum for an hour and a half. The secretary read the minutes for yesterday's sessions which were accepted without any changes. We were shown how to find the Chapter documents stored on the cloud. Then we elected our Planning Commission and Proposals Committee. Anthony Amissah, provincial of Kenya, was elected on the Planning committee from AFRAM, Xavier Thirukudumbam for ASPAC, Franz Helm for EUROPE, Alfonso Jose Berger for PANAM. Then we elected our Proposals Committee: Gabriel Afagbegee for AFRAM, Henryk Adler for ASPAC, Timothy Lehane for EUROPE, John Benas for PANAM and Mark Weber for the Generalate.



The elections in the plenum were followed by Mass in our basic groups where there was a sharing following the themes presented in the gospel (Mt 6:1-6; 16-18). Then, after a break for lunch we went to our zonal groups to share our how our various provinces were able to implement the Communal Directions. In the discussions it came out that migration, family and youth ministries and the ethic of life were the biggest challenges. Most of our province personnel are involved in parish ministry for our dioceses and we must tailor our aims to theirs.



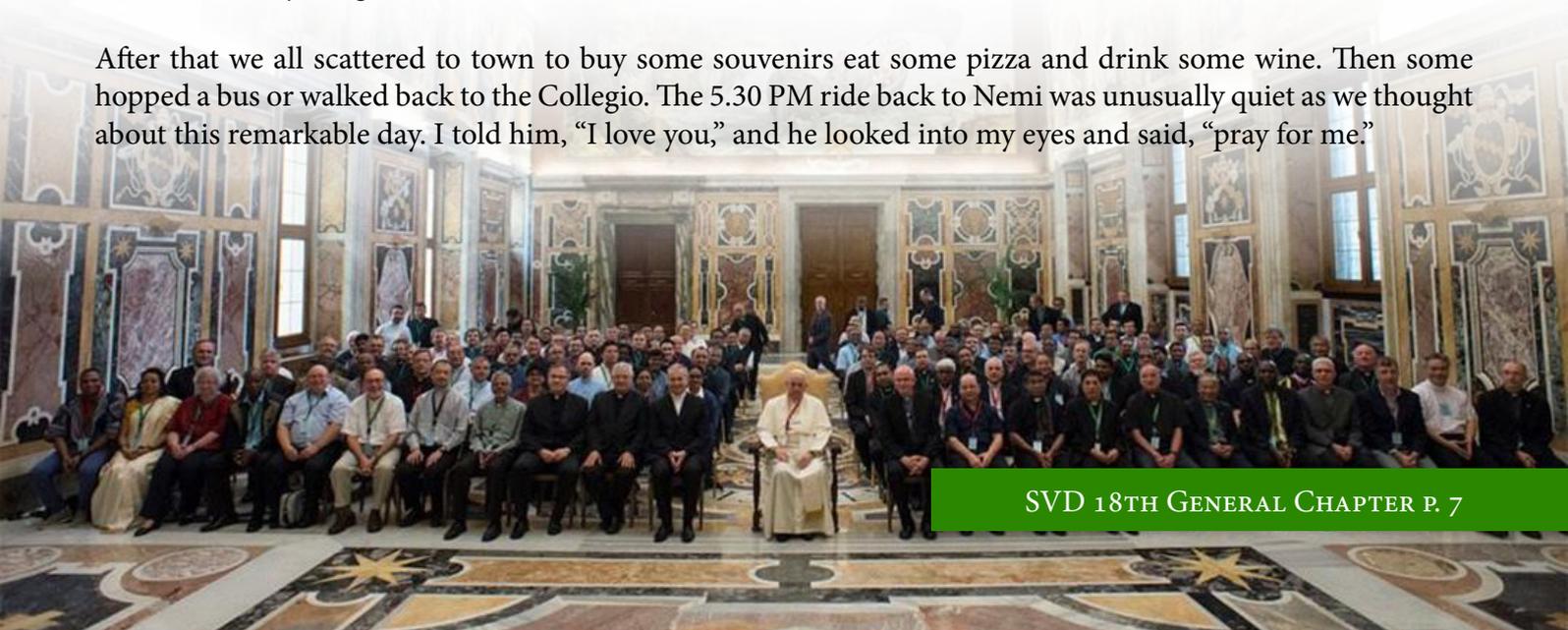
After a short break we went back to the plenum to continue discussion on the implementation of the communal directions and compare notes. It was amazing to see the great similarities in both our challenges and joys. This session was followed by evening prayer and supper.

What wild excitement was in the air as we all rushed down to breakfast even before the 7.30 AM bell! Most were already dressed in their clerical collars as they wolfed down the food and went back to their rooms to complete their last-minute checklists. Today is Pope Francis Day! We are off to see the pope—and not 100 yards away like the hoi-polloi already milling in the hot sun—we will be up close and personal, and we'll even be able to shake his hand. At 9.30 AM all 150 of us piled into three busses and headed down the mountain to Rome. There was a festive atmosphere in my bus and everyone was buzzing away as we plodded through the heavy morning traffic. After an hour, the buses dropped us behind the Vatican and we walked as a group to the center of St Peter's in the shadow of the great obelisk where, legend has it, St Peter at his own request was crucified upside down.

Soon we were being marshalled through the security apparatus and then made to wait. About 11.00 AM we were ushered past the pike-bearing Swiss guards, who like the guys in the red jackets and bearskin hats in front of Buckingham Palace, were so still that for a moment we thought they were waxen figures. But they came to life pretty quick when someone tried to photograph them. Then it was up the stairs—the climb of the century (I hope the pope doesn't have to climb it). But it was beautiful--inlaid marble walls of every color, ancient brass handrails and steps worn away over the centuries by thousands of feet. And they were very long and very high, and there were five or six of these passageways! It was also quite hot, and when we reached the dizzying top step it looked we had passed through a sauna. Our guides let us cool down and then ushered us into the glorious audience room of Pope Clemens XIII, a magnificently frescoed and marbled room with a small podium at one end where the pope would sit and more than a hundred upright chairs beautifully upholstered with some red velvety material. We took our places and quieted down looking to the side door, which must have been 15 feet high, anticipating his grand entrance. But after doing this for 45 minutes we got tired of sitting and everyone started roaming around and taking pictures.

Suddenly we were motioned to sit. Fr Kuluke stood in front of the group ready to introduce us. Then the doors opened and there was Papa Francisco with two bishops at his side, all smiles as he entered the room and took his place on the podium. Fr Kuluke introduced us in Spanish saying how pleased all of us were to have this wonderful opportunity. Pope Francis came down from the podium and greeted Fr Kuluke and then read a prepared speech in which he thanked us and urged us to continue our great work in service of the Lord's Mission, to be aware of death pray for all those who have gone before us, and also to pray for him. As usual he was at his best when he put the text aside and spoke from his heart. Then, one by one, each of us went forward and shook his hand. We were informed beforehand that he didn't want anyone to kneel or kiss his ring or give him any high titles. He simply wanted to look into our eyes and greet each of us. And that is exactly what he did. A few of the confreres benefited from a little longer exchange of words, and from the laughing that ensued, there was even some joking.

After that we all scattered to town to buy some souvenirs eat some pizza and drink some wine. Then some hopped a bus or walked back to the Collegio. The 5.30 PM ride back to Nemi was unusually quiet as we thought about this remarkable day. I told him, "I love you," and he looked into my eyes and said, "pray for me."





The General Coordinator of Communications, Fr. Modeste Munimi SVD, informs us about the sources on the Internet where we can follow the development of the XVIII General Chapter. Being informed of the events puts us in the spirit and direction of this General Chapter and we accompany this important event with our prayers.

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