

The associates of the Congregation of Our Lady

Sharing the path from Szombathely (2008) towards Locquirec (2014)

Dedicated to Sr Paule Sagot (1919-2011), who radiated Peter Fourier's and Alix Le Clerc's love. With deep gratitude.

A new spring is blooming...

- international communication
- new groups of associates
- deepening the charism of Peter Fourier and Alix Le Clerc

... in spite of our limits...

- do we associates have a common awareness ?
- how do we face the ageing problem ?
- have we got a spiritual life on which our actions are built ?

And we get the impulse to move forward...

- a special focus : educators and schools
- autonomy and commitment
- a common concern : caring for creation

Conclusion

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The first associates of the C.O.L came to birth in 1990 in Sheffield, closely followed by groups in Scotland and in Brazil.

On 20 November 2000, twelve people attended the first meeting of the French associates, in the Parisian Abbaye-aux-Bois, accompanied by Sr Odile Guyot-Sionnest.

In September 2007, I tried to inquire into “Being an associate of the C.O.L”. Why do lay persons want to join in a congregation when there are fewer and fewer religious vocations in Western Europe and North America? What do they want to do? It really seemed that being an associate was a path of sharing a common spirituality, fraternity and mission.

At the Chapter of Berlaymont (2002), the sisters had voiced : *“The associates are the true and legitimate inheritors of the charism of Peter Fourier and Alix Le Clerc; they are partners of our mission in the extended family of the Congregation”*.

In July 2008, a historic landmark was reached: one delegate from each country was invited to the Chapter at Szombathely. Seven associates were able to come to Hungary : Sabine Didelot (France), Helenka Pilatova, (Slovakia), Agi Albrecht Lorantné (Hungary), Baudouin Kabulo (The Congo), Rodrigo de Souza (Brazil), John Mc Guigan (UK) and Jean-Marie Wauters (Belgium). For the first time, the associates could express their hopes and the sisters ratified their desires:

- to work out, helped by the sisters if necessary, their own organisation
- to make progress in their spirituality by a more extensive knowledge of the basic texts of the Congregation
- to increase mutual acquaintance, not only locally, but also internationally
- to support, or even share in, the apostolate of the sisters.¹

Four years after the Szombathely Chapter, I would like to look at what has happened since then?² Sometimes, we may be disappointed (the associates are getting older and very few new people have joined in the groups, the common awareness seems to be weak...). Sometimes, we are energised by the hope springing up in other countries or by deepening our links of friendship.

The next Chapter General will take place in 2014 at Locquirec (Brittany). Couldn't we seize the opportunity to move forward? This is the aim of the following reflections which are fruits of my experience.³ Unfortunately, I don't know exactly what happens in each country so I could not be wholly comprehensive in my survey. Whatever it may be in every country, I really hope all the associates can find here an impetus to reflect on their own way of “doing all possible good” in the spirit of Peter Fourier and Alix Le Clerc.

¹ Acts of the General Chapter Hungary 2008, p. 10

² Cfr also my article in 2009 « Associates CND : what's new since the General Chapter of Szombathely » CND 123 – 2009, p. 38-39

³ Many thanks indeed to Sr Edith Pirard, Sr Christina Brown and Sabine Didelot for their useful advice.

I dedicate these reflections to Sr Paule Sagot who left us on 2 January 2011. She was the first one who gave me the taste of the spirituality and the teaching of Peter Fourier and Alix Le Clerc. All over the world she spread a beam of love for the Founders. I am infinitely grateful to her.

1. A new spring is blooming...

Three realities are sources of joy and hope: international communication, new groups of associates, deepening the charism of the Founders.

1.1. International communication

- As the Chapter had focused on “mutual acquaintance, not only locally but also internationally”, the idea of creating an **associates’ website** came into being. Two Belgian associates, Jean-Marie Wauters and Stephane Gilson worked hard to create the website “alix-pierre-associated-org”. Each country was invited to choose a correspondent to communicate news and projects from his or her region. In January 2009, the first newsletter was sent to everybody – sisters, associates or friends of the C.O.L- who had asked for it. For more than three years the website has been in existence. Here we can find news and pictures from all over the world, thanks to Stephane’s passion !
- After some meetings with associates from different countries (Jupille May 2006, Wishaw September 2007, London August 2008, Reims September 2008⁴), an idea was launched to have an international associates’ meeting. From **19 to 24 July 2010**, about 30 associates and sisters (from Ireland, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Cape Verde, Slovakia, Hungary and Belgium) gathered in **Belgium**, at the Brussels’ fraternity of Bon Pasteur. The program was varied: getting to know each other; prayer; reflection on Peter Fourier’s writings “education changes the world”, “following Alix in the shadows and in the light”; the Congregation today in the world; 'sightseeing'; future projects.
- The Brussels’ meeting really opened us up to the international dimension. The group made some decisions :
 - the representatives of each country send news of their group and, every two months, one country sends prayer intentions to form a prayer chain around the world.
 - a Belgian associate, Marie-Josée Rouard, sends birthday wishes to each participant.
 - a new meeting would be organised in another country (Hungary, Cape Verde?) after the sisters’ Chapter in 2014.

Personal contacts have also been made easier: e.g. Myriam and Michel Lebbe who speak Portuguese keep in touch with Maria and Antonia from Cape Verde.

1.2. New groups of associates

⁴ Those international meetings were absolutely vital to get a feeling of belonging. Moreover, I had the opportunity to attend several associates’ meetings in the world (Brazil and the Congo in 2006, Vietnam in 2009) and to feel our common spirituality, fraternity and mission.

- **Cape Verde** is like a miracle... as there are no sisters of the C.O.L there! How did it happen? Studying at the Catholic University of Sao Paulo (Brazil), Maria dos Reis met with Sr Valdete who works there and when Maria was ill went to live in Valdete's community. When she returned to Praia (capital of the archipelago, on the Santiago island), she set up a "group of prayer/reflection St Augustine". The group became officially recognized as "Associates of the C.O.L" in August 2009, when Srs Valdete and Graça (from the Brazilian Vicariate) went to Cape Verde and saw it was really inspired by the charism of the Congregation. Nowadays there are about 100 associates who gather every month. Maria dos Reis and Antonia Ferreira da Vega attended the meeting in Brussels and shared their hopes and their dynamism with all of us.
- In **Hong-Kong**, there are only 4 sisters, working modestly in spiritual and social activities (catechesis, teaching, Church Architecture...), having no schools or visibility. Little by little, since 2010, people began to approach them to find out who they were and what made them tick. "Come and see," answered the sister. Now they meet every two months in the tiny flat of one of the sisters to learn about Peter Fourier and Alix Le Clerc.

Both groups of Cape Verde and Hong-Kong really answer a need of the people for solidarity and spirituality. In those countries, there are certainly fewer opportunities to deepen one's faith in community. The regular attendance is probably higher than in our European groups. Thanks to them, we think the charism of the Congregation can spread and start again in many different ways.

1.3. Deepening the charism of Peter Fourier and Alix Le Clerc

All over the world, the associates express the desire to know, understand and deepen the intuitions of the Founders. They seek to actualise the message in the personal contexts of their lives and to answer the needs of the time. As Sr Paule Sagot said, *le propre d'un charisme est de transmettre à travers le temps un esprit, une manière de vivre l'Évangile, un regard sur autrui et sur le monde. Retrouver l'esprit d'un fondateur, ce n'est pas répéter ni même imaginer ce qu'il ferait actuellement. C'est se pénétrer de son regard pour inventer, comme lui, du neuf.*⁵ Fidelity means continuing with our own works or being attentive to the "signs of the times" and thence to whatever "newness" these signs require of us.

For a long time, several sisters have been working on that subject, publishing articles or books. Although it is difficult to mention every sister, let me thank here, among others, Srs Paule Sagot, Marie-Claire Tihon, Thérèse du Peyroux and Nicole Reille.

Recently a fantastic work has been done!

- First, I would like to emphasise the work of the **archivists in Fontenay**, among others, Sr Marie-Paule Sieffert and also a Parisian associate, Marie-Rose Giros. In the correct

⁵ Paule Sagot, *Pierre Fourier, Alix Le Clerc, spiritualité*. Paris, CND, 1998, p. 15

temperature all the documents of the C.O.L. have been collected and indexed. Whoever needs information about the Congregation can ask for it in Fontenay...

- Another very important work started in 2005, led by Sr Marie-Laure Bradel. This is a **pedagogical approach to the Founders' Texts**. Actually, the initiator of the work was the former Superior General, Sr Stéphane-Marie Boullanger. Its aim is to give the sisters and the associates access to important texts of Peter Fourier (e.g. *Constitutions, De l'instruction des filles séculières...*) and Alix Le Clerc (*Notes, The Relation*). I really loved being invited to work with sisters from all over the world in 2005, 2007 and 2009. In 2009, another associate, Sabine Didelot joined the group. Sr Marie-Laure Bradel has created a series of folders which can be used by groups for reflection and study on the Founders. Every month, she does so at the Abbaye-aux-Bois in Paris. Sr Lelia Sbrana does the same with associates in Southern Brazil. Sr Marie-Alice Tihon and I also led a reflection day on "Inner peace" for the sisters at Berlaymont (Belgium). Elsewhere there are similar activities going on.
- At the International Meeting of Associates (Brussels July 2010), two days were devoted to a deeper understanding of our Founders' message; the first day focussed on the topic of education, "Education changes the world" and the second, led by Sr Marie-Laure Bradel, was called "Following Alix in the shadows and in the light".

I know that deepening the charism of the Founders has no cut-off point, but I do think we now have got the means by which we can respond to the training needs of new sisters and associates.

2. ... in spite of our limits...

Sometimes, however, we, sisters and associates, can experience a certain feeling of "dullness, disappointment, discouragement". As with all human beings, there are ups and downs... Every source of hope has its limits:

- international communication, but which common awareness?
- new groups in the South and the East of the world, but what about our "old" groups in Europe?
- deepening the charism of the Founders, but are we really nourished by the Gospel and their way of living it?

2.1. Do we associates have a common awareness?

As everybody knows, communication does not mean community... I should dream about a common awareness and a strong feeling of belonging which all the associates could share in! But the reality is very different. International communication has its failures: difficulty of languages (how to communicate with Swahili-speaking women in the Congo?), lack of access to Internet... And above all, relationships amongst people who know each other very well can be challenging. Associates come and go, following their own desire. For example, I thought that the delegates to the meeting in Szombathely would go back to motivate their respective groups. Well, for personal or relational reasons, what I envisaged hasn't been realised quite as I hoped. Actually,

they were not “spokesmen” of their group ! Stéphane Gilson, webmaster of the associates’ website, says that promises have not been kept: news from abroad hasn’t been sent, the prayer chain is not regular. There is no “associates’ General Council” to oil the wheels, when it is necessary! In fact, it is nearly impossible to federate such a wide variety of people from one to another country. And in each country, they are many ways of life and commitments: some associates work in schools, others are social workers...

The sisters can also experience the same difficulties : community has to be continually built. Much time and energy are needed to achieve effective communication !

2.2. How do we face the ageing problem?

Nobody should be surprised: the ageing of the associates is connected to the ageing of the sisters. In Scotland, for instance, the second group of associates to start, many associates are aged 80 years old and more! And there aren’t any youngsters joining the group. Use of Internet, travel, social action... everything is more difficult.

I do not exactly know about the vitality of the Brazilian, Vietnamese, or Congolese groups. But, in Belgium and France, recruitment of new associates (especially youngsters) is difficult and, certainly, very different as it is in Cape Verde. I would emphasise three weaknesses we have to face: what is the image of an associate? what kind of belonging exists? what kind of structures do we need to strengthen our belonging? Have we really moved on since the Chapter of Szombathely? I am not sure...

2.3. Have we got a spiritual life on which our actions are built ?

Even if the associates really deepen the thoughts of Peter Fourier and Alix Le Clerc, the question remains: how do we live the Gospel, inspired by their spirituality ? I think it is not possible without extended moments of prayer together. Like the sisters who pray together at least two times a day, we should meet together frequently, asking the Spirit to inspire us. Then, we could really share the spirituality of the sisters.

The situation surely varies from one group to another. And it may change according to times. But we may not leave the question out of account. Common prayer is a rock upon which we base our action and our community. In Belgium, even if we pray together by every meeting, I think we miss times of common prayer. When I (too rarely) go and visit the elderly Belgian sisters in “L’Olivier”, and I can share the common prayer with them, I feel nourished from within. And that gives me the desire to move forward. Why is it not possible with other associates? I cannot answer the question. Maybe, all the associates do not feel the same desire ? Surely our geographical dispersion is a brake, even in a small country. The chain of prayers on the website has been a good idea... but how difficult it is to stick to it!

3. And we get the impulse to move forward...

After having lucidly seen 3 signs of hope and 3 difficulties, here are 3 perspectives to move forward. Just a little step before the Chapter of Locquirec in 2014...

3.1. A special focus : educators and schools

In the countries where the sisters have kept in touch with schools, there is an opening towards younger people. A new transmission is possible.

- France is a very special case in the whole Congregation: through the “*Fondation Pierre Fourier-Alix Le Clerc*”⁶ the Congregation is the guardian of 16 educational institutions (25,000 pupils). Many initiatives have been taken in the training of teachers and heads, e.g. in Cannes (South of France), thanks to Sr Cécile Marion and her team. Recently, cooperation amongst the schools of Luxembourg and Hungary⁷ has been set up, based on the “Tour de Main”, the teaching programme of the C.O.L. In September 2011, Sr Christiane Kientz, the French Vicar, and her council organised a “**Forum of the Congregation of Our Lady**” in a Parisian school; it acted like a large “shop-window” on the world of the Congregation today. The associates, as well as other groups who work in partnership with the sisters (e.g. the Foundation Pierre-Alix led by Sr Christelle Michaux and Sr Florence Hersant), explained their concerns and their identity. Many teachers and friends of the Congregation attended the forum and were able to explore more deeply the “image” of the C.O.L. today.
- In Belgium, the situation is different because the few Belgian sisters do not run their “historical” schools of Jupille, Berlaymont and La Hulpe anymore, but they still have an important “power of advice”⁸. The teaching programmes of these schools are inspired by Alix Le Clerc’s and Peter Fourier’s spirituality. “Pedagogical days for teachers” have been organised to deepen their thoughts. The “roots” of the C.O.L. are well present... but how can we add “wings” to them to move forward ? In October 2011, the Belgian associates, accompanied by Sr Edith Pirard and Sr Véronique Wathelet, organised a trip around Lorraine “**Our roots and our wings**” for the headmasters and the teachers⁹. This trip was a big success: about 20 teachers as well as the headmasters of Berlaymont and Jupille. It contributed to a better knowledge of the Founders and the associates. Since then, some teachers have joined the Belgian group.

Both initiatives, of the French Vicariate (Forum of the C.O.L.) and the Belgian associates (Our roots and our wings), could, perhaps, be an example for other countries, where there is only a small number of schools. The main question is : how can we communicate the “image” of the C.O.L. to the general public?

3.2. Autonomy and commitment

Up to now, the associates have been accompanied, supported or led by a sister... except in Cape Verde. But the sisters are getting older. A new step could be for the associates to become autonomous. If the Cape Verdian associates are able to do it, we probably are... It does not mean

⁶ Cfr <http://www.fondation-pfalco.org/>

⁷ Srs Françoise Debeaupre and Marie-Thérèse Clément have been sharing their school experience in Hungary.

⁸ In Berlaymont, Sr Véronique Wathelet is member of the Board of Directors, Srs Marie-Laure Martin and Edith Pirard are members of the General Assembly.

⁹ Cfr the folders « Our roots and our wings » on <http://www.alix-pierre-associated.org/>

the partnership between sisters and associates could disappear. Actually, it is the foundation of our commitment ! But we have to see the reality of the C.O.L. today...

Autonomy means accepting another way of organising ourselves and making a more formal commitment. In Brazil, for instance, the associates take vows. In Belgium and France, people are worried about committing themselves, although rituals are important as they help to foster a sense of belonging. However, I believe the wonderful adventure of the associates cannot bear lasting fruit without some form of structure. All that the sisters have achieved is worth carrying on the mission. If some delegates of the associates are invited to the next Chapter, I think the question of structures has to be looked at. As Laurent Boisvert wrote in his comprehensive book about the associates of a religious congregation , *Un élan ne peut durer s'il ne consent pas à s'institutionnaliser tant soit peu.*¹⁰

3.3. A common concern : caring for creation.

Sr Marie Alexia Nguyen, Superior General, has frequently emphasised that a common theme, such as, the care of creation, can provide a focus for sisters and the associates. On the website of the C.O.L., there is a phrase: « *La transfiguration du cœur et de la communauté est indissolublement liée à la guérison de la Terre. Une vision du monde transfigurée nous permet de distinguer la portée durable de nos manières d'être vis-à-vis d'autrui, notamment du pauvre, et vis-à-vis de notre environnement naturel, empreinte silencieuse de Dieu.* »¹¹

This subject really answers one of the cries of our world today: the world has to be protected because the human being has to be protected. World, body, spirit are bound together. As sisters and associates, aware of the spiritual sense of life, we can bring something new to this present issue.

On the website of the C.O.L., we can find several avenues for reflection/action:

- * getting out of the circles of violence
- * experiencing creation as a world of relationships
- * learning about interdependence as a condition of life
- * growing together in respect and harmony

We associates, all over the world, could work together on the same issue, for instance, “getting out of the circles of violence”: by searching for texts to inspire their reflections, from the Gospel, from the works of St Augustine’s, from Peter Fourier’s and Alix Le Clerc’s thoughts; by examining the roots of violence in their own lives (at school, at home, in the prisons...). Each group of associates could send a short contribution to the website of the C.O.L. or the website of the associates. Work and exchanges together would be possible. We would be able to grow together in partnership with the sisters. Eventually, the feeling of belonging would grow stronger. Two years is time enough before the 2014 Chapter, to work out this project!

¹⁰ Laurent Boisvert, *Laïcs associés à une congrégation religieuse*. Bellarmin, 2001, p.63

¹¹ Bartholomé Ier, Déclaration de Porto Alegre, 2006. Cf. <http://www.congregation-notredame.cef.fr/>

4. Conclusion

At the end of this survey, I have to apologize! I have said nothing about what is happening in countries such as Brazil, the Congo or Vietnam where the associates have been working for many years. In Juazeiro (Nordeste of Brazil), for instance, the associates continue to help the pilgrims who come to pray to “Padre Cicero”, they raise funds for schools, pray with the sisters... In Southern Brazil (Erexim, Sao Paulo...), several groups are active in health care, adult education and in reflection on “rebuilding relationships in a wounded world”¹². In Kolwezi (the Congo), the associates help the prisoners, bringing them some meals¹³. In Vietnam, the associates share the sisters’ mission in catechesis and “heart schools”.... It would be great if I could know what is really happening also in Slovakia and Hungary ! But, everywhere, the Holy Spirit is at work inspiring the lives of Peter Fourier’s and Alix Le Clerc’s inheritors.

Before pointing out principles and generalities, we have to come back to the reality: our associates are living in the world, on the path of “spiritual, fraternal and apostolic sharing” with the sisters. If we open our ears, we are maybe able to hear them singing together “*May God be your one and only love*”... And each associate is unique, held as each one is in the palm of God’s hand. This is the main point. *Think globally, act locally*. First of all, each associate has to feel loved, welcomed, spiritually nourished and if need be financially supported. And then indeed, every step forward is a grace-filled step into a deeper fraternity.... every action can be a continuation of the sisters’ mission, a present of God. We, associates and sisters, are groping our way, an Easter Way of death and resurrection, between differences, challenges and common hopes. With confidence.

Finally, let us go back to the source of our being, the One who inspires our action, let us ponder the text: *I am the true vine; and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit, he will cut away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more. You are clean already by means of the word that I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, unless it remains part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing*¹⁴.

¹² Cfr the article of Sr Terezia Mrazova in CND n°126 – 2012, p. 46-48

¹³ Cfr the article of Sr Nday Ilunga Banza Esther in CND n°126- 2012, p. 42-43

¹⁴ John, 15, 1-5. Gospel for May 6th 2012