

General Chapter Canossian Sisters

12 August 2022 Rome
Ezekiel 16:1-15, 60, 63; Matthew 19:3-12

INTRODUCTION

I spent most of my Jesuit life in the Philippines, except for some years of studying and pastoral and research exposures abroad. During these years, I was fortunate to have met some Canossian Sisters doing pastoral and educational ministries in Mindanao, fighting human trafficking in Manila, and even cooperating with political struggle against human rights violations. I got to know of Saint Josephine Bakhita when I served as pilgrimage chaplain during my studies in the UK. I really appreciate your passion for God's Kingdom. And now, I have a chance to pray with you in this momentous occasion. Thank you!

Today is the Feast of Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, a French woman of great and noble character. She was born in 1572 and died at the age of 69. She founded the religious Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary. The order accepted women who were rejected by other orders because of poor health or age. When people criticized her, Chantal famously said, *"What do you want me to do? I like sick people myself; I'm on their side."* During its first eight years, the new order also was unusual in its public outreach, in contrast to most female religious who remained cloistered and adopted strict ascetic practices. Saint Francis de Sales was her spiritual director and a close friend.

In his eulogy for Jane de Chantal, St. Francis de Sales said, *"In Madame de Chantal I have found the perfect woman, whom Solomon had difficulty in finding in Jerusalem"*. Solomon was famous for his wisdom, and Francis found in Jane de Chantal that wisdom. Today, I would like to invite you to reflect on a particular kind of wisdom called **"sagacity"** ---that sharp, intuitive but penetrating knowledge of where the will of God can be found.

In this mass, let us pray for this virtue which might help us confront the complicated situation we find ourselves in today, especially as we discern God's will during this General Chapter. This virtue of sagacity requires diligence and hard work. Let us acknowledge that we need extra grace to pursue this passionate search for God's will. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

HOMILY

I was in Palermo, two weeks ago, when I received the reminder that I agreed to celebrate mass with you today. I was staying with the Jesuit community attached to the Chiesa di Gesu della Casa Professa. That tourist attraction is a wonderful example of baroque design. But many are not aware that there is an elevated chapel behind the main nave, called Capella del Sabato. It was a venue often used by the Congregation of the Cross and Martyrdom of Christ in many of their collective discernment meetings in early 1900.

One thing that struck me there was the circle of statues of women representing great and noble virtues. Of course, you have the virtues of *Prudence* and *Mercy* and *Purity and Innocence*, but the very first virtue to the left as you enter the chapel is called *Sagacitās* or *Sagacity*. And I felt like that virtue should speak a lot to us today, especially when we meet to discern where the Lord is leading us in these confusing times. **Sagacity** comes from the French *sagacité* which in turn is derived from the Latin *sagācitās* or quickness of perception. Many people associate sagacity with political savvy, of detecting where power lies and ably choosing the right strategies for maneuver. But it is not only true in politics. Sagacity touches on personal and even spiritual maturity that allows us to see beauty even in ugly situations (Michael Bassey Johnson). Sagacity, therefore, is the quality that makes a person a sage.

I am not sure whether Pope Francis has visited the Jesuit Church in Palermo but he also has his list of virtues, and Sagacity is one of them. According to Pope Francis, *“sagacity is the readiness to grasp and confront situations with shrewdness and creativity”*. Sagacity, according to the Pope, also *“entails personal effort aimed at acquiring the necessary requisites for exercising as best we can our tasks and duties with intelligence and insight”* [21 December 2015].

But sagacity for a Christian goes further. In the Gospel today, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees with the question of divorce. And Jesus answers, "Have you not read that in the beginning the Creator made them male and female...So, they are no longer two but one body; let no one separate what God has joined."

The question of divorce is complicated, but let me focus first on Jesus' tone of voice. It is as if Jesus were saying, *“Can you not see the point of God for blessing marriage. Don't you have insight on how God works in human life, in human history?”* Even the disciples seem at a loss. If that is the

case, they say, then it is useless to get married. You can imagine Jesus stretching out his patience. *“Don’t you have insight? Don’t you have wisdom? Don’t you have sagacity?”*

This virtue is so challenging that there’s actually a whole new journal called *Sagacity: Journal of Theology and Christian Education*. The virtue of sagacity, according to the Journal, is “the capacity for astute or sound judgment.” It is a kind of thinking that involves “the impetus to engage human existence with honest intelligence as a fulcrum by which we undertake numerous activities with creativity, purpose and integrity. Without such leverage, we could only make arbitrary decisions based on momentary impulses and reactions; our activities, as to whether these are worthwhile or have enduring outcomes, would be uncertain or capricious. Sagacity is astute engagement with human existence that can both test ideas through purposeful activity and modify previous propensities through thoughtful reflection.”

I would like to add that today, more than ever, sagacity must also involve consulting data of human experience. This means appreciating and integrating the results of even secular research and findings about the situation of humankind in these perilous times. One example of the set data that we need to pay attention to is **The Global Risks Report**, published regularly by the World Economic Forum. It is called an “Insight Report”.

According to this 2022 report, 41.8% of the global population has a grim outlook of the next three years and 37.4% fear of fractured societies dividing the world into winners and losers. When asked to identify the most severe risks on a global scale over the next 10 years, people answer climate action failure, extreme weather, biodiversity loss, infectious diseases, debt crises, among other things. Thank God, Pope Francis has crafted **Laudato Si** for this engagement. We could almost hear the Lord, speaking through this and various other reports, *“Don’t you see these signs? Don’t you hear the voice of the Lord in these reports?”*

Now, if we take these and other reports seriously, then we can probably expand our interpretation of the Lord’s concern for unity in the family, beyond the divorce issue. The Lord’s dream is a sense of being one family protecting the earth as our common home. In the same Global Risks Report, the top scars left by Covid-19 are the erosion of social cohesion, livelihood crises and mental health deterioration. This fragmentation, this erosion of what unites the human family is exacerbated by digital inequality,

debt crises, and even the threat of military confrontation between the remaining super powers of today. Thank God again for Pope Francis' encyclical Fratelli Tutti that reanimates authentic dialogue and a better politics for today's fragmented pandemic-infected world. *How much of these sets of data and Church teachings inform our deliberation and discernment?*

Before I end, let me go back to the 'Chapel of the Virtues'. I realize that right next to the statue of Sagacity is the Statue of Fortitude, of Courage, of Audacity, of Parrhesia. That also says a lot to us! We embrace vulnerability, yes, but that is not enough. The call for Synodality offers new energy and new strength. And so, in the midst of our vocational vulnerability and institutional weakness, in the face of our dwindling personnel and resources, we are still challenged and empowered to see and to detect where the hand of God is working and the heart of God is expressing love.

I sincerely pray that in your assembly, you may be blest with the virtue of sagacity, of that sharp, intuitive but also data-supported penetrating knowledge of God's will for you and for our peoples—strengthened and moved by audacity, courage, fortitude, and don't forget joy—in this challenging time. Amen.