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LETTER OF THE PRIOR GENERAL
TO THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE ORDER OF SAINT AUGUSTINE
ON WORLD DAY OF CONSECRATED LIFE

*"We are in the same boat,
All of us fragile and disoriented,
But at the same time important and needed,
all of us called to row together, since no one reaches salvation by themselves."
(Pope Francis' Message for the World Day of Peace, 2021)*

Dear brothers and sisters:

On behalf of the General Council, I am writing to share with you my deep sentiments of peace, grace and love given by Jesus in whom we renew our witness, faith and life on this World Day of Consecrated Life.

We are living in a moment of crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic is dramatically changing the world, customs, and way of life we know. We have been taken by surprise by a situation that escapes any anticipation and that deeply shakes our security. Everything has been affected. Including our religious life. It is a time of death and life; of pain and questioning; of challenges and decisions. I believe that we are in a time of change, in a true crossroads of history. As the Pope reminds us, "it is a time when both our categories and our ways of thinking are shaken, and our priorities and lifestyles come into question [...]. The question is whether we are going to get out of this crisis and, if so, how. The basic rule is that you never get out of a crisis the same. If you get out, you come out better or worse; but never the same." (Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*. New York 2020, 1). Whether we like it or not, we are protagonists, not mere spectators. In the options of the present, we risk our future as an Order. And these options should lead us to some dramatic decisions.

During these months, in one way or another, we have been forced to question ourselves about our personal lives, and our life in community and in our circumscriptions. We must question our apostolates and how we exercise service in the Church. We have realized that, at times, we have been building on sand and not on the solid rock that is Christ (cf. Mt 7: 21-29). At times we have made our illusions into realities that are not always important. Thus, worldliness,

individualism, routine and, ultimately, selfishness has grown in the Order. They are indicators that the salt has lost its flavor (Mt. 5,13). This is a key to the vocational crisis and marks an urgency for change.

Now we are more aware than ever of the need for profound renewal to accept the newness that comes from the Spirit, in living our charism: so suggestive, so attractive, so demanding, so current. The Augustinian charism is not a set of quotations from Saint Augustine or the saints of the Order, but a way of being Christian, with all its radicality inward (holiness) and outward (mission). A path towards the fullness of Christian life and perfect charity (cf. *Constitutions*, 1). It is true that no one can know what the future will hold, but we can enter "a new imagination of what is possible." It is not an easy process, nor can it be solved in a moment, it is long, complex, and deep. It is also urgent and necessary. It cannot be postponed; it cannot be ignored. And it affects everyone: men and women religious, laity, communities, circumscriptions, the Order. We have the obligation to rethink our reality as Augustinians in the Church and in the world. This is what the Pope asks of us, to whom we reiterate our devotion and fidelity proper to our Order (cf. *Constitutions*, 3). He invites us not to be afraid.

Consideration of the present moment must take us out of ourselves and our "particular beliefs" and lead us to understand and live our own encounter with Christ in a more coherent and therefore riskier way. "This is the moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities — what we value, what we want, what we seek — and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of." (Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, 6). The moment we are living offers us the possibility of transforming hearts hardened by selfishness. I invite you seriously and deeply to review various elements of our life and our structures, to walk the path of renewal and hope. Three options seem especially urgent to me, which I propose for your consideration.

* *Option for life*. The world is changing rapidly and with great inequality. A number of systems have been exhausted, leading to a humanitarian and existential crisis of values. What Saint John Paul II called the "culture of death" (cf. Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*) advances inexorably and laws on abortion and euthanasia are passed, which affect the very existence of the most fragile and vulnerable at the beginning and end of life: the unborn, the elderly and the incurable. Furthermore, true and authentic "structures of sin" against life are created and consolidated, which make inequality possible: the unjust distribution of property, attacks on human rights, the drama of migrants and refugees, the consequences of the financial, climate and health crises. We Augustinians, who have taken a vow of poverty, must "look" at the poor without reducing them to an economic and social concept or category. For this reason, we not only have the obligation to denounce the structural evil of our society and its false models of production, consumption and development, but, at the same time, it is urgent to propose new paths based on the Gospel (cf. *Constitutions*, 73). All of us are called to care for the most fragile on earth (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 209). That is why I ask each brother and sister in all the circumscriptions of the Order to be decisively involved in the defense of the dignity of life, with all that it means and implies.

* *Option for fraternity.* In line with what Pope Francis beautifully tells us: “I hope in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. Fraternity between all men and women. Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together.” (Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 8). If we, as Augustinians, have come together having one soul and one heart on the journey towards God (cf. *Rule* 1,3), we must be teachers of communion and creators of unity. Having an open mind and a sense of the Order seem essential to me at the present time. For this reason, nationalism, provincialism and localism are an attack against unity and constitute infidelity to our vocation. There is no room for discrimination based on nationality, race or culture, and there is no room for selfishness. I also remind you that we profess for the Augustinian Order. It is necessary for us to make progress in reinforcing our community structures (a serious problem in the Order is caused by the proliferation of excessively small communities). It is also necessary that we promote collaboration between constituencies.

* *Option for creative risk taking.* All renewal in the Church consists essentially in reinforcing and faithfully living one's own vocation (cf. Vatican Council II, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 6). We have been called to follow Christ closely in the Augustinian charism; our personal history and also our history as an Order is a love story that gives meaning to who we are and what we do. "One does not begin to be a Christian through an ethical decision or a great idea, but rather through an encounter with an event, with a Person, who gives a new horizon to life and, with it, a decisive orientation" (Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*, 1). Whoever encounters Christ shares in his radical novelty and opens himself to the Good News, assuming the responsibility of proclaiming it, of bearing witness to it. This announcement carries with it the invitation to share its joy, which attracts precisely because it is enthusiastic. Have we perhaps lost the freshness of the Gospel? How and what is our vocational response? The Holy Spirit is like a strong wind that shakes the whole house (cf. Acts 2,2) and we must keep the Spirit in our hearts daily (cf. Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 272B, 9). It is time to engage in a deep and transformative spiritual experience. We are not on the brink of the abyss, but rather at a historical crossroads that demands coherence and a courageous and honest response from us. The times in which we now live contain a lesson from God, a call to step out from what is known, from security, from inertia. We have an invitation to change our perspective, to stop once and for all the insistent and routine repetition, to overcome the fear of change and suspicion of the new. Following Jesus implies moving towards the unknown, without fear or bewilderment. I hope that we can reflect on this and, in dialogue, we can specify renewal options in our various levels (personal, community, circumscription and Order).


Dear brothers and sisters, we are not alone. We are united in Christ, “as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth, which is our common

home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all.” (cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 8). At this moment in history, united as Augustinians, as Church, as humanity that seeks and yearns, we say with one voice, together with our Father Saint Augustine: “O Lord my God, my one hope, hearken to me, lest through weariness I be unwilling to seek you, but that I may always ardently seek your face. Give me the strength to seek you... My strength and my infirmity are in your sight: preserve the one and heal the other. My knowledge and my ignorance are in your sight; where you have opened to me, receive me as I enter; where you have closed, open to me as I knock. May I remember you, understand you, love you. Increase these things in me, until you renew me wholly” (Saint Augustine, *The Trinity*, 15,28,51).

May the Lord bless us and may Saint Joseph, patron of the Order, protect us.

With joyful wishes to all of our Sisters and Brothers on this Day of Consecrated Life.

Rome, February 2, 2021


Fr. Alejandro Moral Antón
Prior General O.S.A.