

# Chapter Reflection Letter I

26 September 2013

Dear Brothers,

*Every member of the Congregation shares the responsibility for the constant renewal of its life and for its adjustment to the changing needs of the world and the Church. (Constitution 94)*

In less than six months from now we will begin our Thirty-First Congregation Chapter in Nairobi. Most of our Provinces and Region have had the first part of their own Chapters, naming delegates, raising issues and noticing the movements that are taking place. For those called to the ministry of leadership this can be a very busy time as they give an account of their stewardship, and attend to the many details such accounting involves. For the rest of us, this major event in the life of the Congregation can become almost a non-event. We can easily allow this graced time to pass us by as we permit routine and our everyday concerns to manage our lives.

The Congregation Leadership Team wants to share with you some thoughts on Chapters and our evolving understanding of what happens at such times. Our hope is that this will enable us all to prepare for the coming Congregation Chapter with greater awareness and clarity.

Many of us know how much our Chapters have changed from the 1970s to the present time. My earliest memories revolve round listening to the arguments put forward by delegates for and against certain positions. I remember Chapters becoming divided over issues. Groups often came to the Chapter to deal with certain personal agenda and to

pass resolutions. It was their one chance to ensure that grievances were aired and that “their men got in!” I also remember the formality of these events and the ‘acceptance of motions to amend motions to the proposal’!

God was always regarded as a constant. God’s revelation never changed and we knew what God was like and what God was asking of us. So, if God was a constant then we did not need to focus on the quest for God at Chapter time, and we came with programmes that looked to the smooth running of the Institution. And very often that is what happened.

More recent Chapters have been quite different. We speak of ‘sharing reflections’ rather than debating issues, of ‘reaching consensus’ rather than deciding by vote, of including times of prayer and silence, of discernment, of thinking Congregation more than Province or Region or District.



Prayer and Silence

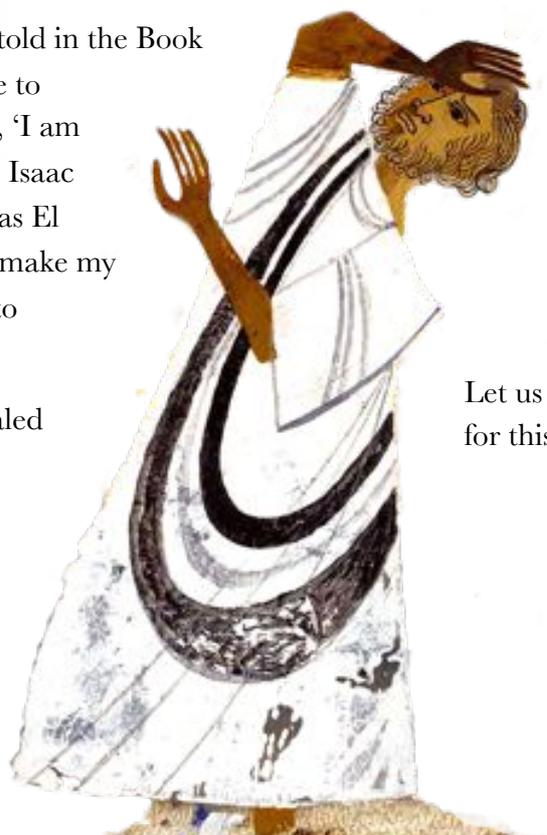
There is a huge emphasis on “Listening for God”, and the processes used in Chapter are to help that to happen. Each Chapter asks, ‘what if our current image of God is not where God is revealing the Divine footprint now?’

*...He is such a fast  
God, always before us and  
Leaving as we arrive<sup>1</sup>*

We are gradually coming to the realisation that every Chapter is a special moment in the love relationship between the Congregation and the Mystery we call God. This special moment, like all love moments, reveals more of the Beloved. What happens after the Chapter therefore is the result of this new experience of Divine unfolding. Because we experience God in this new way, we act differently. The initiatives that result from Chapter are a response to this fresh understanding. It has always been like this, even if we were not immediately aware of it.

There is a lovely story told in the Book of Exodus. “God spoke to Moses and said to him, ‘I am Yahweh. To Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I appeared as El Shaddai, but I did not make my name Yahweh known to them.’” [Ex. 6:2-3]

The new name is revealed to Moses because now there is a new mission for the People of God. The old name, which sustained a fledgling group of refugees, no longer suffices to deal with new threats. Now they



have to deal with Pharaoh: the one who is the Father of the People, but not of all the people – only a favoured few. We have Pharaohs in every age. What name of God do we need to deal with these Pharaohs? Moses receives the name Yahweh, written only with the vowels YHWH, pronounced like a gasp! And it is in this God, this gasp, this breath, that he is asked to trust. Do you believe in the promises of Pharaoh or in the breath of God?

What is our world and our Church facing today that needs a fresh understanding of God? Why is it that Religious Life finds itself in such dire straits now? Our failure to be enkindled is because our image of God is old!

Chapter time is a time of seeking and sharing and renewing images and experiences of God, initiated by God.

*Now is the time for stripping the spirit bare,  
Time for the burning of days ended and  
done,  
Idle solace of things that have gone before:  
Rootless hope and fruitless desire are there;  
Let them go to the fire, with never a look  
behind.  
The world that was ours, is a world that is  
ours no more.<sup>2</sup>*

Let us be bold and generous in preparing ourselves for this.

*David, Francis, Jack, Peter, Philip*

<sup>1</sup> R.S. Thomas, *Pilgrimages*

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Binyon, *The Burning of the leaves*