

OPENING ADDRESS BY THE GENERAL SUPERIOR

Dear Friend and Colleagues,

I am happy to welcome you to this meeting as those responsible for implementing our Society's Formation Programme.

The eruption of violence in Kenya over the last couple of weeks has thrown most of our plans into disarray, causing us to cancel the EAR Assembly and necessitating the transferral of this meeting.

Kenya remains volatile: our thoughts and prayers are for a peaceful and just outcome to the present tragic circumstances.

We remember those who were unable to attend this meeting: Liam Durrant, Theodore Wubbels, Donie O'Connor and Patricia Akiisa.

We also bring to this table our other formators: Paul Hien, Fr Matheus, Fr Arla, Andrew Mukulu, as well as all those who help us as associate or assistant formators.

Our students are also here with us in our hearts and minds as well as in all our deliberations.

It could be said that prior to Vatican II, formation had probably been based on preceding monastic models, the characteristics of which include regimentation, indoctrination, discipline, separation and detachment; focussed towards the personal acceptance and integration of the vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.

This was surely mirrored in our own formation programme which most of you will have experienced to some degree.

When the liberating winds of change swept through the Church in the 60s and 70s, the prevailing model of formation correspondingly loosened up, broke out and deconstructed itself.

Those of us in Roosendaal during the 70s will remember the result: excitement, hope and promise. The world was changing and we would be part of a reformed reality. However, re-forming of new formation models was still in progress, leaving us in something of a creative in-between-time.

It was with the encyclical *Pastores Dabo Vobis* that the focus was sharpened with the acknowledgement of four equally important areas of formation: pastoral, personal, intellectual and spiritual. The purpose of formation is to integrate these four areas, with the happy consequence of presenting to the Church for ordained ministry and mission a growing but wholesome person.

It is twenty years since the momentous capitular decision to recruit students from Africa and Asia. An enormous amount has changed in this time: in the world, the Church and our Society.

We have had the courage to explore alternatives and grow through mistakes. We have had the wisdom to reflect with intelligence and humility on our processes: the Guidebook for Formation, the Review of Formation, and numerous meetings and documents bear ample evidence of this.

Change continues unabated and though I believe we have an inspiring, well-developed programme, something we can be truly proud of, we must, like the Church, be always reforming.

Hence this meeting, which allows us to share information, understand each other's contexts, support one another in such a demanding ministry, and if and when necessary make the necessary recommendation to the General Council for change.

I have no doubt about the importance of what we are doing. We have partial custody of young people's lives and futures. We are heavily responsible to them, our Society and the Church for how we prepare them for ministry and mission. I believe we are giving them our very best: I believe you are the best.

From my own experience, I have learnt that we must not lose focus on what is realistically possible. Formation is a partnership and the adult student is also called to be fully responsible for his own formation. We provide the opportunities and the healthy context for the student, and where necessary the encouragement and the admonition. Ultimately, though, it is up to him to be open to what is offered, to respond generously and grow with us as their overseers.

Some students will engage the programme and after a healthy process of discernment, decide to leave; others wait for dismissal, waiting for the decision to be made for them.

Dismissal of a student is usually the consequence of his not being willing to engage fully in what is offered in the formation programme. You have the responsibility to discern the future of the students in your care. You serve us all well, including the student concerned, when after all due consideration and consultation, you decide to dismiss him. You have the General Council's full support in this most difficult aspect of your ministry.

The next ten or so years will prove crucial to the future of our Society, let alone our Formation Programme. It will require from us all flexibility, a generous spirit, sacrifice and creative planning to maintain the high standards we have set for ourselves.

Sincere and talented students present themselves to us, usually with the full support of the Local Church. We have excellent structures and facilities, and a well-constructed Formation Programme.

Thanks to foresight and good planning we have the financial resources to sustain it. Excluding capital outlay, the cost of the whole formation programme is still less than the running costs of St Joseph's College in the past.

Our main challenge is in the area of personnel. We need a minimum of 12 full-time formators and four full-time Vocation Directors and we must balance this with our commitment to Mission. I am confident that we can manage this challenge if we all continue to be flexible, adaptable and generous: in fact, a perfect model for our students whom we are preparing to send out as Good News to those they will serve.

By the Will of the Father may the Spirit who forms us in friendship with Jesus Christ, bless our efforts in His name. Amen.