



PLENARY GENERAL COUNCIL
AUTEUIL: 1-20 February 2020



**Discernment, Communion, Peripheries
Calls, Promises and Challenges
A Journey Forward**

**“It is folly not to be what one is [Religious of the Assumption] as fully as possible”
Saint Marie Eugenie**

OPENING MESSAGE

Very dear Sisters,

This is our first CGP after General Chapter 2018, and it gives me immense joy to address you on this auspicious day as we begin our journey together to strengthen our bonds, to reread our experiences, to address our major concerns, and to dream together for the future.

One of the fruits of the discernment of the GC 2018 was the birth of our general community. I want to take this opportunity to thank the congregation for the gift of my council. We enjoy being together, praying together, reflecting, and discerning together. It is indeed a blessing and God’s special gift for me and for the congregation. This does not mean that we have no difficulties; we do have our own fragilities. In fact, we are so different from one another: different in rhythms, talents, temperaments, likes and dislikes, but what helps us remain united are our kindness, our mutual appreciation and respect for each one’s role, generosity to give our best at the service of the congregation, and our conviction that we are here because we are chosen by God. This experience of communion is a source of grace for me. I also thank our sister community, the Auteuil community, for its service to the congregation as well as for being an inspiration and strength for the general community.

The past eighteen months have been a period of much learning for me. I have been discovering the congregation from within – from the centre to the provinces/region and vice-versa. I have learnt many things from my council, from sharing with the sisters, bursars and provincials, as well as in and through the canonical visits, various sessions, celebrations, committees, commissions, and our mutual exchanges. We are a group of joyful and committed women known for our simple hospitality, sisterly dealings, and mission of transformative education: formal and informal. In spite of some difficulties in some places, in general, there is a mutual sense of affection and appreciation between the sisters and our mission partners, whether they are lay, religious or clergy. Topics such as the accompaniment of sisters, inter-cultural living, healthy inter-personal relationships, the pastoral of vocations, formation at all levels, leadership and its challenges, and a greater collaboration with the laity occupy significant space in our conversations.

We live in a rapidly-changing world and an evolving multi-cultural and multi-religious environment. We experience tensions between globalization and localization, internationality and inculturation, secularised culture, and longings for meaningful spirituality. There seems to be a crisis in the world today, and we religious are not above this global phenomenon which envelops our daily life. How do we redefine ourselves and make our presence – our identity and mission – a source of healing and integration in a wounded, broken, and divided world?

The GC 2018 highlighted discernment, communion and peripheries as our identity marks and invited us **“to return to the sources”** of our spiritual heritage, in order to become fully religious of the Assumption for our times.¹ Our experiences tell us that these calls have both promises and challenges. We have been making conscious efforts to make discernment a way of life, better inter-personal relationships in communities a priority, and going to the peripheries an imperative for us to respond to the calls of our times. You shall see these aspects more in detail in the reports of the general community and of the provinces.

In this opening message, as one of our responses, I want to explore and deepen the words of Saint Marie Eugenie: “It is folly not to be what we are [Religious of the Assumption] as fully as possible.” During our annual retreat with Saint Marie Eugenie, prepared and accompanied by Sister Clare Teresa, I was touched by the concern of Marie Eugenie when she said to the sisters who were preparing to be educators that **our congregation should cease to exist the day when we abandon the values of the Gospel and accept the values of this world.**² Similarly, Pope Francis recently (last month) reminded us to consider whether our thoughts and ideas come from God or from the spirit of the world: “when you feel something, you feel like doing something or you get an idea, a judgment of something, ask yourself: ‘is this what I feel from the Spirit of God or from the spirit of the world?’”³

We have not abandoned the values of Jesus and the Gospel; but I get the impression sometimes that we are gradually becoming more and more absorbed by the values, attitudes, and choices of this world. It is also a concern that sometimes we do wonderfully well in our apostolic field but we cannot live together in community. Or we are very faithful to our daily prayers, but we cannot be kind enough to one another in community. Sometimes we find our comfort in the community and forget that we have been called to a serious engagement with the suffering people of the world. For some of us, Smartphones have become our constant companions, and we don’t like to live a day without them. Some of us are so busy that we give insufficient time to the community and even to the mission. Lastly, a few are pious or prophetic religious but not necessarily “religious of the Assumption.”

If so, what makes us religious of the Assumption? What does it mean to be a religious of the Assumption today? In this context, I would like to talk about an **“ASSUMPTION CULTURE”** or an **“ASSUMPTION WAY”** which in a certain manner transcends and at the same time integrates our individual cultures. This culture will have diverse manifestations or different

¹ The General Chapter 2018 document, especially pages 5-7, 9-10.

² “All that St Teresa wished for her sisters the day they abandoned holy poverty [that the convent walls crumble], I want for you the day you abandon the values of Jesus and the Gospel in favor of the world’s values.” I quote from the notes of Sister Clare Teresa, “This Church which you do not Know,” page 5 (cf. Mère Marie Eugénie, *Conseils sur l’Education*, n°1511, en 1842).

³ <https://zenit.org> (JANUARY 07, 2020).

faces in each province. As the history of our congregation evolves and unfolds with new expressions in response to the current challenges, we are invited to return to the sources in order to help us discern creative and meaningful expressions of the Assumption Way for today.

The RA charism is a gift to the Church. It is our task to remain deeply rooted in our Assumption heritage and to make our presence, our way of life and mission meaningful and relevant.⁴ The metaphor that comes to my mind is a “**flying kite and its string**”. If we think the string is keeping a kite from flying higher, we are mistaken. The truth is that the string helps the kite stay up high and in place in spite of being pulled in different directions by the wind. In our pursuit of freedom and autonomy, we sometimes snap the string of God’s will as found in our **Rule of Life**, our common policies and decisions, and in our charism and heritage. We forget that the more strongly connected we are, the higher we can fly. True freedom is basically the possibility to be fully oneself, true to one’s nature and faithful to one’s duty. I am free not when I can do whatever I want and the way I want. As a religious of the Assumption, I am free when I can be fully a religious of the Assumption and live the Assumption Way of Life in its plenitude, to paraphrase the words of Saint Marie Eugenie. What enslaves us is that which takes us away from our Assumption Way, the RA identity and mission. Moreover, it is the legacy of Saint Marie Eugenie that binds us together beyond the borders of race, class, colour, and nationality.

When I think of the relationship between the general community and the provinces/region, the metaphor that comes to mind is that of “**mirrors and shadows**” [കണ്ണാടികളും നിഴലുകളും].⁵ Mirrors will always give us a reflection of our true selves and truth gives us real freedom. Shadows will never give up on us and they will always accompany us no matter where life leads us. We wanted to be honest, transparent and straightforward in our responses. On the other hand, we tried to be closer to you in accompanying you with our affection, ongoing reflections and prayers, upholding the well-being of the provinces/region as well as the common good of the congregation. Yes, we have realized that truth sometimes hurts. But in the long run, this hurt is more life-giving and growth-promoting than a *laissez-aller* that protects us momentarily. So, let us become “mirrors of truth and shadows of light” to one another.

We need to continue our ongoing search for meaning and relevance which implies not only restructuring but constant renewal. It seems imperative also to have a mindset focused on **integration, inclusion, wholeness, and holiness**. In this journey, we need to combine kindness and firmness, centers and peripheries, space for creativity and norms for boundaries. They sound like opposites, but they will complement each other and make us more balanced. I would add my hope that our contemplative experience lead to personal

⁴ For a detailed discussion, see Rekha M Chennattu, “To Be Rooted and Relevant: A Call for a Paradigm Shift in the Life of Women Religious,” *UISG Bulletin* 142 (2010): 47-61; « Enracinée et Pertinente : Un Appel à Changer le Paradigme de la Vie Religieuse Féminine, » *Bulletin UISG* 142 (2010) : 46-61. Enraizadas y Pertinentes: Un Llamado a Cambiar el Paradigma de la Vida Religiosa Femenina,” *Boletín UISG* 142 (2010): 46-60. Una Spiritualita Radicata e Attuale per un Cambiamento di Paradigma nella Vita Religiosa Femminile,” *Bollettino UISG* 142 (2010): 47-61.

⁵ In Malayalam (my mother tongue), the term *nizhal* (നിഴൽ = shadow) is a neutral term. As a metaphor, the word "shadow" here has a positive meaning and symbolizes a benevolent accompaniment that never abandons.

conversion and that our community living impel us to prophetic mission. Let us therefore reclaim and hold fast to our rich heritage as we discern and appropriate new and creative expressions of the Assumption Way or the Assumption Culture for our times.

I hope our reflections together in the light of the reports of the general community, the provinces, commissions, special talks on “Consecrated Life” and “Intercultural Communities” – not to forget our Immersion Experience – will all help us journey together with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

With deep sentiments of joy and hope, immense gratitude to my council and to each one of you, and in communion with each and every sister in the Congregation, I open the General Plenary Council 2020. May our deliberations and reflections help us journey forward with optimism and deeper communion at the service of God’s mission in the world.

May God bless our journey!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rekha M. Chennattu". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rekha M. Chennattu, RA
Superior General

Auteuil, 1st February 2020