



FRATRES  
SANCTI JOHANNIS  
PROVINCIAE  
EUROPAE

## Message from the European Provincial Chapter 2023

Marchegg, Austria, from 10th to 17th January 2023



The first European Provincial Chapter began on Tuesday 10th January 2023 in the Priory of Maria Königin with the 19 capitular brothers and the chapter secretary. It had been extremely well prepared by the brothers in the definitory and the Priory of Marchegg gave the Chapter a very warm

welcome indeed. The merging of the Northern European Pro-Province with the Southern European Vicariat (ratified by General Chapter 2022) was the culmination of the decentralisation process the Community is going through and resulted in the European Province which, during this Chapter, laid the foundations needed for building a future full of energy and enthusiasm.

The capitular brothers began by taking an oath on the Bible, each brother committing to seek the common good of the Province. This was followed by a short time of sharing which gave each brother the chance to tell the others how he was doing and what his expectations were at the start of the Chapter.

### **"Present and future": caring for each other**

The first group work done was on the theme of "caring for each other": how to approach priory-province cooperation, what kind of brotherly attitude is needed for this and what would be the commitments and work required to make it possible? The feedback on this was full of points to learn from, and underlined the fundamental importance of listening to one another, of taking time for one another, of respectfully taking into account the "biographic make-up" of each person, of the possible symbiosis to be found, of benevolence towards governance, of positive communication, and of the setting up of provincial apostolates. Also, how to be open to constructive criticism from each other and to be more responsible for what we undertake.



### **Address: Administrator**

Br. Ignaz-Maria presented his report as Administrator, reminding the capitular brothers that the Province currently counts 48 brothers (51 affiliated) with an average age of 52. He pointed out that in its early days, the new province would be accompanied by the central government in certain areas (for example, the call to Holy Orders). He also spoke about some challenges: a positive stance on receiving vocations, initial formation to be implemented in English, and reconstruction work with regards to our past. He spoke of the positive morale of the brothers in the province, the diminished number of brothers in the priories, and the mixed feelings about the provincial formation meetings. He

also enumerated in some detail the situations of sexual abuse which have unfortunately scarred the history of priories in the province, and the important and sensitive question of requests for forgiveness. Finally, he mentioned the particular situation of the brewery in The Hague and the fraternal and financial questions that this situation raises.

### Our charism and missions in Europe



The Chapter addressed the question of the priories' missions in the province through an exchange on our apostolic fields and mandated the provincial government to reflect on our missions in Europe in relation to our charism. In addition to this, we have been working on a presentation text for general usage and which the priories will soon be invited to reflect upon.

### Exchange with the Jesuit Provincial

Bernhard Bürgler, the Jesuit Provincial of their newly created Central European Province (2021), addressed the Chapter through live link-up. From his general presentation in English we retained some points of interest for us:

- one "enters" the Jesuit order and "lives" in a province
- the order's choice of "four preferences" (Spiritual Exercises, guidance, youth, care of the common home) and of five apostolic fields
- the choice of a common language for the new province (German)

### Election: Provincial Prior

After deliberating and, the following morning, praying the Rosary, Br. Ignaz-Maria was elected as the first Provincial Prior of Europe, the election having been ratified by the Prior General. Br. Ignaz-Maria made the profession of faith and the oath of fidelity, before celebrating a Mass of thanksgiving. Since the Provincial Prior, as Major Superior, can no longer be a member of



the Prior General's Council, Br. François-Xavier informed us that he has appointed Br. Renaud-Marie to replace Br. Ignaz-Maria.

### Initial Formation

The Chapter also had the task of dealing with initial formation, first of all in the pre-novitiate stage. There are now two parts, a first period which is now called "Aspirancy" and the second "Postulancy". The brothers have opted for flexible durations for each (between 6 and 10 months), in a priory in the country of origin, where possible. The Postulancy is carried out in a residential or non-residential form, according to the discernment of the conventual chapter concerned. The same Brother will be responsible at the level of the province for these two preparatory stages.

Three sessions were reserved for looking closely at the "pro's and con's" of the five priories selected as possible places for the novitiate (the priories of London, The Hague, Marchegg, Bucharest, and Banneux), at the end of which the Chapter voted for the Priory of Marchegg. It will be up to the Prior General to establish Marchegg as a novitiate.



Br. Dan then presented the three options for our choice of philosophy formation: The Angelicum (Rome), The Josephinum (Ohio) and Tilburg University (The Netherlands), providing detail about their academic backgrounds. In the end The Angelicum was chosen, although this decision will require the consent of the General Head of Formation.

### The Provincial language

After discussion on the role of the English language in the European Province, the Chapter drew up "recommendations from the Chapter to the Provincial Prior for the implementation of the use of English as a common provincial language", including the question of how to facilitate the learning of English and to stagger the implementation over a period of time. The main suggestions included:

- that the next Provincial Chapter be bilingual (English-French)
- that the provincial formation sessions include speakers in both French and English

- Offices: that as of the next provincial activity, the hymns be in English and the office in French, provided we do not yet have a validated office in English.

### Economic and legal questions

Our provincial bursar, Br. Marie-Thomas d'Aquin, presented his report, maintaining the distinction between Northern Europe and Southern Europe, and underlining the fact that the financial situation is fortunately heading in the right direction. The capitular brothers then discussed the questions of the budget and of the provincial savings, a special provincial fund for brothers' old age, the creation of a legal status for the province and the procedures to be put in place for investment projects.



### A visit from Cardinal Schönborn



Cardinal Christopher Schönborn did the Chapter the pleasure of coming to preside at evening Mass on 13th January along with many lay faithful. He had dinner with the brothers and then generously shared his memories as a direct witness of the Community's development, which he saw from its very beginnings in Fribourg, and which he was closely involved in at several stages. He mentioned in particular the time in Fribourg and the personality of Fr. Marie-Dominique Philippe, situating him in the

history of the Church at that time and with relation to the other new communities that sprouted in the post-conciliar years. He considered that the crisis we are going through has been managed well and courageously by the Community. He urged us not to be discouraged but to move forward with hope.

### A day off in Slovakia

With beautiful weather for the day off, the capitular brothers walked 16 kilometres into neighbouring Slovakia, to the historic Marian shrine of Marianka. They celebrated Mass and shared a

meal together before continuing by bus to Bratislava to visit St. Martin's Cathedral and hear a short organ recital with explanations by the organist on the cathedral's imposing, and almost brand-new, instrument (2010). The brothers then walked through the streets and squares of the beautiful historic centre of the capital before returning to Marchegg by train.

### Address: Prior General

After this welcome break, the Chapter continued its work, welcoming the Prior General by live link-up, hearing his address and putting to him their questions. Br. François-Xavier emphasized two priorities, following the decisions taken at General Chapter 2022: to care for the life of the Community (the role of practical realism and the fraternal importance of listening to each other) and the work of the reforms undertaken.



He underlined the importance of awareness with regard to the challenges we are facing, accepting to mourn the loss of illusions in order to better welcome Christ with humility, and to live a new "community narrative" which will give rise to reconciliation by discerning God's action in the midst of our troubled past. He also invited us to read and work (both personally and in chapter) on the report from the Interdisciplinary Commission which will soon be published. Finally, he also encouraged us not to lose our sense of humor, quoting Pope Francis: "A sense of humor is the human attitude closest to the grace of God".<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the reforms, Br. François-Xavier gave an overview of the commissions' work. Of the 17 commissions created at General Chapter 2019, 8 have completed their work. Two commissions have been added: human resources and the 50th anniversary of the Community. The main projects of the commissions still at work can be grouped into the following 5 areas:

- Listening, forgiveness, human resources
- Family of St. John, Secular Oblates, 50th anniversary
- Congregational law, regular oblates

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<sup>1</sup> in *Dio è Gioia: Papa Francesco incontra Novi Orizzonti* (2020)

- Singing and liturgy
- Sos-abuse procedures and follow-up for the brothers involved

### Address: General Head of Formation



During this session Br. Jean-Polycarpe, General Head of Formation, presented to the Chapter the valuable content of our [Ratio formationis](#). Designed to be improved over time, it is genuinely suitable for nourishing personal and community work, and is a source of reflection, formation and renewal. He also pointed out that the table of contents, the index and the appendices are highly useful tools for consulting the document on the various topics it covers.

He then described the framework and nature of the office of Provincial Head of Formation, stressing that, primarily, each brother is responsible for his own formation.

### Election: Provincial Head of Formation

After the brothers had discussed the desired profile, deliberated on the possible candidates and taken a consultation vote, the Provincial Prior appointed Br. Athanase from the Priory of Geneva as Provincial Head of Formation.

### Group work on vocations

Using two extracts from the Prior General's latest lettre dealing with the question of vocations, the capitular brothers worked on three questions: the spiritual reasons for not postponing the question of vocations, the need to rework our theology of vocation in order to put God's action more at the centre, and the ways of doing things in pastoral work in order to "welcome" rather than "call". The feedback from the



groups was full of analysis and positive proposals for renewed approaches, all of them taking into account that it is first of all God who calls someone.

### A commission on The Hague

Following a motion concerning the situation of the Priory of The Hague, the Chapter expressed itself in favour of the creation of a commission to listen to the people concerned, to evaluate the past by establishing the history of events, and to make proposals.

### Election: the Provincial Prior's Counselors



The Council of the Provincial Prior will be composed of Br. Athanase, as Provincial Head of Formation, Br. Jurek, elected by the Chapter, and a third brother whom the Provincial Prior has yet to appoint.

### Election: *Socii* and substitutes for General Chapter 2025

After deliberation and voting, the following brothers were elected as *socii* for General Chapter 2025: Br. Johannes, Br. Johannes-Elias and Br. Thomas J. The substitutes elected are: Br. Gabriel-Mary, Br. Athanase and Br. John-Mary-Jesus.

### With thanks

The brothers of the Chapter express their deepest thanks to the chapter secretary, Br. Leopold, and to the brothers, oblates, volunteers and friends of the Priory of Marchegg for their warm welcome which meant that everything ran so smoothly. We also thank all those who supported this Chapter with their prayers.



The next European Provincial Chapter will take place from January 13th to 20th, 2026.





*The capitular brothers*