

# MAIN FEATERS OF THE SOMACAN SPIRITUALITY IN THE CURRENT CONSTITUTIONS

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## Introduction

This is the last day of the convention. At this point, I think that we can affirm: "St. Jerome's charism is truly a mystery!" Not in a defeatist or ironic sense. To come to such a statement, it means that we have achieved a goal of a certain value! The charism of St. Jerome, as well as the charism of any Founder, is a reality that does not belong to the sensible world but to the world of the spirit. One can only and always understand only something of a charsim. More one gets into it by living and experiencing it, more one gets into its understanding progressively.

### 1. Constitutions: Institutional Expression of the Charism of a Religious Institute

Live and experiment the charism in order to understand it.

This is a statement quite irksome for us modern children of Descartes, the philosopher of the clear and distinct ideas, because we want to rationalize, systematize, and clarify everything. A charism is not a geometric figure to describe. One can always get only some aspects of it because it is a matter of a "flash of lightening" from the Holy Spirit (at times dramatic, but almost always sweet).

The Church's document "Mutuae relationes," in the chapter III about religious life in the ecclesial communion, guides us in penetrating into the depth of the mystery of the charism of a religious Institute's Founder. Until then, the Church used to recommend faithfulness to the Founder's spirit. In "Mutuae relationes," the Church offers a precious track for a theological-ecclesial reflection. The document states: "The Founders' charsim reveals itself as a Spirit's experience handed down to their disciples in order to be lived, guarded, deepened, and constantly developed by them in tune with the Body of Christ, that is in perennial growth... Such a characteristic entails, therefore, a particular style of sanctification and apostolate that establishes a peculiar tradition in such a way that one is able to grasp the objective components of it. "

"Objective components" are those, which are always valid. Some aspects, in fact, are the Founder's, St. Jerome, such as some prophetic gestures we read about in his biography: a penitential spirit lived at an utmost level and almost impossible to imitate ... the ministry in favor of the street-walkers ... There are some transient and temporary aspects, as well as forever-valid aspects. In discerning them, who will assure us we are not falling into subjectivism? The abovementioned document of the Church acknowledges that the Superiors of the Congregation have the threefold "munus" proper of the Bishops (prophet, priest, ruler) in regard to the reality of their own religious Institute: "as to the office of teaching, religious Superiors have the competence and authority of masters of the spirit in regard to the evangelical project of their own

Institute." It is obvious that, when the spiritual direction of the Superiors of the Institute entrusted to them refers to substantial issues, such as the charism, the Superiors must avail themselves of the most solemn and serious forms of their teaching. One of these is the General Chapter, from which the Constitutions must receive approval, after a mature examination. Constitutions can be the first ones or the renewed ones, as in our case.

Function of the Constitutions is to establish the essential components of the charism and to codify the manners in which the charism's essential components should be expressed in different historical moments. Function of the Constitutions is to point out the essential components of the charism and to present them with authority to the group who recognize, as in our case, St. Jerome as its Founder, so that it may continue to refer to them in its journey toward holiness.

If we carefully read the words of the Church's document quoted above, we will realize that it speaks of "particular style of sanctification and apostolate." It does not use the term "spirituality," term that is quite pretentious. "Spirituality," in fact, refers to an organic whole of components lined up in a relationship among themselves: goal, way, means. Such an organically structured reality is typical of few groups in the Church, which have established particular schools. We speak of Franciscan, Dominican, Jesuit, Carmelite spirituality and schools. The "particular style of sanctification and apostolate" of our Congregation, without claiming of being a spirituality, knows its own well determined and defined tradition from which one can draw proper objective components and hand them down.

Constitutions are, therefore, the institutional expression of the Somascan charism as far they "fix" and codify the components regarding the proper style of sanctification and apostolate. They not only point out its original facets, but they guide in forming the internal and external attitudes, which constitute its most faithful expression.

#### *February 8, 1985: Historical Date*

February 8, 1985, is an historical date for our Congregation. It is the day when Fr. Pierino Moreno, Father General, presented the text of the renewed Constitutions and Rules to the Somascan religious. They meet the requirements of renewal and aggiornamento recommended by the Vatican Council II. The Church herself was acting to the conditions of our time in faithfulness to its Founder and its charism.

The Constitutions and Rules were prepared according to the suggestions of the letter "Ecclesiae Sanctae." They came into force, "ad experimentum," on June 29, 1968, and on January 1, 1970. The 1975 General Chapter thought it better to prolong the "experimentum" in order to deepen the fundamental values of our tradition. The revision work saw all the confreres contribute by taking part in different ways in the 1979-80 extraordinary General Chapter and in the 1981 ordinary General Chapter. Finally, the text was ready to be presented to the Holy See. The Church's approval was granted on February 8, 1983. In order to conform proper law to the new Canon Law, some modifications were introduced. They were approved by a decree of the Holy See on January 10, 1985.

## *The "Gift" of Constitutions*

For a religious Institute, the Constitutions are always a gift from God.

They point out the direction toward which the Holy Spirit wills to guide it in order to bring up-to-date the witness of life and holiness He has manifested in the Founder and He intends to accomplish through the Institute.

The new CC&RR have been welcome by our religious with "gratitude and consolation" (LG 12). The style of the Somascan life, re-thought in the point of view of St. Jerome and our first generation, and applied to the historical context of today's life, has emerged in all its most original facets purified from the crusting that along the centuries might have weighed down the initial project. Very precious has been the work of those who have diligently combed our sources and of those who were able to individualize and catch the new demands that the history of people, among whom our Congregation is called to be en-fleshed, was making evident. The result was a valuable work in which the spiritual, Somascan, apostolic, and juridical components harmonize beautifully.

"A book of Somascan life," it could rightly be defined.

One can sense the delicate and discreet spiritual presence of St. Jerome and of the first Somascan generation. Even without quoting them directly (not a feasible expedient for a constitutional text), the spiritual magisterium of the saint, the concrete way of living, the characteristic evangelical aspects of his own spiritual experience in which the first generation of Somascans was involved, are felt present and easily identified in the background. They emerge with wise discretion, they almost spread a delicate and sweet aroma, they enlighten with suffuse tones, without the intrusiveness of the literary quotations. And the numerous notes at the bottom of each page to point out the precise source, assure us that we are breathing the "air of our home." Truly, the conjugation between "yesterday" and "today" was successful.

Constitutions get us in touch spiritually with St. Jerome and with that particular spirit with which he expressed his "living the Gospel." We cannot state that only his letters and the witness texts of the beatification and canonization trials get us in touch with him. Surely, these documents of primary importance reveal to us St. Jerome's inner self. Constitutions, besides the fact that they synthetically already contain these same components internalized and lived by the first group, who was with the Founder, offer themselves as a "form of life" for those who today would like to follow Christ with the same style with which St. Jerome did, and was institutionalized in the Congregation and approved by the Church. Constitutions represent the concrete way of living St. Jerome's charism in history.

When the new constitutional text was issued, quite many religious were amazed that in the first part, the spiritual one, the numbers were presented in a periodical broken form, almost a poetical text, instead of a periodical continual form. Why? The same question could be asked to those who, at the time of the liturgical reform, drew many texts of the Missal in the same way: Eucharistic Prayers, Prefaces, Collects, and other parts. It is a typographical technique that mirrors itself psychologically in the soul of the reader and gives to the text a certain musicality that fosters inner attention through a rhythmic flowing. The division in distinct versa feels of anointing and almost of the sacredness of

the Eucharistic and Prefaces' texts, and fosters a meditative attitude: each versus constitutes a scansion corresponding to each phase of the meditative moment.

The current text of the Constitutions is a text where St. Jerome is present, living and pulsing.

The Constitutions of the past drew inspiration from a module almost uniform and stereotyped of constitutions, more or less homogeneous for all the types of religious Institutes. In those of 1626, it was almost absent any reference to St. Jerome, if we exclude his aspect of Founder and some other external hints. Completely absent were the points of view of "re-creating" his figure that must be made re-livable in times different from those in which he lived.

The current Constitutions, on the contrary, translate him for us and for the times in which we live: both under the ecclesial and social profile.

### *Constitutions and Rules*

Among the constitutional texts that followed each other during the history of our Congregation and that were usually identical in substance and different in marginal aspects, the issue of 1985 has a component of utmost importance: distinction between the Constitutions parts and the Rules parts.

It is the application of the criteria that were supposed to guide the work of renewal and aggiornamento of the Constitutions. It was the Church herself to prescribe that the parts directly relating to the charism were to be clearly distinct from the parts relating to the contingent and, therefore, changeable aspects of living. Our constitutional text too is articulated according to such a distinction. Different typographical fonts distinguish the Constitution parts from the Rule parts.

Several numbers of Rules present in the past constitutional texts (which did not have this distinction) have been eliminated either because "obsolete," that is, no longer compatible with the demands of today's life or in order to give more responsibility to the individual person.

The Constitution numbers are in the wake of the different texts of the Constitutions expressed by the various moments of the history of our Congregation. They do not betray anything, change anything of substance, refuse anything or forget anything. They are, on the contrary, rich with the new acquisitions that the Church matured in the Vatican II under the divine action of the Holy Spirit. Particularly, one can see in the forefront the aspects of St. Jerome's spirituality, which were missing in the previous texts. They are those constitutional numbers, which create the right mentality of the Somascan religious and characterize the authentic belonging, not only juridical but also and, above all, spiritual, to the Congregation.

The Rule numbers point out the concrete ways through which the Somascan charism expresses itself in the concreteness of life. They also constitute the component that evaluates whether the charism has been internalized or not.

From the Constitutions, meditated and internalized, to the Rules, practiced in faithfulness: this is the complete dynamism to which the Somascan religious opens up in his daily living. The characteristic attitude of "being Somascan" becomes concrete ways of living.

Even the observance of the concrete norms (many times St. Jerome would insist in his letters) is a condition for the Company for "being with Christ."

*The Congregation Presents Itself in Its Main Spiritual and Apostolic Features*

Until now, I have presented some general aspects, which are essential for a fruitful and sapiential approach to the 1985 Constitutions. Now, I enter into the thick of the topic: "Main features of the Somascan spirituality in the current Constitutions." Our attention is called to focus on the initial chapter, THE SOMASCAN CONGREGATION, with which the Constitutional text begins.

It is not the first chapter. It is an independent chapter that it is not even involved in the numbering of the whole constitutional text. It is a chapter that the previous texts of our history have always had, even though, like now, always "un-hooked" from the progressive numbering. Moreover, in the previous texts, this chapter was limited mostly to external events.

There are different ways for a religious Institute to introduce itself. It can introduce itself by stressing ascetic spiritual components that are its own, or it can introduce itself by historically describing the original events of its beginning. Before the crossroad between the two possibilities, the General Chapter chose the second one: the historical description that would heavily underline the components that characterize it and that would make them emerge from the concrete "life experience" of St. Jerome and his companions. A description almost in "slow motion." One can see in it an experience lived in the Church first by St. Jerome and then carried on for centuries by the Somascan religious who would constantly look at the Founder in order to draw inspiration from his typical way of living the following of Christ, and of working apostolically. That is, the charism.

In "telling" the early Somascan history, the Constitutions bring to the surface the components that constitute the original and characteristic aspects of St. Jerome's charism. Really successful was the General Chapter's choice to "tell" the early Somascan history, to tell it without emphasis, but with the right necessary stress. More than a dry analytical list, the Constitutional text presents these components as the characteristics of the early "Somascan experience," both the spiritual ones and the apostolic ones: historical origin, Founder, name, historical series of events marked by particular ways of "living in Christ," life-style, persons belonging to it, types of apostolate, features of spiritual life in the wake of the Founder, approval by the Church...

The spiritual and apostolic components characteristic of the early "Somascan experience," narrated in the chapter "The Somascan Congregation," will be developed in the following text, in those parts which refer more closely to the spiritual and apostolic aspect of the Somascan project. Here, they are represented in synthesis, as emerging points of St. Jerome and his early followers' experience. But, they will also be present in an analytical manner.

We could compare this chapter to an "overture": a musical text where one can, right away, detect and perceive the different musical motifs, which will find their enlargement in the whole opera.

Or we could compare it to the vestibule that introduces to the temple...

Therefore, I will try to analytically highlight the different spiritual motifs that are gathered, especially in synthetic way in the account of the early "Somascan history," and the proper tonality that they give to the aspects that constitute the design of our spiritual and apostolic life drawn in the following constitutional text.

## 2. Particular Style of Sanctification of the Somascan Religious

The chapter of the constitutional text we are going to examine does not intend to answer the question, "what must the Somascan religious do," but "who is the Somascan religious." The Somascan looks at St. Jerome and his characteristic way of following Christ in order to identify himself with the Founder.

### *"Humble Congregation"*

Right away at the beginning, we encounter one of the fundamental components of our Somascan features.

The # 1 describes the spiritual experience lived by St. Jerome, the Founder. There are historical components, which are very typical. The number begins with the words: "The humble Congregation of the Somascan Religious." The expression is beautiful: it brings us back to the "Humilem hunc Ordinem" of the 1626 edition. Our Congregation is a humble reality: the Somascan does not make the news. We immediately run into a characteristic that we feel it is typically ours: "we do not make the news." How many times we realize that very little is said about us! Let's leaf through history and it will not be hard to convince ourselves that rarely history deals with us.

I think of different style of doing good in the history of the Church. St. Leonardo Murialdo used to say: "Do good and keep quiet." Don Bosco instead used to say: "Do good and make it known." And both of them are Saints. But we Somascans, by nature, feel more in tune with the first. Humble, but dignified: not full of complexes. Think that in five century we were able to send to the glory of the altars only our Founder, nobody else...!

"Humble Congregation": It is not self-destruction! To do good and to sound the trumpet can be "too garish!" To do good without advertising it purposely is dignity. The time in which we live is more in tune with this style. The Congregation is humble, but dignified. "Humble Congregation" is a profession of faith in the power of the Lord. Like Mary, who exalts the Lord because "he has looked with favor on his lowly servant."

For this purpose, the second letter of S1, Jerome has expressions, which shed light on this "humble." "Our benign Lord has wanted so in order to increase in you the faith, without which - as the evangelist says - Christ cannot perform many miracles, and to answer your holy prayer to Him. He also wants to make use of you, who are poor, troubled, afflicted, wearied, despised by all, and even abandoned by the physical presence, but not by the heart, of your poor and very much beloved and dear father."

What a feeling in this expression! And again, in another expression of the same letter: "The second, he wants to increase your faith in Him and not in others, because - as it is said above - God does not work in those who have not put all their faith and hope in Him alone. Those in whom there is great faith and hope he has filled with love and he has done

great things for them. Therefore, if you are not lacking in faith and hope, he will make great things of you, exalting the humble." "Humble" here has the biblical meaning, that is, the attitude of those who put all their faith and hope in the Lord. Their only support is in the Lord. The Somascan is first of all a reflex of this "humility" or faith in God, expressed by St. Jerome.

*St. Jerome: Model from Which to Draw Inspiration and to "Re-Create" in the Journey toward Sanctification*

*"Raised in the Church of God by St. Jerome Emiliani under the action of the Holy Spirit."*

Here, right away at the beginning, stands our Founder! The protagonist, however, is the Holy Spirit. It is He at the origin of the Somascan adventure. St. Jerome is only the docile instrument. This name that for the first time resounds in the Constitutions is the name of our Father. The beloved name of him, whose spiritual image, each one of us, because of his Somascan vocation, carries imprinted in his heart. Journeying toward the Lord means, for each one of us, growing each day in the identification with St. Jerome.

One of the merits of the current Constitutions is to make St. Jerome continuously present in the description of the profile of the Somascan religious, differently from the previous constitutional texts. I would like to present a brief list of the aspects of this presence. Besides the rich number 1, he is mentioned opportunely and expressively in different passages: the Somascan religious consecration is "to renew in us the gift of grace bestowed on S1, Jerome" (# 6); the spirit of the Somascan poverty is a spirit of faithfulness to St. Jerome and his early companions who called themselves the "Servants of the Poor" (3 19); the Somascan community is a community which opens up to the poor and the abandoned on the example of the Founder (# 33); St. Jerome "who used to spend a lot of time in prayer" is master of prayer for each Somascan (# 43); the prayer of the Somascan is a prayer which "opens the eyes of our blindness" (# 43; evident is the allusion to the 4<sup>th</sup> letter of St. Jerome); it is not lacking the aspect of devotion to our saint, understood as adoration to God who, through S1, Jerome, manifests His glory (# 52); St. Jerome is presented as a clear example of penitent (# 64); the # 71 presents the main features of St. Jerome true "apostolic man" of the Catholic Reformation; the # 74, a pearl, presents the singular aspects of St. Jerome as a wise and fatherly educator.

The current Constitutions, therefore, "ooze with" the spiritual presence of St. Jerome, even though in the chapter "Somascan Congregation" the spiritual experience of St. Jerome is grasped and presented in its core.

*Marian Component*

*"Converted to God and deeply renewed through the intercession of Mary."*

To identify with St. Jerome means to repeat the journey of conversion covered by him in the company of the One who in his life is everything and is a primary component of his spirituality and of the spirituality of each Somascan: Mary.

Fundamental component in the Somascan way of living in the Spirit is the Marian component. In St. Jerome's charism, Mary is an essential component. His conversion is a

work of Mary. We cannot understand anything of our origins without Her. The Constitutions for Novices express in this way the attitude of the future Somascan toward Mary: "to whom they will remember to entrust and devote completely." It is the confident offering of one's all being. "Entrusting" is the attitude of the child who abandons himself completely in the arms of his mother.

The strong Marian stress in the existence of St. Jerome and the Somascan is presented by the current Constitutions not in a devotional light, but in the light of a filial abandon, a confident entrusting. Like St. Jerome in Treviso, who, before the image of the Madonna Grande, asks her: "And now, what must I do? Tell me! Give me the light to see and understand something in this life of mine that is so troubled!"

And the Marian motif, really so strong and characteristic, as well as so determined, emerges in different points of the Constitutions. However, it emerges always correct and composed, at the right moment, without inappropriate devotions, with a solidity that involves faith, reason, and feelings. At # 9, Mary is model of our consecration. Devotion to her is one of the surest means for being faithful to consecrated chastity. Three numbers (49.50.51) detail the forms of devotion to her. Especially # 49 has a measured poetical stress, with a moving tenderness ... And the Virgin is presented as an aid for growing in faith and hope in God, that are the essentials of the Somascan life project. She is the Virgin of the YES to God. Like St. Jerome.

*Fundamental Component of the Sanctification Style of the Somascan Religious ad the  
Centrality of Christ*

The presence of Mary in the characteristic Somascan religious' way of living "the life of the Spirit" prepares the centrality of Christ. Some expressions of # 1 are particularly vibrant: "desiring to follow the way of the Crucified ad imitate Christ his master..." "he attracted other men who, for Gospel's sake, offered themselves to Christ with him ... ;" "proposed to his followers a style of life which manifests the offering of oneself to Christ in serving the poor ... " We are at the presence of that we can call the heart of the Somascan style of sanctification: the Christ-centered aspect.

Certainly, also in any type of spirituality Christ is the center. However, the mystery of Christ is various and multifaceted: each Founder has caught an aspect. St. Jerome has caught Christ as Love: love from which everything flows and, in order to return it, only a response of love would be possible. Love ("desire") that becomes gift: "they offered themselves to Christ with him."

The style of life S1, Jerome gave origin to, is such that it offers its own authentic reading key: "a style of life which manifests the offering of oneself to Christ in serving the poor." We are in tune with what Jesus maintained: "Anything you would do to the least of my brothers you did it to me." When with pain he saw in some of his early companions that a scrawl was replacing their early fervor of self-offering to Christ, he exploded in those strong expressions of his sixth letter, the letter of tears, because written with tears: "Don't they know that they offered themselves to Christ?" Christ Love, Christ from whom to learn, Christ Master. His letters always have the Gospel as a background: meditated, prayed, it becomes a category of thought. The Somascan spirituality has as a unifying center and heart this type of relationship with Christ: Love, Master of life. In all the aspects of the consecrated. existence of the Somascan contained in the following

constitutional text, one can grasp this Christ-centered aspect, this tense and personal relationship with Christ consecration is the answer to God's call to follow Christ (# 6); chastity is the expression of an undivided heart, like the heart of Christ (# 11); poverty is putting everything in common in the likeness of Christ and his disciples (# .16). As well as, living in common has as a paradigm of reference to Christ living with his disciples (# 4); obedience is modeling oneself on Christ who constantly adhered to his Father till death on the cross (# 22).

*"To himself and his companions our fervent father proposed a style of life that manifests in serving the poor the offering of oneself to Christ by committing oneself to any works of mercy."*

"Our fervent father!" This expression is a pearl. It cannot but evoke the dedication letter of Molfetta: "As ardent lamps you show outside rays of works inflamed by divine love, inspired by the example and teaching of that beatified soul of Sir Jerome Miani, Venetian gentleman... He had the ardent desire to draw and unite to God men of any kind of status, degree and condition, and he showed it with evident signs. Burning of divine love for the love of the Gospel, and desiring to increase the kingdom of God, he left his riches, his noble family members and the illustrious fatherland and threw himself in the arms of his beloved naked and crucified Jesus Christ. After a short pilgrimage, he started from you, poor things to realize his desire." Burning words that express his inner fire of love for Christ and the poor and that he was able to communicate to his companions who shared with him that beautiful adventure of loving Christ and the poor.

Expressions that, it seems to me, lead to a conclusion that may look daring, but of which I do not have any doubt: the Somascan spirituality, lived to the end on this journey of tender but burning love for Christ and the poor, has as a finish line not only asceticism, but mysticism: the mystique of the love for Christ. "Amorem amore compensandum" (love is repaid by love) stated the "Monita," or maxims of spiritual life for us Somascans. They were maxims quite generic, common in the religious literature of the time. However, inserting this note of intense and tender love for Christ in a context of Somascan formation, seems to me that it constitute a strong suggestion to reach that love identification with Christ that St. Paul told that it happened to him: "For me, to live is Christ." Life is no longer a sum of duties to do, but the joy of feeling one thing with Christ.

To this finish line, I think, the centrality of Christ in the spiritual life of each Somascan must land.

### *"Following Christ" in the Style of Sanctification of St. Jerome: Involvement*

I think we can find another aspect characteristic of the style of sanctification of the Somascan in an expression whose meaning goes far beyond the historical data: *"Moved by divine love, he attracted to him other men who, for the sake of the Gospel, offered themselves to Christ with him."*

It is the aspect of involvement. St. Jerome infected those who would admire his radical transformation. He stimulated them not to be only spectators; he involved them in his life experience. Infection is one of the most re-current aspects in our Constitutions. In an ecclesial modern language we would say: "new evangelization," that is, a provocative,

disturbing evangelization. This aspect that characterizes so deeply the existence of our father has entered the Constitutions too: at # 10, referring to the authenticity of our consecrated life; at # 15 referring to chastity. Also in poverty, the most evident testimony, is present in this aspect of involving witness (21), especially regarding new vocations. If the youth see us as bourgeois, worried only of our well being and of solving at best the problems of daily living and amusing ourselves, they leave us. And that it is right! If we are not able to involve in our life and draw those who see, observe, and are in touch with us, we must doubt the authentic value of our life.

In this number, words are measured. No emphasis, no praising or commending intention here. A story like the one of St. Jerome, that has at its root the Spirit of God, cannot be told but in a style and in words which are simple and almost bare. However, the few words are "key words" of the Somascan and Jerome's vocabulary.

*"Moved by divine love, he attracted other men."*

Here is the power of holiness: the fascination of infection. He has started alone, but he has remained alone for a short time. Soon, a constellation of other believers coagulates around him. St. Jerome has infected. The good news of his inner transformation spreads around rapidly from the flames of love, which he gave off. They would hear about him and would follow him to stay with him. St. Jerome infected and we too should become like him. The future of vocations can be assured in the measure with which each one of us, personally, our communities, and our Congregation will be able to give off that fascination that infects. Only that that is valuable fascinates.

*"Who, for the sake of the Gospel, offered themselves to Christ with him."*

A flash that will capture the true identity of the Congregation at its beginning: not a social movement, not a group of volunteers to assist orphans and heal the wounds of society, but the consecration to Christ. A handful of believers, established around Jerome Miani, who offer themselves to Christ with him, recognize Christ in the poor, in the orphans, and in the abandoned, and who feel they are sent by Christ to serve them. Here is the central core, the heart of what has been the Congregation at its beginning and what it is: offering oneself to Christ with St. Jerome. The belonging to the Company of Divine Love, explains the "moved by divine love." Consecration always launches into mission. They are terms and dimensions strongly correlated and destined to be integrated.

### *A Strong Community Style of Life*

Some expressions of # 4 underline such an aspect.

*"The Somascan Congregation is a clerical institute of Pontifical right formed by religious, priests and lay, whose life style, though different in ministries, is the same."*

One vocation lived in two editions, different but complementary. The Congregation needs priests and needs brothers. Brothers! How many generations of humble, silent, laborious brothers who were able to express love to the Congregation through their generous commitment! They have allowed the Congregation to carry on a precious work. Brothers express consecrated life in its "being", without the priestly ministry. The priests may run the risk of underlining the dimension of the priestly ministry so to make it more prevalent over the dimension of consecration, opening a gap instead of a simultaneous conjugation of the two components: consecration and priesthood. Unfortunately, the decrease of the number of brothers is a hint that it is also decreasing the authentic

conception of religious life, when it is without priesthood. On the other hand, St. Jerome was one of them!

The statement about the essence of the community aspect in our religious life is: "*On the example of Jesus and his disciples, his members live in common and in common put everything, persevering in accord in prayers and in works.*"

The example of Jesus and his disciples runs into us: an example that will come back in the chapter on community life. It is very important that, even at this point, where the characteristic components of our life are just sketched, we are already faced by the characteristic way of living that was both of Jesus and his disciples. Once again, the Christological component of our spirituality.

The historians of our Congregation observe that our early Constitutions drew inspirations from the ones of the Barnabites, even though they underlined our own characteristic components. The Constitutions of the Barnabites go back to the community life paradigm described in the Acts of the Apostles. Ours, instead, chose the example of Jesus living with his disciples. From a Christological point of view, it is a successful choice, besides being very expressive.

Community life is essential to the Somascan life project. Besides living together, it implies putting everything in common, praying together, living a faith and love experience together, the one that goes back to St. Jerome, programming the common apostolic work together, carrying it out together, and verifying it together.

The life' of communion, for us Somascans, has its own strong and expressive mark: community life. Certainly, it is only a sign, and it could cover up dichotomies: it is up to each one of us to make that sign coincide with reality. However, also the sign is considered in our Constitutions so important and relevant that, for habitual absences from even one common act, we need the expressed authorization from the Superior (# 36). Somehow, absence defrauds the community of the good of a brother's presence.

*The Cardinal Virtues of the "Ascetic" Journey of the Somascan toward the "Perfection of Love," in Reference to St. Jerome*

Church's doctrine is very precise about this point. She asks every religious Institute that also the components regarding its own particular style of, sanctification be conveniently grasped, defined and expressed, in order to avoid a "vague and ambiguous" insertion in the life of the Church, and in order to establish a determined tradition (M.R., 11). Such components transmit the experience of the Spirit lived by the Founder, that is, his particular charism.

*"Its members... tend to the perfection of love in humility of heart, meekness and goodness, with love for poverty and the ardent desire to attract and unite all men to God"*

This expression constitutes the pearl of our constitutional text. If all the old and dear writings about St. Jerome and our early tradition went lost, it would certainly be a great loss. However, the spiritual profile of our Founder could be reconstructed with this expression of our current Constitutions. Here, in fact, we find the salient traits of his spiritual profile destined to constitute the salient traits of the spiritual profile, of the Somascan religious, sons of St. Jerome.

If we examine the 1626 Constitutions, we will run into an expression that at first glance, seems different from the one of the current Constitutions. The "cardinal" virtues, so to speak, of the Somascan are listed as follows: "true humility, perfect obedience, denial and giving up of one's will." Is then the "identikit" of the Somascan changed? Not at all! The expression of the 1626 Constitutions was quite generic; it wanted to define the "proprium" of religious life with the negative sense of "giving up," rather than grasp the specific of the single experiences of religious life expressed by the Founders. In the Church, such a trend will come to maturity, after centuries, in the Vatican II. The interest about the writings of the Saint was scarce too. There were the fascination and admiration for his holy figure, but the need to deepen and analyze his spiritual experience in order to propose it to his followers was not yet felt as, thanks be to God, it is nowadays.

Indeed, we have to say that the expression of the 1626 Constitutions has not been eliminated from the current text. Taken out of a context in order to be replaced by another more appropriate in expressing the characteristic of the Somascan ascetical virtues, it has been put in the chapter of Penance and Mortification. Renunciation to one's will is said to be an essential form of penance. Here the expression finds its more correct and proper context.

The replacement, therefore, puts in the forefront the characteristic spiritual components of the "magisterium" and spiritual experience of St. Jerome. A successful replacement indeed. S1, Jerome's ascetic itinerary, which reaches the finish line of the mysticism of love, through the exercise of particular attitudes, is transparent, clear, and stimulant.

Let us analyze, therefore, the characteristic traits of the Somascan asceticism so closely tied to the spiritual school of St. Jerome.

The finish line is "perfection of love."

Let us think about St. Jerome who exercises in loving Jesus: "O good Jesus, our love, we put our trust in you." S1, Jerome sees God as Love. Jesus is "benign," his is "infinite goodness," his mercy is "benign."

"Our Prayer" is a wonderful flourishing of expressions addressed to this love contemplated in joy and poured out in fervor. It is the desire to reach the "perfection of love:" for God and neighbor. It is an inseparable united front. It is always we who operate the dichotomy: love for God or love for neighbor? There is only one love: to love God in the neighbor, to love the neighbor in God.

Which are the signs that reveal that the love of God, "the perfection of love," has burst into the heart of a man? St. Jerome does not theorize: he grasps in himself the signs of the bursting of God's love radically transforming his human being. The Constitutions display the characteristic aspects of the new Jerome landed to the seashore of the "perfection of love:" humility of heart, meekness, benignity; love for poverty and work; ardent desire for attracting and unite all men to God. A type of asceticism strongly correlated to mission.

### 2.7.1 *"Humility of heart, meekness, and benignity"*

The word "humility" reappears. The chapter opened with the word "humble," referred to the Congregation; here, humility has its see in the heart and it is the root of any attitude.

"Meekness and benignity."

Let us open the sixth letter that denounces some lapses in the fervor of some brothers who were following Christ with him. St. Jerome offers some suggestions for a return to the early fervor: "Therefore, for now I do not know what else to say to them if not to beg them, by the wounds of Christ, that they may want to be mortified in every exterior act, and, full of humility, of love, and of devotion inside, may be able to bear with one another and observe the obedience and respect of the ancient Christians orders. Meek and benign with everybody." Here is the remedy proposed by S10 Jerome: "humility of heart, meekness and benignity." "Meekness!" Let us think of S10 Jerome in 81. Mark's square in Venice, when he had just started to move his first steps toward an inner liberation. Someone insults him and threatens to tear off his beard hair by hair, and he offers his fluent beard. And let us think about the comment of a bystander who knew him well: "If the threat to Sir Jerome had been done some years earlier, Sir Jerome would have had quite a different reaction!"

"Benignity." Let us think about S10 Jerome always joyful, as his biographers say, except when he was thinking about his own sins. Benignity that is welcoming, being able to approach people, to make them feel at ease. All of this has flowed into a style, in a way of behaving of the Somascan religious. Let us re-think of the 1626 Constitutions and of what was recommended to the Superiors: "are to prefer benignity rather than austerity." The best figure of our old confreres we have known, figures who let themselves be molded by the Somascan charism, are all figures who carried this unmistakable mark: very benign, very welcoming, smiling, good, willing to help ...

Let us recall what was expressed in the 1626 Constitutions and now reported in the appendix of the constitutional text among the "Suggestions for a inner life and spiritual progress," especially in regard to the Superiors, but not only to them: "Everybody, especially the Superiors, are to manifest in their face modesty and religious serenity, rather than austere seriousness; they are to be benign with everybody." Not an easy asceticism! Don't we have here, perhaps, the portrait of St. Jerome?

### 2.7.2. "Love for poverty and work"

Poverty is expression of humility. When only God is enough and becomes the only safety in life, one does not feel the need of surrounding oneself with many things, especially when useless and superfluous...

"And work." Once again, a warning about work. Work is expression of poverty. The poor work. Consecrated poverty stimulates to share in the condition of the poor, as more clearly it will be stated in the chapter about poverty, also by earning, as they do, a living through work.

### 2.7.3. "With the ardent desire of attracting and uniting all men to God"

A strong apostolic and missionary sense characterizes the Somascan religious. S10 Jerome has crossed Veneto and Lombardy in order to save souls. In each child of his, this "ardent desire" of saving souls must vibrate too. Molfetta, in a passage of his dedicatory letter, addresses the early Somascans in order to exhort them not to let the Founder's vibrant apostolic zeal get cold: "And I pray to the Lord that he may as much increase the

fire of divine love in your hearts as I wish that it will be increased for love of him and of the kingdom. In this way, you will work more laboriously in the works of mercy and love, and others, on your example, as you did on the example of Sir Jerome (of whom I have great esteem now that he is dead), will start doing the same. In this way, we will bring about the universal reformation of the Church, of which he was thirsty and for which he ordered special prayers." It is the prayer we commonly call "Our Prayer," as Jerome himself would call it. It is the prayer in which we find the ardent desire of St. Jerome that the kingdom of God may advance and that the Church may be led by the Lord to the condition of holiness of the times of the Apostles.

### 3. Particular Style of the Somascan Mission

What I listed so far in a documented analysis are the components that in the distinction made by the Church in the Chapter III of *Mutuae Relationes*, "Religious life in the ecclesial communion," refer to the characteristic way of sanctification. But the same document of the Church states that the charism entails also a characteristic way of operating and developing the apostolate: a style that is internalized, that has been handed down to us by the previous generations, that we have assimilated by living in the Congregation. Of this style too it is possible to grasp some proper components. It is the Chapter "Somascan Congregation" that sheds light on them in the description of the early Somascan experience more than listing them in an explicit way. A reflection on these historical components allows us to present them as characteristic of the way the Somascan mission is carried out.

The # 3 of our Constitutions expresses the complete picture of the mission entrusted by the Church to our Congregation today.

It cannot but surprise, in the description of the characteristics of the Congregation, the priority given to the operational component over the spiritual one, which will find its expression only in the following number. The religious Orders arisen during the Catholic Reformation period as a reaction to the Lutheran Pseudo-reformation, differently from other forms of religious life of monastic style, have the "active" aspect marked heavily. And in the way they express it, they go back to their spiritual profile, which derives from it in all its identity.

This number highlights some constants present in the history of our Congregation. "For the good of the Church and for responding to the call of her pastors, our Congregation has embraced, since its inception, different apostolic activities inspired by the love of Christ." In a time when Luther accused the Church, pointed his finger to her, and preached "sola fide" without deeds, St. Jerome has invested his faith in the works of charity: works "ex fide," expressed by faith.

The number continues: "with the same intense love of our Founder, the Congregation continues to dedicate itself to the material and spiritual care of the orphans and the poor, is committed to the human and Christian education of youth, and to pastoral ministry." Here are pointed out the three ways of the apostolic mission on which the Congregation has always journeyed since its own origins. They are different potentialities of expressing the Somascan charism: service to the orphans, apostolate in schools, pastoral ministry. They are different sectors of activities that never must be seen as antithetical among themselves. Our tradition has always expressed all of them. Even though they are

different, the component that fuses them together is this: "inspired by the love of Christ." Before this common element that inspires them, differences go in the back-burner.

The range of the genuine Somascan mission is therefore expressed as thus by the Constitutions: material and spiritual care of the orphans and abandoned (in all the versions that unfortunately our time knows), human and Christian education of youth in the school, pastoral ministry. Someone could ask: which one is the most Somascan of these activities? Someone tried in the past sowing confusion. However, the question remained silent because our tradition had a ready and prompt answer. It is more Somascan the type of work, which expresses more vividly the spiritual and apostolic traits of the Founder.

Which ones are these spiritual and apostolic traits?

The Somascan Congregation, that draws inspiration from and realizes the characteristic way of following Christ started by St. Jerome, looks at him and at the salient characteristics, which have deeply marked his way of operating apostolically.

Once again, by standing before the early Somascan story told in low motion in the chapter "The Somascan Congregation," we can grasp some important components. Some other aspects are highlighted in the chapter of the Constitutions entitled "Apostolic Mission."

### *3.1. Laboriousness*

It is addressed through an expression we Somascans did not give ourselves but the people of the street who would observe us did: the humble, those who have the sense of God and the scent of truth. It is an expression that the Constitutions, both those of 1626 and those of 1985, repeat because it is essential: "for this reason at the beginning they were called by people 'Fathers of the Works (Institutions) and of the Poor.'" They called us in this way the humble people, those who are instructed directly by God and know how to get at the heart of the truth. They knew us since our beginnings as people who work, who are really active.

St. Jerome's letters too underline this aspect. His first letter: "To Giovanantonio, that he may confirm the Company in peace through the observance of the good traditions and devotions; that he may send to the hospitals those who do not work with peace and devotion and modesty." And again: "work and devotion are the foundation of the institution."

### *3.2. Preferred Addressees and Privileged Environments*

*"The Congregation proposes to religious attitudes which draw inspiration from St. Jerome and his early companions. It encourages all its children to witness through institutions faith and hope in the Lord"*

Apostolate is more witnessing than saying, witnessing one's inner riches of faith and hope, witnessing through institutions. "Little and needy" are those whom St. Jerome privileged, as the Lord Jesus did when he made his own the words of Isaiah: "He sent me to evangelize the poor." "Little and needy" are therefore the privileged addressees: in any part of the globe that they may be: from "meninos de rua" to the undocumented. And many are the "environments and places where the gravest is the condition of poverty."

### *3.3. Formation Goals to Pursue in Our Mission*

St. Jerome was not a social worker that intended to solve the problems, which weighed down society and made life miserable. He was a disciple of the Lord who proclaimed the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom's announcement reaches also such a profound level that revolutionizes even the social settings and makes the world more livable. For this reason, St Jerome would give "the living nourishment of God's word," and would initiate into the sacraments of grace, understood as real encounters with the Lord, and would help people grow in faith through catechesis and the proclamation of the word of God. He resolved to bring to meet the Lord those whom he approached by initiating them into prayer. He aimed at forming in those whom he met the robust witness of Christ, the man actively committed to the service of the Church.

### *3.4. Ecclesiality*

In his apostolic action, St. Jerome went along with a pastoral planning (we would say today with an expression that is part of our ecclesial language): the Bishops planning. The 1985 Constitutions express with a current language what St. Jerome did: *"for the sake of the Church and responding to the call of her shepherds ... "* Let us not forget the veneration St. Jerome had for the Bishop! He would ask them their blessing when he arrived in a new diocese: "He came to me" - says the Vicar General of the Bergamo's diocese in telling of his last moving encounter with St. Jerome where he recommended the Christian faith. From the Bishops he would ask to be notified of the most urgent pastoral and charitable needs... "And never grumble about your bishop ..." - he recommended in his last letter.

St. Jerome never behaved as a free agent who acts as he wishes, independently from any ecclesiastic organization.

In a historical moment like ours where the Church is insisting on a unified pastoral activity and is elaborating pastoral plans, which should be the expression of communion among all the ecclesial components, we Somascans are called by our early, authentic tradition to cooperate in fidelity to our identity.

We can truly say that St. Jerome has anticipated by four or more centuries the document "Mutuae Relationes," that is, the whole of theological and pastoral acquisitions the Church has presented us few years ago.

### *3.5. Involvement of Laypeople in Our Mission*

We have already seen how the "involvement" is a characteristic component of our spirituality: almost "a multiplying factor" that makes the consecrated-life values, lived by us authentically, a channel of evangelization for those who are around us in order to involve them.

It is also a characteristic of our way of carrying out our mission as St. Jerome's children. Besides the components of # I, where the riches of his spiritual experience determined the formation of the group of the early Somascans, the Constitutions

underline the cooperation required and obtained by St. Jerome from the laypeople for their help in serving the needy youth.

Today, the Church herself asks the religious Institutes to involve the lay both in the spiritual dimension and in the educational-pastoral collaboration.

For us Somascans it is a question not of starting but of rediscovering, refreshing what St. Jerome in his fantasy of God's man, of "Miani wise man," had already discovered and realized.

#### 4. The Joy of Belonging to the Congregation Stimulates a Growth in the Somascan Charism

##### *The Foundational Charism Gives to the Somascan Religious a Precise Spiritual Identity*

In force of the gift received from God in participating in St. Jerome's charism, the Somascan religious is marked in the depth of his being "in Christ" by the charismatic identity that expresses itself in precise features. It is not a merely static reality but a dynamic process, a journey started since the moment of baptism. The seed of the new life "in Christ and in the Spirit" for which I, as a Somascan, have been born in that precise moment and that was mysteriously planted in the deepest of my being, potentially contained the features of the Somascan charism as a concrete way in which the sharing of Christ's prophetic "munus" would take flesh: the religious consecration according to the style lived first by St. Jerome.

When the moment of grace came, the mysterious seed started to reveal the signs of itself. The moment of grace was constituted by a reality of the Congregation (a religious, a community...) with which I was entering in relationship. Apparently, a causal relationship (but what is casual in the life of those who can operate a faithful reading of the map of events?) In that moment of grace, it was triggered a mysterious tuning between my "being in Christ," gift from Baptism, and the Congregation as historical reality ordered by God for the realization of my identification with Christ. Moment of grace, but also moment of happiness. Almost a joyful jump, similar to the one of the bride in the Song of Songs at the approaching of her love (2:8). Or the jumping of John the Baptist at Jesus' approaching while still in Mary's virginal womb (Lk 1:41).

Moment of grace! It was the inner joy of the discovery of being made in life but only for being child of St. Jerome, in a dynamic placement of the reality of grace constituted by the Congregation. It was the joy of breathing the beneficial native air, of being myself, of having discovered my identity.

##### *A Journey of Growth in the Vital Experience of the Somascan Charism: "Lectio Spiritualis" of the Constitutions*

I am a child of the Somascan Congregation: in force of the gift received from God, St. Jerome's charism, I am deeply marked by its spiritual features.

Being born in the Somascan family, I found inscribed in my spiritual genetic code those features. But they are like seeds that needs to be made spring up in the journey of my life. And it is consoling to think that for such a development and growth I have the grace of the Lord.

After the analysis of our current Constitutions, we can say that the Congregation has answered to the request of the Vatican U to attentively reflect on the original inspiration of the Founders. The current constitutional text reflects it faithfully and proposes it to us in an enthralling way. We feel that the Constitutions are a "rule of life" and not only a code of behaviors. They lead to the experience of the Somascan charism. The right attitude of the Somascan before the Constitutions is a contemplative attitude, like the one of Israel before the Law, gift of God, expression of the Covenant. Psalm 118 is the reproduction of the inner attitude of Israel before the Law: wonder, joy, welcoming ... This is also the result of a journey that each one of us is called to accomplish personally. It is the journey of the "lectio;" a spiritual reading, that is, accomplished under the action of the Holy Spirit. The heart receives continuous impulses to look beyond the letter of the text, opens up to the conversation with God, and opens up to contemplation. We realize, according to Origenes' experience, that "more we walk further into contemplation more the journey becomes longer and we encounter the Incomprehensible one ... " Approached in this manner, internalized, the text penetrates our heart, transforms it, and directs it toward St. Jerome's charism.

We are told that St. Agnes always carried the Gospel on her heart. The Somascan is called to carry the Constitutions not only on his heart but in his heart.