Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul AD 2020

From the Rule "The Senior shall convene the Society once each year…" Chapter IX.6

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

I hope and pray that you are all well in this disjointed time. Without a doubt these last few months have been a difficult time for many of us as we have struggled with pastoral care or concerns in our parishes, dealt with the social isolation brought on by social distancing, the massive economic disruption which resulted from the pandemic and have perhaps watched with deep concern as the issue of racial inequality has both transfixed and transformed so many of our communities.

In the midst of all these issues, the General Chapter retreat of our Society may not be something that is foremost in your mind at this point, but it is something we need to address because it takes a certain amount of planning to hold an event such as ours. And the question is simple – given the pandemic and the current spike in some areas, should we go ahead with the General Chapter in October as scheduled or should we postpone or even cancel?

I recently polled the Leadership Council on this matter and needless to say we received a mixed set of responses. Some Deans made it very clear that they wanted to go ahead. Other Deans, after informally polling their members, indicated that a majority of members in their chapter would choose not to attend. Some suggested that we concentrate on those who wanted to go rather than those who do not and that, in this manner, if the General Chapter were to held, then everyone would have a choice whether to attend or not.

But, in my opinion, this decision is not a simple matter of choice. Rather there are some other important criteria for us to consider. Some of these are:

1. The Seminary of St. Mary will not be making a decision about whether to permit conferences and retreats until at least mid-September i.e. about three weeks after the Seminarians return to classes. The first concern for the Seminary is the care of their students; all other concerns such as the Conference Center, which we use, are secondary. But to live with the uncertainty of planning until what would be a bare three plus weeks till our General Chapter would, I believe, be difficult for many who would need to make plans to attend.
2. One of the highlights of any General Chapter, at least for me, is our common worship, which is also a mark of our Society. Yet there is no doubt that worship could not be done as we have in the past but instead would have to be radically altered. We all know the admonition against singing in this time of pandemic, so that would be cut. The very use of the chapel space, into which we are generally tightly packed, is not a good model for social distancing. Questions would arise about whether and under what form we could celebrate the Sacrament. All of these issues give me pause for thought and concern.

3. It is also unclear whether we could use other facilities on the grounds of the Seminary even if we were permitted to gather, the refectory being of most concern since our group and the Seminary community often follow each other immediately for meals with no time to clean or sanitize.
4. We have to bear in mind the widespread geographic nature of our Society which results in a mixture of responses to the pandemic. In essence this means that some of our members will come from areas where there is little or no restriction or demands while other will come from areas where there are stringent governmental restrictions. We also have to bear in mind our Canadian brethren who, if they came to the US, may have to go into quarantine upon return to Canada. This could cause further confusion and concern on the part of many in our Society.
5. I also have to bear in mind that a goodly number of our body are, as we might say, in the more mature stage of life…and I can say that as one already in his 70's! While it is clear in the current spike that younger folks are also susceptible, clearly the older that one is, with any attendant health concerns, the greater the level of risk.
6. Returning to the matter of choice, I believe that it is more complicated than a personal decision of whether to go or not to go. Rather there is an obligation on each of us to consider the weaker brethren around us and have concern for them. The same is true for our Society as a whole. We, who are called to a life of service, should also strive to model that concern for others by not putting anyone in jeopardy regarding this virus.

Given all of these points of consideration, and more besides, I have determined that we will NOT hold a General Chapter retreat this year but will wait until 2021. Normally we would make a decision like this by consensus but, as I indicated above, the Leadership Council is not of one mind in this matter and it would take a while for us to achieve consensus, time which we do not have. In addition, as I quoted at the top of this letter, our Rule indicates that it is the Senior who convenes the Society in General Chapter. Therefore while I have taken the counsel of the Leadership, including the Officers who are fully supportive, it is my decision to cancel our General Chapter for 2020.

The next issue that arises is whether to hold a "virtual" General Chapter i.e. put our Teaching Theologian on line and perhaps even pray some of the Offices together on line. This sounds like a good idea at first blush partly because I, for one, was very much looking forward to Bishop Riegel address us on an important topic and with a great title. But given the size of our group this would have to be more in a "webinar" style than one which is interactive and, after discussion with the Officers, we are of the opinion that it would be a presentation best saved until our General Chapter next year. Meanwhile I would urge the Deans to consider working with their chapter members to pray at least one set of Daily Offices together during the days scheduled for our retreat so that there would still be a sense of community.

Finally the question has been raised of whether there would be a "refund" on dues this year if there was no General Chapter since part of the dues pays for a person to attend. The answer is

no. Our dues are our dues and we are paying them to support our Society and its work. And we are grateful that, even with the economic situation making it difficult in some cases, that so many of our members have chosen to continue supporting the Society with their dues for 2020.

This was not an easy decision to make. By the grace of God I have attended every General Chapter retreat since 1997, which was the Founding Retreat, and it will be a very strange thing for me not to make that annual pilgrimage this year. But after full consideration I have determined that it is best for us as whole body to cancel this year and to wait in patience until we will hopefully be able to meet in 2021.

May God's richest blessings be with each of you until we are able to be together again.

In Christ and in our common life and work,

Paddy Rooney, Senior.