



Fr. Thomas  
General prior

Rimont,  
20 February, 2019

## LETTER TO BROTHERS

*"The truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32)*

Dear brothers,

I did not envisage writing to you before our next General Chapter, but it seems necessary to me to do so, given the current context. With the Prioresses General of our sisters, I have already been led to write a public letter in order to set straight some truths that were mishandled in the news articles that appeared about us.<sup>1</sup>

With you I would like to go further and take the time to raise once again the sad question of abuse in our community, and the way in which – with the government of the brothers – we have worked on this question during my two mandates as Prior General. Some may have found the actions we have taken to be insufficient, others excessive, but I want to take this opportunity to assure you that throughout my mandate I have always acted in good conscience, taking into account the victims and the justice owed to them, the brothers entrusted to my care and the future of the Community.

In this letter I will essentially address three subjects: communication about Father Marie-Dominique Philippe; the case of abuse committed by other brothers; what we have put in place to combat abuse and to rectify what needed to be rectified in our internal culture.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Letter of 7 February*, available on the Brothers' website: <https://brothers-saint-john.org>.

## FATHER MARIE-DOMINIQUE PHILIPPE

In 2013, I was given access to a certain number of testimonies that, although not as explicit as the testimonies that came after my having spoken about the issue, led me to report them to the General Chapter, then to the Community as a whole.<sup>2</sup> I have on a number of occasions explained the reasons why I made the issue known.<sup>3</sup> In essence, I first and foremost wanted to take into account the indescribable suffering of the victims and to make sure that no young brother entered our community without being aware of these details concerning the founder of the community in which he had decided to live.

Today, one might come to the conclusion that the announcement I made was not sufficiently explicit – and I acknowledge that a more explicit condemnation of Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe's actions would have better contributed to the victims' path towards healing. But that would also be to forget the context of the time. No other community had ever, on its own initiative and without external pressure, made known the misconduct of its founder. Our community was also troubled by the grave crisis that had taken place in the Contemplative Sisters and their subsequent break up. Some of the brothers, who disagreed both with the decisions taken by Rome with respect to the sisters and with the government of the Congregation, had just founded the community of "San Juan el teologo" (which is now called *Verbum Spei*) in Mexico. My statement, which might today be considered as insufficiently explicit, nevertheless provoked an internal and external tsunami; which, besides, has brought me more than one hundred scathing letters and two trials for defamation (one in Paris, the other in Rome), both of which concluded that I was right to speak about these issues, "having verified the reality of the immoral behaviour of Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe and the validity of the motives for providing truthful and public information on the issue to avoid greater harm and damage."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Letter to the Brothers of 2 May, 2013, available on the Brothers' website.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. For example, the programme broadcast on KTO, available on the Brothers' website: <https://brothers-saint-john.org/who-we-are/our-history/fr-marie-dominique-philippe/>.

<sup>4</sup> Decree of 20 December, 2016.

Despite its minimalist character, the formulation we chose – "gestures contrary to chastity" – which was agreed upon by the General Chapter, enabled the commencement of an enquiry into the truth about our founder (who, for many, was destined for a process of beatification) without destroying our Community, and enabled other victims to come forward, as well as initiating the necessary work of readjusting our relationship to our founder.

Following these statements, I received new testimonies, some of which were far more explicit, like that of one of the claimants who, subsequently shared her story publicly. In addition to this testimony, the dossier on Fr Philippe contains fifteen testimonies that report gestures of varying gravity, mostly toward religious sisters (most of whom were Contemplative and Apostolic Sisters of Saint John), within the setting of spiritual direction or confession, sometimes with justifications given and intimations of keeping the incident[s] secret, during a period that stretched from 1974 to 1992. To my knowledge, five cases involve acts that could be characterised as sexual (rather than highly sensual), and which in three cases were repeated over a long period of time.

Most of these elements were shared with brothers during our vicariate meetings over the past few years, and I want to underline how much I appreciate the freedom of expression with which we spoke together. The assimilation of a history like this is not the work of a single day. The rhythm of each person must be respected and, moreover, nobody is obliged to take the same line of thinking. I would nevertheless like to highlight a couple of things:

1) I do not know anyone who, having read the collection of reports, would doubt their veracity. Furthermore, Rome has confirmed their veracity on a number of occasions, notably in the letter we received in 2016, and in the eight pages of the conclusion in the trial for defamation brought against me.

2) The brothers who publicly expressed their denial of these events, especially those who signed a petition against me, bear great responsibility. Their public denial has wounded the victims, added to their suffering

and slowed down the necessary work of acknowledging these issues. We must understand that life for the victims of abuse has usually been one of survival, continually struggling against anxiety and depression. They have seen their lives totally ruined by what has happened to them. When I have had the sad experience of meeting them and coming to understand (at least a little) what they have been through, I have felt like getting down on my knees before them and telling them how ashamed I am. I want to apologise to them a thousand times over, as a member of the Church, as a representative of the Community of Saint John, as a priest, a brother, and even simply as one of the baptised. The victims of abuse in the Church need a profound and sincere *mea culpa*, not words of denial, and certainly not renewed humiliation.

We will once again need to take up the question of our relationship to our founder during the coming General Chapter. For those who knew him (70% of the brothers), all of this is particularly painful and almost inconceivable. It takes time. I am very much aware that it is a question for which each one of us has a personal path he must walk. For some, this path is easier or has already come to an end; for others, it will take more time and accompaniment. We must exercise fraternal charity and really live by it, including with regard to the differences I have mentioned.

With regard to the work needing to be undertaken at the next General Chapter, I recently received a letter from Mgr Carballo, which said the following: "We understand the dissatisfaction felt with regard to the path taken by the previous General Chapter in relation to the founder of your institute. Immediately following the chapter, there were indeed protests made by religious who deemed the moral accusations made against Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe to be false and in need of public refutation. With the next chapter fast approaching, other religious have, on the other hand, asked that measures be taken in the opposite direction. As far as the Dicastery is concerned, we appreciate the decisions taken by the previous General Chapter as well as the prudent and sensitive way with which you wished to act upon those choices. However, that does not prevent the coming General Chapter from reconsidering the events of the recent past. It could prove very useful to address the recent past in relation to (...) daily life within the

communities, which [certain brothers] deem to be still too steeped in the example of Fr Philippe (prayer, portraits, books, etc.)."<sup>5</sup>

## OTHER BROTHERS

As you know, cases of abuse have also concerned, and continue to concern, brothers of the community. I will not go into the details of each case here. Dysfunction in dealing with these incidents may have occurred in the past, and we have publicly asked for forgiveness, especially during Jean-Dominique-Marie-Thérèse's trial for acts of paedophilia. There is no possibility that dysfunction of a similar kind could take place today, and this has been the case for a number of years now. Any reported case of abuse is treated in conformity with civil and ecclesiastical law.

The Commission SOS Abuse is currently dealing with cases both old and recent, of different natures and levels of gravity. It will give a report of its work during the next General Chapter.

We were indeed too slow in acknowledging these issues, but I think that from 2013 onwards things started to become clearer. We needed time to put *ad hoc* processes in place to deal with the issues. The report *Trials and Hope (Epreuves et espérance)*, which was written by the capitulants of the 2013 chapter, is in this regard significant and revealing, as it illustrates our position at that time (acknowledging and making unequivocal statements about the situation regarding Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe and other brothers): "shortcomings in chastity accompanied by doctrinal justifications have sadly involved brothers."<sup>6</sup>

I would also like to mention that I have defended some of the brothers before the authorities in Rome, either because of shortcomings in the trials brought against them, which I attempted to make clear to the Roman authorities, or because at the time I was not yet aware of the extent of their misdeeds.

---

<sup>5</sup> Letter of November, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Paper written by the brothers at the 2013 General Chapter

## WHAT WE HAVE DONE

I would now like to go over in more detail the actions we have taken to combat abuse, for although we are ashamed of the abuse committed by our founder and by some of our brothers, we have nothing to be ashamed of in the way in which our community has committed itself to combatting these abuses, in communion with the Church and the Pope. The combat is far from over, but we have undertaken it with courage and determination for a number of years now, so that the errors and faults of the past are not repeated. And this has indeed been the case.

To combat multiple cases of abuse, and the internal culture that made them more easily possible, we have had to work on at least four domains: 1) formation of the brothers; 2) making sure victims are listened to immediately; 3) treating reported cases seriously and quickly; 4) accompanying victims of abuse and truly helping them.

### 1. Help for victims

As a victim of one of the brothers wrote to us: "The greatest problem I faced as a victim within the community, whether dealing with the sisters or the brothers, was to be met with completely inappropriate reactions from those with whom I tried to speak about the issue: denial, attempts to water down the problem, defending or excusing the perpetrator, even suggesting I was the guilty party, etc. For many years this meant I was backed into a corner and I could not see any possible way out. It takes an immense amount of effort for a victim to begin to talk about the problem, and they simply will not make such an effort if there is not even the slightest reason to think that it would bear any fruit."

I have personally received visits from a number of victims as has the Commission on Abuse. It is without doubt the welfare of the victims for which I am most concerned today. I do not think that I have minimalized the drama they have lived through, but it is possible that some of them may think I have done so. I should have done better. I should have done more. We must do more. Nevertheless, this is what we have done by instituting the SOS Abuse Commission, making it possible for victims to contact the Commission easily and by forming the brothers.

## 2. Commission on Abuse

In order to correct errors in the way in which we have received and dealt with accusations in the past we created a Commission in 2015, which, since its implementation, has already made major improvements. In 2016, we added two laypeople to the Commission: a psychologist and a legal expert.

With the approach of the next General Chapter, we have asked the Commission for an evaluation and a series of recommendations so that we can identify areas for improvement in the functioning of the Commission.

Before we set up the Commission, we drew up a number of internal procedures to prevent and deal with abuse. These internal procedures (which have been made known to all of the brothers) were approved by Mgr Rivière and by our Roman authorities.

## 3. SOS Abuse

It was essential that we make it easy to contact the Commission on Abuse (cf. following point). To that end, since 2018, any person can contact the Commission directly via an email address we created ([sos.abus@stjean.com](mailto:sos.abus@stjean.com)) and which we have advertised through our internet sites and newsletters.

#### 4. Formation

For the prevention of abuse we have placed a strong emphasis during our initial formation on knowledge of one's self, one's affectivity and one's sexuality, and on the rules of good practice in spiritual accompaniment. As you know, since September 2016 you have been required to undergo formation about paedophilia and abuse. These sessions have called on the help of highly qualified external experts in these subjects, notably the delegate for the Conference of Bishops of France. Brothers who are tasked with providing formation also benefit from specific formation in these areas, as do young priests during their time of formation.

Although this formation specifically addresses sexual abuse, it also provides formation about the risk of abuse of power, which almost always precedes sexual abuse. 80% of the cases we know about have taken place within the context of spiritual accompaniment. We must therefore continue our work on this essential question of accompaniment. Many of the brothers are following more in-depth formation given by the Jesuits. I encourage you all to make use of this formation. The question must continue to be regularly addressed in chapter, as it was in 2017-2018 with the community work undertaken by the working group on accompaniment. We must be continuously vigilant in this regard, and we must also not be afraid to make use of fraternal correction vis-à-vis a brother's relationships with people.

This question must be of particular concern to us, given our knowledge that abuse committed by our founder and by some of the brothers was accompanied by inadmissible spiritual justifications. In his teaching on the "love-of-friendship" (sometimes translated as "friendship-love"), Fr Marie-Dominique insisted so much on this aspect of ethics that it led to a lack of balance with regard to other important elements of ethics (for example, the place given to law or the notion of moral fault) and his work on this topic could give rise to grave confusions. These confusions were reinforced by the fact that Fr Marie-Dominique did not clearly address the limits of friendship-love and the way in which those limits should be imposed in religious life, and especially in the context of spiritual accompaniment. This has not helped



some brothers to situate properly the place of friendship and the limits of its exercise within the context of religious life.

As Master of Studies, Br Martin undertook an enormous work of discernment with respect to the formation received from Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe in ethics, notably during the Vicariate Chapters of 2015-2016 and the last General Chapter of 2016. Br François-Frédéric then took up this work, which resulted in a letter that was co-signed by the Mistresses of Studies of both branches of the sisters. This work should be better known, further debated and continued.

In order to complete this work of formation and of acknowledging the problems in our internal culture, we have also invited a systemic psychologist to join the Counsel of the Prior General (the same psychologist has also been invited by our sisters) so that we can better understand what has happened and contribute to a culture of respect for each person's personal autonomy. I think we must continue in this direction and not hesitate to ask for help from people outside of the community.

## CONCLUSION

I would like to take this opportunity to ask forgiveness of the victims who feel they were not sufficiently listened to and / or accompanied, as well as of the brothers whom I may have hurt and who at one moment or other may have lost confidence in the community. I especially want to ask forgiveness of brothers who in the past have been wounded in their inner self by other brothers of our community. I want to apologise to the victims of our founder and to the victims of our brothers.

You can probably tell that I leave these nine years in charge as Prior General a tired man. But I think that our community has never been as healthy as it is today. Given the strength of the Johannine charism we have received, the fraternity that has continued to surprise me during our recent Vicariate Chapters, all

the trials we have been through together and all the work accomplished, I am convinced that Cardinal Braz de Aviz, in his letter of June 2016, had good reason to say: "*The prospect of young people being called to religious life in your Family of Saint John is a good both for them and for the Church.*"<sup>7</sup> The work we have begun together will certainly bear fruit for our community in the foreseeable future, even if it is in tears that we must sow.

Br. Thomas

---

<sup>7</sup> Letter of 22 June, 2016, available on the website of the Brothers of Saint John.  
<https://freres-saint-jean.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/12/lettre-de-rome.pdf>