

Introductory Message

Dearest Sisters,

Having invoked the gift of the Spirit upon each one of us, let us enter into the theme of this Third Consultative Assembly:

As we know, it is:

***Custodians of love,
we journey together in hope***

We have journeyed for four years since the last General Chapter, and we have experienced the light and protection of the Lord and His providential interventions at the various stages. Now, aware of our fragility and of the working of His Grace, we are called to **evaluate the path covered** and to **envision the prospects for the future**, in the light of the journey of the Church and the present situation of the world. We are privileged because we are in the heart of the **Jubilee Year**. This Assembly, thus, is doubly a precious time of Grace.

As we know, the General Consultative Assembly is a phase in the journey of the Congregation, marking the connection between the previous General Chapter and the next one. Let us recall the theme of the XXXIV General Chapter: ***Sisters of St. Ann, a Family for Families – Journeying with the Church, bringing Hope and Joy to the world today***. By evaluating the journey we have covered, we open ourselves to the Voice of the Spirit, who, through the signs of the times, indicates to us the steps to be followed.

From the theme of the previous General Chapter and the Synodal and Jubilee events comes the phrase: ***We journey together in hope***, which is what we wish to continue to do in the Church and in the world.

The phrase, ***Custodians of love***, gives us the specificity of our journey at this particular moment and brings to mind the image of the **Good Shepherd**.

It is very significant because it enshrines various meanings: A Shepherd is the **custodian/guardian** of the sheep: one who is called to *safeguard*, that is, to *protect* and *watch over*. **Shepherd** (in English also *pastor*) is also precisely the one who leads the sheep where there is food/pasture (*grass* in Spanish is *pasto*). The **shepherd**, the one who feeds, is therefore the one who provides food=nourishment (he who gives food at the opportune moment – (cf. Ps. 104:27: *These all look to you to give them their food in due season*).

Therefore, a Shepherd is the one who not only watches over, but also nourishes.

Therefore, in this inter-chapter journey we are called to be ***Custodians of Love***: we are called to **safeguard the Love that has been given as a gift by God to each of us**, but we are also called to **safeguard the Love that is in others**. We are called to watch over this love, to guide it, and also to nourish it and increase it.

To understand this theme better, I would like to explain the picture that is placed at the centre of this hall. It is a reproduction of an **ancient mosaic**, that of the **GOOD**

SHEPHERD in the *Mausoleum of Galla Placidia* in Ravenna, which dates back to a period between 425 and 450 AD. Together with the Word of God in *Ezekiel* 34:11-16, this image sheds light on the theme of this Assembly.

Let us describe the mosaic:

- At the centre, like an **axis of the composition**, Jesus is depicted as a **shepherd who takes care of his flock**. The sheep represent all the faithful, who follow Christ as their guide.

Jesus is a **youthful figure** (he is presented without a beard, like an adolescent) because he is the image of the **Son of God**. He is wearing royal clothes, because he is the King of Heaven and of earth; he is wearing a golden robe representing his divine nature and a purple cloak, a symbol of the Passion: Jesus gave His blood, His life, for the sheep.

His body is completely turned, in a dynamic pose, as if making slow, solemn movements. It possesses measured energy. His expression is serene and relaxed. His gaze, with His head turned to the right, seems absorbed, looking into the distance. **His thoughts and gaze** are always in **God the Father** and on the fulfillment of **His plan of salvation**.

- Jesus is seated as if on a throne, on a **rock of three steps**, which is a metaphor for the Trinity. It is also a symbol of vigilance, because it is in an elevated position: the shepherd stands high up like a sentinel on the lookout to safeguard his flock.

- With his **left hand** he holds a **cross** which is at the same time a **rod** and a **staff**.

The rod and the staff, symbols of the Divine Shepherd mentioned in Psalm 23, converge in the cross, an emblem of salvation. The **rod** serves primarily as a support for the Shepherd as he walks over rocks and stones, over mountains and valleys; it serves him to guide and direct the flock and to protect it from various dangers; while the long, curved **staff** serves to retrieve the lost sheep, bringing them back to the right path. The rod and the staff are put together here as a **cross**, which Jesus transformed from a means of torture into an instrument of mercy and salvation.

He is the shepherd who guards, protects, accompanies, guides and saves his flock.

- With His **right hand He caresses**, or rather, simply touches the nose of a sheep. It is a very delicate gesture that expresses affection, acceptance, personalized care and physical closeness, but not intrusiveness or violence. It expresses **care**. It also seems to be like a paternal gesture of someone who is feeding his sheep.
- The **animals** are similar, they are all **sheep**, but each sheep is in a different position. On the left, two sheep are standing and one is crouching towards the bottom corner. On the right, other three sheep are grazing peacefully. We are all sheep, but each of us is

different, unique, and therefore with a **personal expression**. He knows each of the sheep in its own particularity and calls each one by name.

The different attitude of each sheep also indicates the **freedom** that God has granted to each person.

Even though their posture and attitude differ, all the sheep turn their heads and gaze **towards Christ**, who is the true guide. There is **personal freedom** and at the same time, **unity of path**, unity of perspective, centered on Christ.

- The **scene** is very balanced, based on a symmetrical but not rigid composition, it presents itself as an idyllic image, where peace and harmony reign. The Shepherd and the animals appear serene, relaxed, and perfectly at ease.
- The **setting** is naturalistic, resembling a **mountain landscape** very rich with plants, flowers and shrubs, immersed in a springtime atmosphere, which the blue sky seems to refer to. The colours too are light, bright, like those of a clear day: all elements that evoke Paradise...

The dark blue background of the lunette represents the sky, but also refers to death and to Paradise that welcomes the righteous, suggesting that following Christ leads to salvation and resurrection.

On the left, behind the sheep, a **hill** can be glimpsed that conceals **the tomb of Christ**, a memorial of His Resurrection.

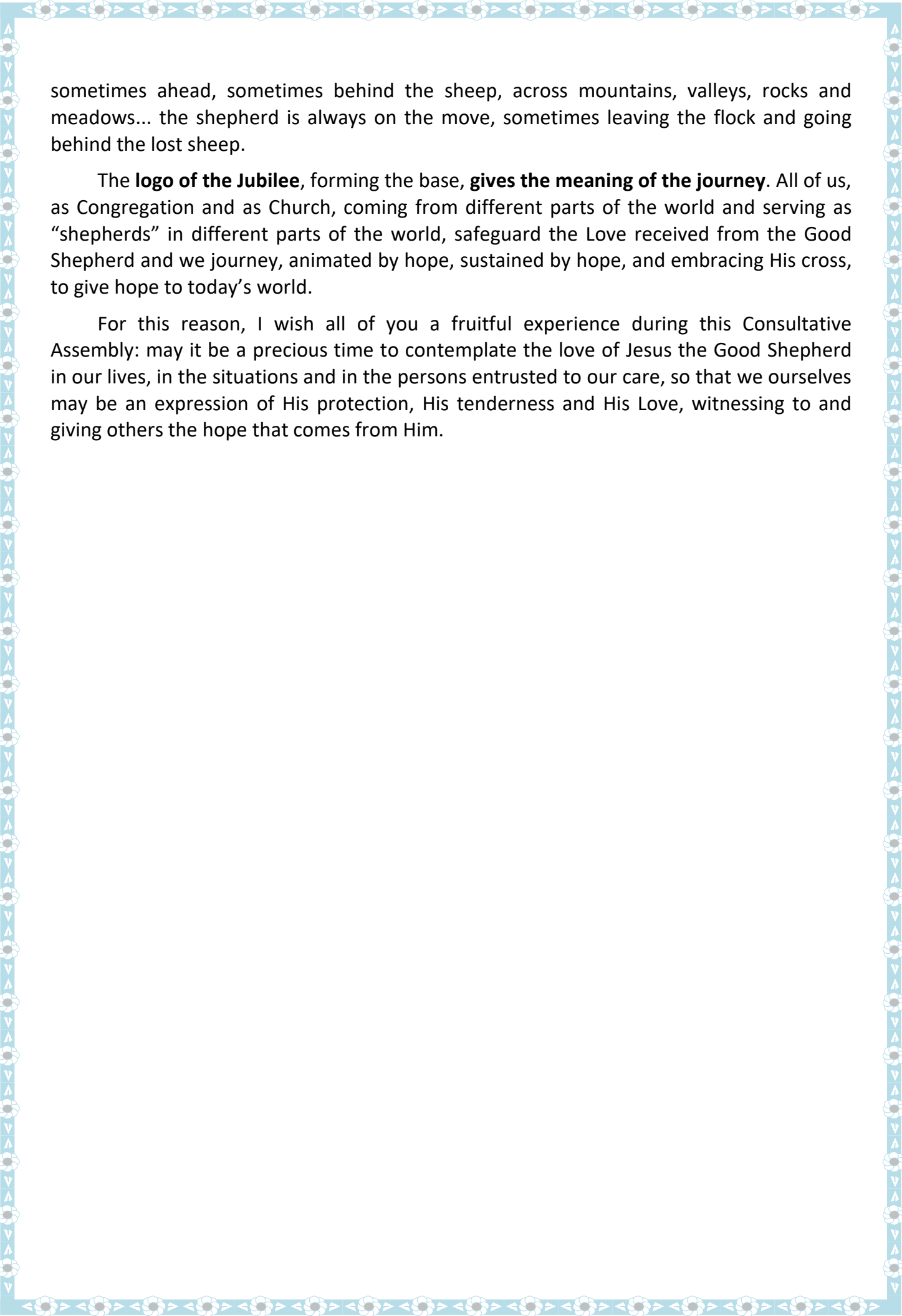
The peaceful landscape, rich in plants and flowers, instills a **serenity centered on Jesus**: only through Christ can eternal peace be attained.

This picture of the Good Shepherd has been chosen because it seems to cross in a transversal manner, the various themes we will be discussing during this Consultative Assembly, helping us to fix our gaze on the **key words** that outline the figure of Jesus as our Shepherd and give us a direction in our experience of fraternal communion, the service of authority, the administration of goods, our apostolate, and our relationship with all the little ones, the fragile and poor whom He places on our path, both within and outside our Communities.

The key words are: **vigilance, protection, care, love, happiness, hope**.

It is interesting to note that our **Founders** and **Mother Enrichetta**, in their mission of service to others in various fields—social, political, religious, and community — lived precisely these values. Therefore, they are for us concrete “teachers” of life.

The **LOGO OF THE JUBILEE**, in this symbolism, is not just placed side by side to it, but gives a basic orientation. In the mosaic, Jesus the Good Shepherd is seated, because He governs and nourishes, but—as mentioned earlier—He is not static; He has a dynamic nature. Indeed, we know that the very identity of the shepherd involves **walking**,



sometimes ahead, sometimes behind the sheep, across mountains, valleys, rocks and meadows... the shepherd is always on the move, sometimes leaving the flock and going behind the lost sheep.

The **logo of the Jubilee**, forming the base, **gives the meaning of the journey**. All of us, as Congregation and as Church, coming from different parts of the world and serving as “shepherds” in different parts of the world, safeguard the Love received from the Good Shepherd and we journey, animated by hope, sustained by hope, and embracing His cross, to give hope to today’s world.

For this reason, I wish all of you a fruitful experience during this Consultative Assembly: may it be a precious time to contemplate the love of Jesus the Good Shepherd in our lives, in the situations and in the persons entrusted to our care, so that we ourselves may be an expression of His protection, His tenderness and His Love, witnessing to and giving others the hope that comes from Him.