Letter promulgating the decisions of the first General Chapter (11th November 1874)

My very dear Sons in Our Lord, as you know, by Episcopal Order of the 1st of October last, I convoked your first General Chapter for the 11th of the same month. Today, I must report on the decisions of this Chapter and modifications that these decisions entail for the government of your Society.

Government of the Society – The main objective of the convocation of your General Chapter was to give you a definitive government through the election of your regular Superiors. In fact, I had had to take upon myself alone, from the moment of the foundation of your Work, all the remits and all the tasks of its government. There lies one of the needs, which is imperative to the founders of regular communities and from which they must not shrink in the beginning.

However, in the particular situation in which I find myself, weighed down and taken up as I am by the many tasks of the episcopate; besides, sentenced to a premature death by daily increasing disabilities, I could not imagine keeping this responsibility any longer, thus leaving you without regular leaders, who would be able to completely share your life. At my death, it would expose you to dreadful circumstances. For this reason, I absolutely ruled out the idea that you had to elect me unanimously as your Superior General. It touched me deeply, a proof of your filial affection. Indeed, this would have made complete and even more acute the disadvantages that I wanted to avoid.

On the other hand, my dear Sons, it would have been imprudent to abandon you all of a sudden to yourselves. You are all young; you do not have enough experience, for some time yet, to do without higher guidance. Now, all this corresponded perfectly with the Holy Rules of the Church, which gives special rights over Works and Societies submitted to their jurisdiction to Founders, especially if they are diocesan bishops. Therefore, I could and should, by giving you regular Superiors, have remained as your first ecclesiastical Superior and consequently retain the necessary authority to ensure the maintenance of your initial spirit, prevent or repair the errors, if any were committed, and rectify abuses.

Indeed, as long as they are not approved by the Sovereign Pontiff and exempted by him from the jurisdiction of the Ordinary, Diocesan Congregations do not and cannot have other rights in the Church than those they receive from the Bishop. It is up to him to direct them, to extend them or suppress them and they can do nothing legitimately without his authority. My dear sons, it is on this principle that I based myself, to draw up, in two Orders, the rules that were to follow your General Chapter. It would give it the attributions it would keep until the Holy See would arrange it otherwise if it thought fit. Finally, it would lay the conditions on which the governance of your Society would be constituted.

These fundamental rulings, for which I had earnestly asked the Lord and Our Lady of Africa to grant me their illumination, were transcribed at my order as headings of the logbooks of the deliberations of the Chapter. Moreover, I had them printed and they are in your hands. I therefore have no need of making them known otherwise. In conformity with their content, the elections to the Council of the Society proceeded.

As no one was yet found to fill the necessary condition to become Superior General, i.e., who had ten years of presence in the Society from his entry to novitiate, the Chapter elected three Assistants: Rev. Fr. Deguerry, Superior of the Affats; Rev. Fr. Charbonnier, Superior of the Junior Seminary for local inhabitants; and Rev. Fr. Livinhac, Deputy Director of the Scholasticate.