On this day, by recalling the birth of our common Father John Eudes, the Lord Jesus gives us a special grace to begin a new step in the history of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd. As I had already shared with you in the opening Mass of your Congregational Chapter, it is about experiencing after the reunification, a new time of grace that allows, with a renewed spirit, to continue with the mission. “Together in Mission” was the theme of the Chapter; now it is necessary to implement all the decisions taken and finalize the proposed plans as well as to continue to build on what had already been established.

As we are in a time of grace, let me start by giving thanks. First of all, I want to thank God for all the wonderful history of mercy lived by this marvelous Congregation: a unique and inspiring history, I must say. I want to thank the outgoing Congregational Leadership Team which is about to end its mandate and, in particular, Sister Brigid Lawlor who, for twelve years, devoted herself entirely to her sisters. Dear Brigid, you have done an excellent job! Of course, I would also like to give thanks to all the sisters who, as councilors or by carrying out other tasks, have given the best of themselves to the Congregation.

Finally, on behalf of all the sisters who are present here, as well as of all those in mission in various countries of the world and, on behalf of all the Eudists, I want to give a warm and hearty welcome to Sister Ellen Kelly and the new Congregational Leadership Team. We offer this Mass to ask God to bestow abundant blessings upon all of you, to give you the strength of the Holy Spirit and to spread a contagious enthusiasm in order for you to fulfill your mission: to be as merciful as your Father is!

I appreciate the attention and consideration, dear Sisters, which you have demonstrated today, 14th November, during the celebration of the installation of the new CLT. I also appreciate your choice of the readings of St. John Eudes for the Mass. All this is a sign of fraternal communion and a desire to build together the Family of the Great Heart, a Family who is as merciful as the Father!

The first reading illustrates the work of God as the Good Shepherd, anticipating the mission of Jesus Christ. Chapter 34 of Ezekiel begins with a prophecy against the shepherds of Israel, who are bad shepherds because
they only take care of themselves! ...They consumed milk...They have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. They have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. ...So my sheep were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. (Ez 34,1-7). Then the Lord takes the decision to take care himself of his flock. But what will the Lord do as the Good Shepherd? He says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered ...I will bring them out from the nations and gather them,...I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains...I will tend them in a good pasture...There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture...I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. All these actions are vital for the good of the sheep in order for them to survive and have abundant life. This reading also teaches us about a new way of shepherding, a way of shepherding with justice: He will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep because, even among them, there have been mistreatments and abuses (Ez 34,16-22).

Here we have a wonderful paradigm which is appropriate for the Congregational Leader and, of course, for all the Leadership Team: the call to carry out a merciful shepherding mission, taking care of all the sheep entrusted to us. To do this, we must search, look after, rescue, gather, bring back, pasture, take care, bind up, strengthen... It is a service that demands the best from any congregational leader: it is necessary to give our own life for the sheep, for the sisters and the brothers, like Jesus the Good Shepherd did. This is the model of a merciful shepherd who gives up his own self-interests, his own life, so that the sheep entrusted to him may have life and abundant life! To be a good shepherd, our thoughts, words, actions, our whole being must be animated by a heart of mercy which is the very Heart of Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd because he shows mercy to all of his sheep, so that they can fulfill their mission in the world: to be as merciful as the Father!

In God’s love and care for us, Pope Francis has proclaimed the Holy Year of Mercy, a time of grace for the Church and for our Family. The Pope reminds us that “Mercy is the word that reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy is the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy is the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person.....Mercy is the bridge that connects God and man.....”

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1 Extract from Pope Francis, Misericordiae Vultus, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, 2.
Mercy is a central theme in the life and thoughts of St. John Eudes. Indeed, one of the ideals conveyed to his sons and daughters, is expressed in these words: “we are missionaries of the Divine Mercy, sent by the Father of Mercies to dispense the treasures of his mercy to the wretched, that is to say, to sinners, and to deal with them in a spirit of mercy, compassion and meekness.” (SJE Complete Works, Chapter X).

For St. John Eudes, mercy, which is understood as the superabundant and gratuitous love of God for the sinful person, represents a core point in the being of God. This explains, in the end, the source of the plan of salvation, that is to say his revelation of the Sacred Scripture, his action in the history of salvation (considered at both community and personal levels), as well as the great mystery of the Incarnation, and the personal states and mysteries of Jesus: his feelings, intentions and disposition.

The Heart, as central to SJE’s spirituality, becomes, by his own interpretation, the source of mercy that flows inextinguishably from Jesus’ Holy Heart: “He is merciful who bears in his heart, through compassion, the miseries of the wretched” (SJE “The Admirable Heart of Mary”, Chapter VIII). If we paraphrase our Father Eudes’ quote, we can say that: “He is the Good Shepherd (the one) who bears in his heart, through compassion, the miseries of the wretched”. It is clear that, following St. Augustine, Father Eudes takes into account the Latin etymology of mercy (miser = misery; cor = heart); a heart which is touched by love, by the need or weakness of the other person: this is the heart of the Good Shepherd! In the end, it is the same love of God which is manifested first to us as sinners and, through us, to all the sons and daughters of God, even to those who hurt us, for they also were born from the Heart of Jesus.

The strength of this spirituality, based on the Holy Scripture, amazingly overflows far more than originally expected. Indeed, mercy is the means that providentially, and through the breath of the Holy Spirit, has encouraged the establishment of St. John Eudes’ and St. Mary Euphrasia’s foundations. As the one and only Family, we have received, from each other, the charism of mercy, because we certainly exist to light the fire of mercy in the world, to renew the Christian spirit of the baptized, to work for the dignity of women and to form good Gospel workers.

The driving force that pushes the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd - and also the Eudists - is nothing other than the mercy that flows from the Heart of Jesus. The compassionate look of Jesus the Good Shepherd on the lost sheep continues in the spirituality and mission of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd. No matter the situation, or the circumstances, or the place where they are, because they have a very clear principle of being missionaries of mercy, as St. Mary
Euphrasia wrote: “For whom do you think has the Lord done such wonders? Perhaps for special souls, his friends? Oh no, my dear daughters! These things were done for fallen creatures, who had lost their way and abandoned the right path. Now you see how God loves! He loves us passionately! And shall we never do anything for him? Shall we never repay him in some way? Oh yes, indeed! We shall lead back to him some of those souls his heart loves so much.”

Mercy cannot be reduced to a feeling or a good desire, but it needs to be translated into concrete actions, as we find in our spiritual teachers. According to St. John Eudes: “Three elements are necessary for mercy: the first is to take pity on the miseries of others...the second, to possess the greatest will to help the outcast in their miseries...the third, to pass from thought and will into action.” (SJE – “The Admirable Heart of Mary”, Chapter VIII). And incredibly, in St. Mary Euphrasia, we find an echo of this statement: “Watch over them carefully, noticing their needs of mind and body and prudently leading them to spiritual pastures suitable to each one's state.”

We thank the Lord for this spirituality of profound biblical roots, as we are heirs of the Heart of Jesus. We have been placed in a world and in a time where, though we do not want to hear about God, we are still interested, accept and understand the language of mercy. In this way, the spirituality of our Family becomes a challenge that requires from us intelligence, creativity, personal holiness and much prayer in order for us to become the missionaries of mercy that St. Mary Euphrasia and St. John Eudes dreamed of for their daughters and sons.

Let us unite as the Family of the Great Heart, full of mercy, in order to continue and to complete the life of Christ. This is our common mission! In the coming Holy Year, Pope Francis will send thousands of missionaries of mercy throughout the whole world. We will accept, in the same way, the call of Jesus, who called and sent out 72 of his followers, two by two, “to heal the sick and tell them: ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” (Lk 10,9). So, let us proceed together as the Family of the Great Heart, Good Shepherd Sisters and Eudists, to bring to the world the compassionate and merciful love of God.

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2 Extract from “Conferences and Instructions of SME”, Chapter 4, page 46.
3 Extract from “Conferences and Instructions of SME”, Chapter 6, page 62.