



*"But at midnight there was a cry,
"Look! The bridegroom! Go out and meet him.
The bridegroom arrived.
Those who were ready went in
with him to the wedding hall
and the door was closed."
(Mt 25,6.10).*

Very dear sisters,

as I am writing these lines I think about you and I "see" you in the daily commitment, in the different responsibilities, that everyone in her place is doing in the name of Jesus and of Don Orione, among the little and poor ones. For some of you the beginning of the school year finds you also in the effort of the introduction in a new community, in a new apostolate or in a new responsibility... I'm thinking about you and I "see" you and spiritually I am following you up knowing the love, devotion and generosity that are in your hearts, wishes and the suffering to answer with faithfulness to the Lord on the path of holiness... everything is for me a reason of such a gratitude for what you are and what you do! As you are the concrete face of what a Little Missionary Sister of Charity, a daughter of Don Orione is called to be in the Church and in the world.

With these feelings today I'm coming to you to share with you some reflections which can accompany the walk of preparation for Easter and help to go and meet the bridegroom, the Risen" with their lamps well prepared and full of oil.

I would like to invite you all to live this period of Lent in an "Easter climate", in "theme" of resurrection, as the time that the Church is offering us to prepare ourselves to the meeting with the Risen, the time of concentrate all our physical, intellectual and spiritual energies to become more true, better more beautiful in the relationships, in the prayers, in the apostolate...

The "Beauty" as a way to inner life

The strong calling of XIth General Chapter has put us in an itinerary of transformation, of conversion and of renewal of our Orionine consecrated life; this "change" can be generated only "from the inside", in our inner life, in the deep side of our conscious, where we find alone, face to face with God. The "new" is in germ inside us, as the Verb in Mary's womb¹, but it cannot come to fruition without our decision and radical and determinate joining transforming our way of being and of living in what we believe and love.

¹ Cfr. Sr M. Mabel Spagnuolo, Communication for Advent 2011.

The “*new style of life*” could get concrete, external and visible shape only when values supporting it will be interiorized and deeply assumed in our hearts. Only a transformed and converted heart is able to transform and convert reality making it better, more beautiful, more true and therefore, “ more readable and authentic... able to arouse enthusiasm”² other people in the following of Christ.

For many centuries religious life has gone on paths of a holiness, being channeled through many and different forms of personal “utility” or in favor of the others and which, by means of different asceticism, heroic and sincere of course, were a sure and enthusiastic paradigm³.

“Today to offer oneself completely to God it is not enough the wish of the “useful” but it is necessary to offer answers to the wish of the “beautiful”. Evangelism if it’s not a fact as a “beautiful news” it’s only theory and as such not able to put reality in the living and fertile humus of an unexplored culture of resurrection and of fertility. Beauty not as an esthetic fact but as a happening of grace for the fullness of life, for the experience of God”⁴.

The “beauty” is a theological category: God is inexpressible beauty and origin of every beautiful, good and true thing: *“Of all men you are the most handsome, gracefulness is a dew upon your lips, for God has blessed you for ever”* (Sal 45,3). Only what is able to fascinate and attract can fall in love the heart and take it to a full and total gift: *“Master, it is wonderful for us to be here;”* (Luke 9,33) and from this experience of light comes the wish to stay with Him: *“so let us make three shelters”* (Luke 9,33)... but, from this discovery and from this “staying” with Him, in the inner part where we compare with “the most handsome” we become ourselves “beautiful” at His image, too.

The words of Cardinal Martini are very appropriate: *“the truth involves, captivates and convinces in so far as it becomes beauty and tenderness, too, so that nobody adheres to a last sense if not for a kind of fascination of its perceptible and advanced beauty”⁵.*

A renewed spiritual dynamics

Very dear sisters, the time of Lent is the right time to transform our lives, our fraternity, our prayer, our liturgies, our environments, our works and services, our relationships with lay people into the beauty of Jesus Risen...

How? We have already started this walk, during the time of Advent, by reading and dialoguing together about the features of the style of life and by identifying the key words.

Let’s go on in this itinerary, now in a more demanding and concrete way. Those key words must start “germinating” into concrete choices of goodness, of truth and beauty transforming the realities we are living in.

² Cfr. Acts XIth General chapter pag. 42

³ Cfr. Cozza Rino csj, Dall’“utile” passare al “bello”, Rivista “Testimoni” 1/2012, pag. 16.

⁴ Cozza Rino csj, Dall’“utile” passare al “bello”, Rivista “Testimoni” 1/2012, pag. 16-18.

⁵ Card. Carlo M. Martini, “Tu sei bellezza” di E. Ronchi, pag. 24.

The General chapter opened the doors, through the change of some articles, to be able to think in a new way about the personal and communitarian choices either about prayer, or about asceticism, particularly for the time we are starting.

I would like to go through two of these articles of the General Rules, which have been changed on pages 59 and 60 of the Acts of the XIth General Chapter.

The article 34 introduces us in a deeper and more fruitful way to create a climate of silence. But, which kind of silence? how can we make silence beautiful? How can we regain the value of a silence and a solitude that could be “womb” giving birth to the most beautiful words and relationships?

Don Orione gives us a light: *“What a sweet silence full of peace!... and, in silence, only God!... solitude without God let the spirit rest, but harden the heart: it is a flowered perfumed plain, but only with a pale and mortuary sun”*⁶.

Our silence isn't mutism, escape, seclusion, disregard... it is a silence inhabited and impregnated by the presence of God: *“I am going to seduce her and lead her into the desert and speak to her heart.”* (Os 2,16).

Silence is not an aim, but it is “finalized” to the dialogue and to communication with the sisters and the brothers; in this sense, authenticity of our silence will be verified by the beauty of our way to communicate, to dialogue, to open and to welcome the other.

The article 37 invites us to witness the spirit of penance. But, what kind of penance? How can we make “beautiful” asceticism and penance? How can we gain the value of a penance and an asceticism that can be “womb” of new relationships, of a new style of life, more beautiful, more evangelical and humanizing?

Also here the wonderful words of Don Orione, written at the beginning of the article, give us the right direction: *“I pray Our Mother Virgin Mary, for you, so that she may grant you spirit not of severity but of charity, of penance yes, but of charity, of charity, of charity, consuming you all for the neighbor”*⁷.

Only love can make renounce “beautiful”. Asceticism, sacrifices and penance are not an aim, but they are “finalized” to the perfection of charity, without love they make action sterile, life sad and heavy relationships, they risk to fall into moralism and hypocrisy.

*The spirit of penance and of asceticism lived in the more authentic evangelical spirit make our lives more “human” and more “humanizing” and therefore, more “spiritual”: “eventually this is a way of thinking which is different from the time when under the influence of Platonic doctrine finding a good space in our theology, they thought that matter and body were antithetical to spirit. (...) spirit without humanity can take us to coldness and non sense, that is the disease of the sad passions (depression), making loose the compass by drying up the sources of life. In these situations it is not enough the faith of the “brothers” to take us out, to transform the dull or sad hours, but it is necessary the friendship of friends, as the heart is suffering”*⁸.

⁶ Lo Spirito, Vol IX, Unione con Dio, p. 194; O. D. P. 3-9-1899.

⁷ Carta Magna, 18 agosto 1921.

⁸ Rino Cozza csj, ibidem, pag. 19.

In this sense, authenticity of our forms of ascesis and penance will be verified by the beauty of our charity, of justice, of goodness, of solidarity and of friendship we are living in our communities.

Already in the Ancient Testament God is very clear about it: *“look, the only purpose of your fasting is to quarrel and squabble and strike viciously with your fist. Fasting like yours today will never make your voice heard on high. Is that the sort of fast that pleases me, a day when a person inflicts pain on himself? Hanging your head like a reed, spreading out sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call fasting, a day acceptable to Yahweh?”* (Is 58,4-5). Jesus will bring to the fullness this concept in His life and in his words: *“Go and learn the meaning of the words: Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice. And indeed I came to call not the upright, but sinners.”* (Mt 9,13).

The communitarian challenge of the style of life

Very dear sisters, this long reflection wants to be the introduction enlightening your reflections and communitarian discernment, at the beginning of Lent, the frame where to put this “strong time” of preparation to Easter, to the meeting with the Risen Bridegroom.

I invite you therefore to share about what I have written in these lines and then, in the communitarian meeting you will organize this lent period, to read together the second decision about the “style of life” in the Acts of the XIth general chapter: **sacerdotal dimension** (liturgical and of the cult), to stop on the points from 10 to 24 and, strating from these very concrete ones, to make a project for this Lent:

- Which forms of “silence”, of “penance” and “ascesis” we can assume in syntony with what we have read?
- Which commitment during this Lent taking us to make more beautiful, better and more true the fraternal living together?
- How can we make the communitarian, the apostolate and the work places more beautiful?
- How can we make our prayer and our liturgy more beautiful?
- The bridegroom is arriving: how would we like him to find us, personally, as a community, as a work? What kind of oil can we put in our personal lamps and in the ones of the community?

We have a lot of instruments at our disposal to be able to realize a true and authentical walk of conversion and change of our way and of our style of life.

In this period the daily Word of God will help us, and together with the Eucharistic bread feeding us and giving us strength; the sacraments, above all the one of reconciliation, is a space of grace and light to verify the right direction of our life; we have the sisters sharing our lives every day and who though the dialogue, the friendship and the fraternal promotion are provident “voice” of God near us.

Let's use all these means and encourage one another the chance to walk this period with serenity, joy and enthusiasm, while waiting for Easter, while waiting for the Bridegroom.

Beauty of womanhood at the service of the Gospel

But we have an instrument specially put in ourselves as women by the Creator which is a natural and privileged channel of the "beauty" of God: our womanhood.

We women have a particular way to perceive and feel reality, a sensibility and natural intuition putting ourselves in advanced position of service, of compassion, of donation. If we can say that Mary is the maternal face of God, we are at her school, an extension of this mission through the beauty of the spiritual maternity. Don Orione wanted us as "*sisters and mother of the poor*", but also mother and sisters among us.

We cannot smother under wrong concepts of severity what God Himself gave us as our "identity". Moderation is not the opposite of beauty, therefore, let's develop at its utmost during this lent time our skill to make life beautiful. Let's offer one another and to everyone acts of consideration, of kindness, of loveliness and of compassion, of patience and understanding, the gift of a smile, of listening, of the good word, of the right deed.

The beauty of our womanhood is an effective instrument of evangelization, of witness of the face of a God who is beauty and goodness, it is an instrument moving towards faithfulness and perseverance in the vocation and which can attract new vocations.

Nobody can feel outside of this walk of change! We all have a beauty to offer to others as a fruit of an authentic lent walk.

The beauty which Christ wants to create in ourselves has the same power in the young ones and in the less young ones, in the strongest ones and in the weakest ones.

The light, the goodness and the beauty of God bright with the same strength in the hearts and hands full of vigour of the youngest ones as in the wrinkles and white hair of wisdom of the eldest sisters; in the silent room of the sick sisters as in the wings, in the classroom, in the place of the apostolate of the missionaries.

The strength and beauty of Jesus Risen comes clearly in the Eucharistic silence of the Sacramentine sisters and in the waiting full of trust and hope of the Contemplative sisters.

From the Cross to Easter

Dear Sisters, the Lord is coming and wants to meet us awaken and joyful in the waiting. The walk of Lent is a walk of hope, faith, commitment taking us through the mystery of the Cross and the death of Jesus, to the full life of the transfiguration in Him, of the *Instaurare tutto in Lui*.

I wish of heart to you all a serene and fruitful walk towards Easter.

May the Sunday of resurrection find us ready, like Mary of Magdala in front of the sepulcher, to embrace the bridegroom with our life purified and transfigured: *“Listen, my daughter, attend to my words and hear then the king will fall in love with your beauty; he is your lord, bow down before him.”* (Sal 45,11-12).

May be that after these forty days of walk, we could offer to the Bridegroom Risen all the fruits of our fraternal life fortified in the Trinitarian charity and make ours the words of Don Orione: “We are little and a few, but united in Christ. (...) the beauty and the splendor of our unity and fraternal charity will build the Church, the souls, and Christ will be glorified and blessed!”⁹.

I remain and wish also on behalf of the councilor sisters, a happy Easter.

United in prayer and in fraternal love, I embrace each one of you in the Lord:

Sr. M. Mabel Spagnuolo
General Superior

Rome, General House, 17th February 2012.

⁹ Scr. 26, 148, lettera a Don Piccinini, Mar de Hespanha MG, 17-10-1921.