



Prot. MG 98/17

DEAR SISTERS!

Lent has already arrived! In his Message for this year Pope Francis says: “Lent is a new beginning, a path leading to the certain goal of Easter, Christ’s victory over death. This season urgently calls us to conversion. Christians are asked to return to God “with all their hearts” (Joel 2:12), to refuse to settle for mediocrity and to grow in friendship with the Lord. Jesus is the faithful friend who never abandons us. Even when we sin, he patiently awaits our return; by that patient expectation, he shows us his readiness to forgive”¹.

*These words of the Pope are doubly meaningful for us, LMSC, who are faced with another “new beginning”: **the XII General Chapter**, also this is an event of “conversion” and “renewal” to overcome the mediocre attitudes which may have entered our lives, to grow in friendship with the Lord and to purify ourselves of our sins, to welcome his “readiness to forgive”.*

Surely this Lent is the privileged “place” where Divine Providence wants to purify us, mould us and introduce us into the “new time”, the “Kairos” of the XII General Chapter which we LMSC will all experience.

In this time leading up to Easter, I want to propose for your reflection and personal and community sharing, a theme which concludes the itinerary I have offered you during these last six years through my letters of the various liturgical seasons.

I think that you have all been able to follow this itinerary which intended to help us incarnate the “*new lifestyle*” proposed by the XII General Chapter, by studying in a deeper way the main central themes of our charism: obedience, poverty, freedom, chastity, a sense of belonging, a family spirit... and now, the last one, the one which touches the heart of our identity: **charity**.

For us living *charity* is not one more “theme” in the list of the commandments of the Gospel, for us it is a question of life or death. We are “*missionaries*” of charity which is God himself. We are called to become an “*incarnation of charity*”, in our fraternal relationships, in our relationships with others, in our relationships with the poor.

For us “*charity*” is a “*style of life*” which, furthermore, we profess through a “Vow”: **the IV Vow, the Vow of Charity**.

“CHARITY” IS HUMANIZATION

Lent is the appropriate time to examine ourselves on our fraternal charity, on the quality of our relationships, among us and then with others and with the poor!

In his Message for this Lent, which I have already quoted, Pope Francis says:

“Other persons are a gift. A right relationship with people consists in gratefully recognizing their value”, we need “to open the doors of our heart to others because each person is a gift, whether it be our neighbour or an anonymous pauper. Lent is a favourable season for opening the doors to all those in need and recognizing in them the face of Christ.

¹ Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2017.

Each of us meets people like this every day. Each life that we encounter is a gift deserving acceptance, respect and love".²

I was immediately struck by this expression of the Pope: "*the other is a gift*", therefore "*I am also a gift*". Love exists and only has meaning if there is "*another*" who I can love and, thus, God has given us the other precisely so as to be able to activate the love which He himself has put into our hearts. So, if "*the other is a gift*" which is given to me in order to give a concrete form to love, to charity, through welcoming, dialogue, service, solidarity, respect... how can I delude myself by living a life consecrated to charity which excludes the other? How can I be indifferent to the presence of my sister, of my brother, of the poor, of the sick... starting with those who are "*inside*" my house?

In the community we are a gift for each other. We are a gift for each other in the places where we are called to live our vocation. Denying the other is a sin against "*charity*", that is, against God himself who is present in the other, because God makes himself a gift in the person of every neighbor who we meet.

Let us not deceive ourselves by a disincarnated spirituality, which is devotional, moralistic and Pharisaic, very far from making our lives more *human*!

True spirituality is charity, and true charity is humanization, in the measure of the man Christ.

The lack of "humanization" in Religious Life is one of the most popular topics discussed at this time, in the inter-congregational meetings of the Major Superiors and formators. But, I ask myself: are we not ashamed of this? How can we say that God became man, that God is present in the other, that the other is a gift for me, if we then lack humanization in our "*style of life*"?

Perhaps someone reading this may say: don't exaggerate!" But I ask myself: "am I exaggerating?"

During this time, through the readings about creation from the book of Genesis, the liturgy presents to us a concrete example of the terrible effect of sin in us when "humanization" is lacking: the relationship between Cain and Abel. I found Pope Francis' homily which he gave at the daily Mass in St. Martha's Chapel. I will take only a few passages to help you with your reflections: "*The story of Cain and Abel is the story of brotherhood that should grow and be beautiful, but ends up destroyed. A story which begins 'with a little jealousy': Cain is irritated because his sacrifice does not please the Lord and he begins to cultivate a feeling of resentment, a feeling he could control but does not. Cain chose to harbor this sentiment and let it grow. The sin he will then commit is crouching within this sentiment. This is how enmity between us begins with a tiny spark of jealousy or envy, and ends up growing so much that we see life only from that point of view: 'the speck of sawdust becomes a plank in our eye, our life revolves around it and it ends up destroying the bond of brotherhood; it destroys fraternity. Gradually one becomes 'obsessed, persecuted' by that evil that grows and grows. This leads one to detach oneself from one's brother turning him into an enemy who must be destroyed. This enmity ends up destroying families, peoples, everything! This is what happened to Cain who ended up killing his brother*".³

Jesus came precisely to "*humanize*" us through his incarnation, passion and resurrection, helping us to become true "men" and true "women" in the image of God who is Love. In a world like ours only by witnessing to a "*humanizing charity*" will we be significant and prophetic, it is the only way to build the new civilization of love.

Let us ask ourselves personally and then share together with the community:

- In what way is the "*other*" in the community, a *gift* for me and for the others? How do we feel the "*other*" as "*sister*"?

² Idem.

³ Pope Francis, Homily at St Martha's, 14th February 2017

- In what way am I a *gift* for the others? In what ways do I not show *humanizing traits* in my feelings and in my behaviours towards the others in the community?
- In this time of Lent, looking at the “humanizing charity” of Jesus, how can we purify our fraternal relationships from any small trace of a “*lack of humanization*”?

“CHARITY” BEARS EACH OTHER’S BURDENS

“Charity” bears each other’s burdens because “charity” is communion: God is communion!

I have always liked very much the words of St John Paul II: “*A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as "those who are a part of me". This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship*”.⁴

We LMSC, profess this “*caring charity*” by a Vow. This is the charity which moved the apostolic heart of Don Orione to go “*to the ends of the world*”, without borders, without stopping, without sparing his energy, time or health...

True love always tends to the care of life, especially of the weakest and the disadvantaged, and it belongs precisely to the woman to take care of life, to feel her brother and sister “*as someone who belongs to us*”, that is, like one of us, not as a stranger or a foreigner...

It belongs precisely to the woman to train the “*eyes of the heart*” which make us capable of “*seeing*” and “*feeling*” what is invisible and what the other is not saying. Charity takes care of the life of the other with humility, readiness, silently, without human calculations, without humiliating the other, without exceptions or dislikes, because love is greater.

I cannot understand why in certain communities there is indifference, indolence, aggression, egoism, laziness, the pettiness of a charity done “*with the tape measure*”, which only sees one’s own umbilical cord, that disregards the other,... that there are persons with small hearts and who are short-sighted, worried only about their own food, their own medicine and their own needs...

I cannot understand why in certain communities there are sisters in the “*margins*”, or *anonymous*, or alone in their bitterness... the terrible story of Cain and Abel, is often our own story. I would like to quote Pope Francis’ homily again: “*even within our presbyteries, our episcopal colleges there are small cracks and rifts that can lead to the destruction of brotherhood. When God asks Cain: “Where is your brother Abel? Cain’s answer is ironic: I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper? Yes you are your brother’s keeper... But Cain does not recognize Abel as his brother: brotherhood has been destroyed. It’s like saying I know where that one or this one are or those are but I don’t know where my brothers are. In effect, when we fall into this way of thinking, which ends up in the destruction of brotherhood, we can say this: yes I know where this or that one is, but I don’t know where my brother or my sister is, because they are not brothers and sisters for me*”⁵

Dear Sisters, is there not perhaps some similarity with some situations of our communities? Again you will say: “*exaggerated!*” It may be but...

Let us ask ourselves personally and then dialogue together as a community:

- How have we matured among us that “*look of the heart*” which helps us to come closer to the sister who is next to me?

⁴ JP II, *Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 43, 6th January 2001

⁵ Pope Francis, *ibidem*.

- How do we feel each sister “as one who belongs to me”?
- God asks us today: “where is your sister? Where is your brother?” What do we respond to God: they are grown-up, they know what they are doing, I am not their guardian...?, where do we stand?

THE “CHARITY” OF CHRIST IMPELS US

Lastly, I want to propose this other aspect of love, of charity for your reflection: charity is the centrifuge, it impels us, it shakes us, it sends us on mission, to the poor, to the margins.

The motto and the theme of the XII General Chapter are also very enlightening in this: Give oneself entirely to God, in order to be everything to one’s neighbor” – Disciples-missionaries... Two movements which aliment one another and which, if they exclude one another, would make our lives sterile and our vocation sad. We have reflected on two aspects of charity: humanization and taking care of the other, which are directed more towards our fraternal relationships within the community and to the persons who interact with us. This third aspect in a certain way intends to “decentralize” us, “shake us up”, take us out, towards the margins, where the flesh of Christ waits for our embrace, our caress, our help...

Certainly to rediscover the meaning of our **Vow of Charity** is so beautiful, but sometimes, it is so forgotten, or diluted in the middle of many other “things” to “observe”... *Our Vow of Charity is the soul of our vocation and mission, the golden thread, the essential thing, which supports the whole building of our Orionine vocation, as LMSC. Without this Orionine charity, our identity would lose its colour, taste, meaning and prophecy.*

Don Orione was always clear and exigent in this: living our vocation and with an ardent charity are not “negotiable”, or we are what we should be or it would be better to leave. He wrote to his seminarians in 1928: “*Alas to those who are tepid!...alas to those who abandon themselves to indifference... Alas to stagnant waters... Get rid of all sloth! Shake yourselves o my dear sons, and give yourselves to love Jesus and your souls: the Church and your congregation.... Feel o my sons, all the responsibility which is on you: above all feel the Charity of Christ which urges you and presses you: Caritas Christi urget nos! May whoever does not feel this leave the Congregation: he is not for us! May your eyes be opened to the light of God and of your vocation! May your hearts be opened together with your eyes to feel in the charity of Jesus, all the sublimity, all the worth of your heavenly calling!*”⁶

Don Orione wanted to strongly mould in us this fire of charity by giving us the IV Vow, through which we take a serious commitment of service and of evangelization of the poor: “*we intend to commit ourselves by the Vow to the practice of charity, through the teaching of the Christian doctrine and the evangelical works of mercy*”⁷.

Only in the light of this IV Vow can we live all the other commitments of our Orionine consecrated life. The Vow of charity defines our “lifestyle” in all its aspects, ours is a life moulded inside and out with this “*charity which alone will save the world, and for us it is a great honour to bind ourselves with this vow to the personal and community practice of charity: obliging us to consecrate our lives*”⁸ to this end.

Therefore there can be no space in our lives and in our communities for apostolic slowness, for laziness which makes us do only the least and the necessary, to close ourselves in our works for fear of the new and of the new margins.

I cannot understand how there is so much time in the communities wasted in front of the television, or that there sisters who are closed for hours and hours in their rooms on their computers or sleeping, that so much time is lost in gossip, telephone calls or

⁶ Don Orione, Writings 52, 148; from Rome, to seminarians of Villa Moffa, 27th June 1928

⁷ LMSC, Constitutions, art 42

⁸ LMSC, Constitutions, Cf. art. 45

unending “*chat conversations*”, which are not always useful and constructive... while the poor continue to wait “*the fire of our Orionine charity*”

I cannot understand that there are still some communities comfortable in their “nest”, with no activities on Saturdays and Sundays (because they are tired!) That there are still communities who refuse to assume a real apostolic transformation of their works, to open themselves up to the territory, to the street children, to the youth who have no aim in life, to the poor and the refugees.... communities which resist any proposal of new dimensions of Orionine charity, because they are still anchored in the “forms” of the past, which are sadly “*more Orionine*”!

Once more someone may say I am “*exaggerating again!*” I believe it is true... I am exaggerated! Or who knows, perhaps not so much...

Let us ask ourselves personally and then dialogue together as a community:

- How is the flame of this Orionine charity alive in us, is it ardent and expansive, creative and enterprising? (concrete forms)
- How do we feel challenged by the words of Don Orione addressed to his seminarians? What do we feel we need to purify in us?
- In what way are we sensitive to the sufferings of the poor and do we run “*to touch their flesh*”, as Pope Francis invites us?
- Re-read articles 42 and 46 of our Constitutions, which speak about the *Vow of Charity* and reflect on the aspects we have forgotten about.
- In the light of all the reflections we have made with the help of this present letter: what personal and community commitment shall we take for this Lent? Which prayer, which fraternity, which fasting would be pleasing to God in this time?

Dear sisters, I would like to conclude, reiterating again the words of Pope Francis which I quoted at the beginning of this letter.

Before us we have a fresh opportunity to start a new life again. Let us not be content with a mediocre, opaque life without horizons.

May this time help us to grow in love, in friendship and in our spousal relationship with the Lord, to arrive at Easter purified by the Blood of the Lamb, aided by prayer, by fraternal communion, the Sacraments, especially Reconciliation: *Jesus is the faithful friend who never abandons us. Even when we sin, he patiently awaits our return; by that patient expectation, he shows us his readiness to forgive*⁹

We will find then that true joy and enthusiasm which every re-birth bears in itself!

May Mary guide and sustain us on this journey and She, the Mother of the Risen Christ, will lead us to Him and along the paths of a “**real humanizing charity**”, which is “**caring**” and “**missionary**”.

I embrace you with fraternal love in the Lord, and I wish you all, also in the name of the Counselors, a fruitful Lent and a Holy Easter


Sr M. Mabel Spagnuolo
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Rome, General House, 15th February 2017

⁹ Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2017.