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(Don Orione Sisters)  
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**PROT. MG 88/19**  
**RE: Lent Circular 2019**

**Dear Sisters,**

We are at the beginning of that intensive time that prepares us for Easter. This time is also during a year particularly filled with the grace of the canonical visit at the general level. It is also the beginning of the catechesis on the 4<sup>th</sup> vow of Charity, requested by the 12<sup>th</sup> General Chapter. These events have a common denominator, namely, to prod us personally and as communities as well as the entire Institute, to renew our adhesion to the vocational call which God has made to each of us, in its own time: to renew our “yes” to His love and the beauty of our consecration in the wake of St. Luigi Orione.

Now it is in this way that I would like to focus our reflection in Lent this year and our preparation for Easter, namely, on the beauty of the Love of God in us and the beauty of Consecrated Life, which regains new light, a new face and a new commitment, in the light of Christ who died and rose again.

### **BEAUTY OR VANITY?**

At every moment we find ourselves being offered and invited, in a great variety of ways, to look after beauty, well-being, comfort and so on.... Often this is a search for personal fulfilment, happiness and the admiration of other people.

Just recently, I have been struck by a reflection in an article by the well-known theologian Leonard Boff with the title, “*Beauty will save the world: Dostoevsky tells us how*”. The author offers an interesting reflection and I would like to share some passages of it with you.

“...One of the great admirers of beauty was Fyodor Dostoevsky. Beauty was so central to his life that the great novelist used to go at least once a year to see the very beautiful Madonna of Raffaello in the Sistine Chapel. (...) But what truly motivated him was the search for beauty, and so he left us the famous phrase, “*Beauty will save the world*”...

In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* he goes into the matter more deeply. Ipolit, an atheist, asks prince Mynski, “How could beauty save the world?” The *prince* says nothing but approaches an eighteen year old young man who is dying. He remains there full of compassion and love until he dies. By this he meant to say that it is beauty which leads to love shared with sorrow and pain and that the world will be saved today and always when this act is done. (...)

He used to repeat that certainly we cannot live with bread, but also that existence without “beauty” is impossible. Beauty is more than appearance (aesthetics). It has an ethical and religious dimension. He saw in Jesus a sower of beauty. (...)

Our culture, which is dominated by consumerism, sees beauty as building the body and not the whole person. Thus there are ever more methods of plastic surgery and wrinkle-removers to make people more beautiful. This is artificial beauty without a soul. If we look carefully, what emerges from this factory-made beauty are people with a cold beauty with an air of artificiality who are unable to spread light. So here we see that vanity comes into being, not love because real beauty has everything to do with love and communication. Dostoevsky observes in *“The Brothers Karamazov”*, that a face is beautiful when you see in it that God and the devil are fighting, about good and evil. When good conquers then beauty bursts forth and it is expressive, gentle, natural and radiant. What is the greatest beauty? That of the cold face of a top model or the face full of wrinkles and full of light of Sr. Dulce di Salvador (Bahia) or of Mother Teresa of Calcutta? Beauty radiates being. In the two Sisters radiation is obvious, but in the top model it is faded...”<sup>1</sup>

I believe that the just quoted reflection of L. Boff, has a lot to say to us, consecrated women and our mission. That is to give witness to and be the presence of the “beauty” of Christ in the world and also to discover the “beauty” of God in every creature, with the same mystical look made Don Orione say, *“The image of God shines out in the most wretched of men”*... in the most unfortunate, the most desperate, the most unpleasant and disagreeable, “shines the image”, shines the “beauty” of God.



My question is, how much is this experience of “beauty” which is basically the fruit of the victory of “good” present in us? Or, how much has the spirit of the world, which is the search for superficial, banal, worldly and materialistic beauty, entered into us? Indeed, how much we have into the “culture of the selfie”? (What a lot of narcissism we can see on Facebook or Instagram of so many Sisters..!)

Just recently, I was impressed, when speaking with one of our young women in formation, when she shared her desire to find a religious life which was beautiful and attractive, made up of authentic, transparent, luminous and beautiful people... but of that beauty which does not come from the colour of the skin, of the eyes, of the hair, of more or less slimness of the body, of the make of what they use or wear...but of that beauty which comes from the transforming experience of the Love of God which consecrates and invites.

I am convinced that people, the poor, young people, do not need to see in us “models”, as the article just quoted says, but women who are beautiful with the beauty which comes from self-giving to God, women who are happy with the happiness that comes from belonging to Christ, women fulfilled with the Lord of God in us....

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Source: [https://leonardoboff.wordpress.com/2014/05/01la-bellezza-salvera-il-mondo-dostoievskij-ci-dice-come/Leonard Boff, A força da ternura, ed. Mar de ideias, Rio 2011.](https://leonardoboff.wordpress.com/2014/05/01la-bellezza-salvera-il-mondo-dostoievskij-ci-dice-come/Leonard%20Boff,%20A%20for%C3%A7a%20da%20ternura,%20ed.%20Mar%20de%20ideias,%20Rio%202011.)

**Let us pause for a moment and share:**

- What has struck us most so far?
- Can we remember people who we can call “beautiful” and what is their “beauty”?

***“YOU ARE THE MOST HANDSOME AMONG THE SONS OF MEN”***

Psalm 45, which we pray in the Liturgy of the Hours, at evening prayer on Monday of the second week, is a very beautiful song to beauty. It uses the poetic language of love, and exalts the gifts and beauty of husband and wife.

It is easy for us to feel our feminine heart beat as we say, *“My heart overflows with noble words. To the king I address the song I have made, my tongue as nimble as the pen of a scribe. You are the most handsome of the sons of men and graciousness is poured out upon your lips, for God has blessed you for evermore”* (Ps 45:2-3). I think that this is one of the biblical texts with which we identify deeply with the mystical marriage aspect of our consecration. Jesus, the spouse of our life and our heart, is, without doubt, *“the most handsome of the sons of men (v.3).*

The beauty of Christ, of his pure, passionate and overwhelming love, can only be contemplated in the loving and adoring silence of the mystery...*“graciousness is poured out upon your lips, for God has blessed you for evermore”* (v.3).

Certainly, we have no difficulty in seeing the beauty of Jesus in his incarnation, his preaching, in his tenderness towards the little, the sick and sinners...in his compassion and mercy.

We do not get tired of admiring the beauty of his Heart as the Beautiful and Good Shepherd, of his hands which bless and caress children and sick people, his eyes which invite people to follow Him, his feet which visit every human situation...the beauty of the Risen Jesus and the Eucharist....

But, in this intensive time of Lent, Jesus invites us to welcome Him in the hidden beauty of the culmination of His mission of salvation...His passion and death on the Cross...

Mystery of salvation which crucifies the beauty: *“He had no form or charm to attract us, no beauty to win our hearts”* (Is 53:2).



Before the bleeding and wounded face of Jesus, Crucified Beauty, Isaiah expresses a very human and superficial attitude, which could also be ours: *“to despise him...to abandon him...to avert our gaze from him...to look down upon him...to have no regard for him...”*(c.f. Isaiah 53:3).

Only with a look of love can we see the beauty of the disfigured face of Christ Crucified...

Only with the look of someone who is in love can we understand the beauty of His bleeding face....

Only with a contemplative heart can we perceive the beauty in the defeat of the Cross...

Only someone who loves, like Mary at the foot of the Cross, can embrace in Him *"the most handsome of the sons of men"*...

Only someone who love, knows and recognises, and the one who knows understands and loves.

This is the beauty of Christ, the *"beauty which saves the world"*: *"no one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends"* (John 15:13).

**Dear Sisters**, it is in this mirror that we want, at this time, to rediscover the beauty of our life, the beauty of our consecration and our mission. Let us be ready to welcome this beauty: my beauty is measured by His beauty, my love is measured by the love of He who *"has loved me and given himself for me"* (Gal 2:20).

This beauty has nothing to do with vanity and worldliness, with what the world *"decides"* is beautiful, with what the world and advertising want to impose on us and sell as beauty, as happiness, as the only way to fulfilment, to feel appreciated, valued and welcomed....by the world!

No, dear Sisters! It is not short-lived things which will make our life beautiful, harmonious and attractive...it is assuming the life-style of Jesus, the style of his relationships, of his care for others, his acts of love and tenderness, his giving Himself generously, his purity, transparency, authenticity, depth and closeness. It consists in having his sensitive, empathetic and generous heart. It is, in the end, absorbing within us His way of loving. This is the beauty of the Cross! This is the beauty of *"Behold the Man"* (Ecce homo)....This is the true feminine beauty which we are called to radiate....like Him!

**Let us pause for a moment and share:**

**As a community:**

- What is the face of Christ, *"the most handsome among the sons of men"* saying to us?
- How much has the culture of beauty and worship of the body and well-being and its rule entered into us?

**Each one personally:**

- What do I need to purify in me in order to acquire the *"beauty"* which Jesus offers?
- What things do I need to get rid of so as to give space to the life-style of Jesus?

***"...YOUR BEAUTY WILL BE PLEASING TO THE KING!"***

Now let us feel in harmony with the second part of Psalm 45: *"Listen, O daughter, pay heed and give ear: forget your own people and your father's house. So will the king desire your beauty. He is your Lord, pay homage to him. The daughter of the king is clothed with splendor..."* (Psalm 45: 12.14)

For too much time, *"beauty"* has been almost sent into *"exile"* especially in our feminine religious places...It has been confused with vanity and pleasure, and *"beauty"* has been *"judged"* as *"dangerous"*

for the observance of virtue, as a waste of time! But we can see that, in the Bible, and in the Saints, the theme of “*beauty*” has always been present.

In the last few years, Pope Francis has brought the place, vocation and mission of women in the Church and in the world back into the light, as the irreplaceable vessel of beauty and harmony. He has said, “*a woman’s role is to bring peace for without woman there is no harmony....and it is she who brings that harmony which teaches us to caress and love tenderly and who makes the world beautiful...woman is harmony, poetry, beauty, such that without her the world would not be so beautiful and harmonious*”<sup>2</sup>.

*So will the King desire your beauty!*”.... but what beauty in us is the reflection of God? Certainly that which is moulded on the spouse who is to come, on Him who is “*the most handsome of the sons of men*”....

There is a meditation of Cardinal Martini which throws some light on this<sup>3</sup>, as he writes, “*The beauty which I am writing about is not therefore that seductive beauty, which leads away from the true goal for which our restless heart searches.....So it is not about a quality which is just formal and exterior, but it is about that moment of being to which words like glory refers (the biblical word which most closely expresses the “beauty “of God so far as it is shown to us). It is splendour, fascination and that which arouses in us joyful attraction, pleasant surprise, fervent dedication, falling in love, enthusiasm. It is that which love discovers in the person loved, that person which you know is worthy of giving yourself to and for whom you are ready to come out of yourself and play with without fear*”.



Thus, the “*beauty*” of God is His “*Glory*”... Let us think about the words that the Sacred Heart revealed to Don Orione in our Mother House: “*from here my glory will start its journey*”. We, LMSC, through our femininity, have the mission to make the “*glory*” of God, that is, “*beauty*”, tenderness and the mercy of God shine out. This “*beauty*” becomes evangelization, apostolate and proclamation of the God of glory, of Him who is “*the most handsome of the sons of men*” (Psalm 45:3), glorifying Him with our consecrated life.

Again taking our lead from the words of Martini, “*beauty*” attracts and is pleasant. In the scene of the Transfiguration, the apostles who were with Jesus, experienced the joy and the fascination of that “*beauty*” which had never been seen before and wanted to stay there (c.f. Luke 9:33). A “*beautiful*” person, a “*beautiful*” community recall the “*beauty*” of being and living with Him, in Him and for Him. A house, a chapel, an institution where there is order, harmony and cleanliness mirror the “*glory*” and the “*beauty*” of God Himself.

The “*beauty*” of fellowship which lives relationships of openness to God and one another, in friendship, in kindness, in dialogue, in forgiveness, in mutual help and with tolerance, in truth and goodness, is an

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, morning meditation in the chapel of Domus Sanctae Mathae, *Women are the harmony of the world*, Thursday, 9<sup>th</sup> February 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Carlo Maria Martini, Pastoral letter of 1999, “*What beauty will save the world?*”

inspiring and attractive fellowship per the younger generations, and it a firm rock for the fidelity and perseverance of the older and very old ones. *"Beauty"* is a source of hope, joy and perseverance.

Cardinal Martini uses the same expression as that quotation of Leonardo Boff, which we read earlier: *"beauty"* will save the world. It is the same experience of Don Orione: *"only charity will save the world!"* If God is *"beauty"*, if God is *"charity"* then *"charity"* is *"beauty"*! Cardinal Martini adds, *"It is not enough to criticize and denounce the ugly things of our world...It is necessary to speak about them with a heart full of compassionate love, enabling people to experience that charity which gives with joy and arouses enthusiasm. It is necessary to radiate the beauty of what is true and just in life, because only this type of beauty truly ravishes hearts and turns them back to God"*.

Dear Sisters, let us re-visit the personal and community beauty of our life, starting from the simplest things. With regard to ourselves, let us look at the *"beauty"* of a serene and joyful face, *the "femininity" and "sobriety"* of personal tidiness, of the community areas, of our rooms and of the places of work and apostolate.

Let us re-visit the *"beauty"* of our actions, thoughts and words, of the relationships among ourselves, with the older and sick sisters, with the younger sisters, with lay people, with friends, with relatives and with staff.

Let us re-visit the *"beauty"* of our prayer, music, singing, the *"beauty"* of silence, of dialogue and forgiveness. *"Beauty"* is politeness, respect, good manners, tenderness and warm-heartedness.

Let us re-visit the *"beauty"* of our family way of doing things, the way we welcome a guest or a visitor, the way we serve a poor person, the way we answer the telephone, the way we put ourselves at the service of others and the way we do apostolate.

I remember once that one of our confreres, on a feast day, came to stay for lunch in our house in Rome and how he was impressed by the decorum of the house, the little details in the preparation of the table, the kindness and gentleness of the welcome of the Sisters, and at a certain point he said to me, *"You can see that women live in this house!"*

The *"Beauty"* and harmony of our femininity must come out of *"exile"* and fill our Consecrated Life with new light and new fascination. *"Truth"* and *"goodness"* shine out more if they are clothed in *"beauty"* which is *"glory"* and also *"holiness"*. But we shall only have this if we drink from the source of *"Beauty"* like Moses, who, when he came down from Mount Sinai, *"the skin of his face was radiant because he had been talking to him"* (Exodus 34:29b).

This time of Lent is the most suitable for looking at ourselves again in the light of His loving and suffering Face in order to put ourselves before Him with a contemplative heart; for He is *"the most handsome of the sons of men"*, and let us uncover in us, with courage and freedom, that which is vanity, worldliness, superficiality, and blocks out the *"beauty"* of Christ in us.

**Let us pause and share:**

**As a community:**

- What strikes us, as a community, in what we have just read?
- How has the spirit of the world entered into our "life-style"?
- How can we make our community and apostolic life more beautiful? Concretely.

**As individuals:**

- How does this letter challenge me?
- What aspects of vanity and worldliness must I purify myself from?

**MARY, YOU ARE AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE SUN!**

On the solemnity of Easter, towards which we are moving in this time of Lent, the hymn of Morning Prayer in the Italian breviary says, *"The sun of Easter blazes out, heaven resounds with song, the earth exults with joy"*.

As we go along the sorrowful path of the Passion of Jesus, everything leads to the new "Sun" which rises, and blazes out. It is the "Sun of Easter", the Risen Christ, the new Sun, the new face of "beauty", the splendour of the "glory" of the Father, the Victorious King...the "most handsome of the sons of the new man".

In the light of his beauty *"heaven resounds with songs, the earth exults with joy"* because *"beauty has saved the world"*!



Now in the glow of Easter Mary is waiting, Beautiful as the Sun, for now she embraces "Life", the "beauty" of the Risen Son as her Son.

Mary is "full of splendour", because she has also crucified her immaculate beauty in the Cross of her Son: *"the King will desire your risen beauty"*.

Mary is harmony; she is the woman of the New Covenant, born of the blood of Christ. Mary is light, born of the light of the Risen One. Mary is the mother of us all; she is the strong and tender woman, born from the pierced Heart of the Son.

Thus, Mary is the model and school of true and divine beauty and of femininity. John Paul II said the same in an extraordinary way in *Redemptoris Mater*: *"In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement"*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 46.

**Dear Sisters,** at this time of Lent, let us invite Mary to come with us, to walk beside us, in our community. Let us entrust to her, the woman of truth and beauty, our journey in preparation for Easter, and ask her to support us in the contemplation of her Son, so that we may form in us His beauty, and arrive at Easter renewed and purified by his redeeming love.

Each community, will organize itself surely with responsibility in order to live this time, in harmony with what our Constitutions and General Norms ask of us. But I invite you, above all, to live every suggestion, every renunciation, and every sacrifice in the light of the reflection which we have just shared. I invite you to live Lent in terms of beauty and holiness, so that this Lent should not just be another one, made up of little rules, sometimes in a minimal and selfish way, but instead lived with great and authentic desires of renewing the commitment of the Orionine Consecrated Vocation.

I conclude with these beautiful words of Don Orione, which I would like that we listen to as the best Easter greetings: *“Let us ask Our Lady, the Most Holy Mother of Heavenly and Divine Love, that she may give to our souls a great fire of love of God, of true charity of the Lord, such that it may unite us inseparably, in life and in death, in the divine service of the Church and souls”*<sup>5</sup>.

I embrace you with great affection in the Lord, and I wish you a Beautiful and Holy Easter!



*Sr. Mabel Spagnuolo*  
Sr. M. Mabel Spagnuolo  
Superior general

Rome, General House, 18th February 2019

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to Don Pensa, Roma, 2nd May 1920, *A Priceless Treasure, Letters and Writings, Volume One, Sons of Divine Providence, Kingston upon Thames, UK P. 105*