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Prot. MG 66/18

Re: Circular letter for the Advent

My dear Sisters!

I started this letter while the Orionine Formators' Meeting was being held here in Rome, organized at the same extent by the FDP and the PSMC, counting also with the presence of some representatives of the ISO (Secular Orionine Institute), the Institute of Mary of Nazareth and the MLO. The meeting was lived with a great sense of responsibility, love for the young and sense of belonging to the Congregations and to the whole Charismatic Family, in a serene and fraternal climate of joyful exchange.

You have probably already received the message addressed to the whole Family, with some of the conclusions and challenges that, as we know, do not exclusively concern the formators, but all of us, because Formation is the commitment and responsibility of all. As we know, Formation is a fundamental theme for the implementation of our Orionine Religious Life and it is a journey which lasts a lifetime: a journey of identification with the sentiments of Christ. It is also a process of growing incarnation of the sentiments of the heart of Don Orione, as the theme of the meeting recalled: *"Give us, O Lord, the heart of Don Orione"*.

I think that this time of Advent, which prepares us for the celebration of Christmas, is a favourable time to reflect on this theme, in order to ask the Lord to *"give us the heart of Don Orione"*.

We cannot be indifferent, at this time, to the events in which we see the world shrouded: the attacks on the Pope, the scandals in the Church, the violent irruption of gender ideology, the relativization of the value of life, the dramatic rejection of migrants, the return of authoritarian political systems, racism and marginalization, the corruption of governments and of economy... and we could make an endless list of situations that are setting humanity in an atmosphere of violence, suffering and pain that does not seem have any way out.

But we, *"we are not that catastrophic who think that the world may end tomorrow"*¹, we believe that, with his birth, passion and resurrection, Christ is still coming today to give meaning to each story of this world, so loved by him to give his life for it... *"Jesus has already overcome the world"*!

We know that it is *"charity, and only the charity of Jesus Christ that will save the world!"*, and the charity of God is made alive today incarnating in those who believe in Him: when we welcome him into our heart we become *"the way of His charity"*. With this outline, I invite you today to experience this Advent season and the celebration of Christmas this year.

¹ D. Orione, *Writings* 103,274; Buenos Aires, July 3, 1936.

Jesus in the heart of the poor ...

Once again Jesus chooses what is small, poor, what does not count for the eyes of the world, to live on this earth. Don Orione says: *"Jesus was born poor to light the flame of charity in our hearts, to the mystical light of his cradle. He was born poor, to ennoble poverty, which attracts to charity, after having holily moved us. Christmas!... Feast of charity! The Child Jesus, small and poor, took under his special protection, through the centuries, all the little ones and all the poor. Jesus wanted to live poverty in order to awaken and stimulate men to love... Christmas! Christmas! Sweet feast of charity"*².

This choice of Jesus comes to illuminate humanity and all human realities: the place where there is more emptiness, more misery, more sin, more despair is the place where Jesus renews today his incarnation; the place where, today, he wants to find the "crib" to be born... in order to trigger the gem of his divine charity, of his redemptive Love.

Don Orione says also: *"Christ is not yet expelled from the earth, he is not yet a forgotten, an unknown: Christ lives again and is reborn, and triumphs, and his life fills the hearts and the world. O Jesus, who made yourself small with the small ones, weak with the weak, sinner with the sinners, I would say, in order to earn either the small or the weak, and the poor sinners, to make yourself all to all, and save everyone, - oh how much I feel comforted by you, how much I bless you and how much I love you, oh my Jesus my sigh and my life..."*³.

While contemplating this great mystery of the Incarnation, we will be able to discover, in this infinite abyss of divine Love, what we are called to incarnate and to live. God has assumed our humanity in order for us to assume his divinity. Only the experienced love becomes given love, and only by embodying the look of God in us we will "see and serve Christ in the poor", as it was for Don Orione.

Let's stop to reflect:

How do I experience the real presence of Jesus in my life, in the poorest and in the events of the world and of Church today?

How do the above words of Don Orione question us as a community? (to dialogue together in community)

Change the "heart of stone"...

With his incarnation, God came into the world to wrest the "heart of stone" of humanity, to free man from the grave of his closed heart, rigid, cold and drowsy from sin...



God becomes man in Jesus, to humanize our life with his incarnated divinity... In the incarnation of the Son, He is telling us: *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh"* (Ez 36: 26)...

The Advent that we are about to live is a call to let us "change-tear" our heart from God; the wait which characterizes Advent is not a passive "waiting", but it is a time of action, attention, openness and interior and exterior work, letting God take away the "heart of stone" that is in us, and "put a heart of flesh"... but he won't do that without us: God will change our heart, if we let him do so! **A "heart of stone" is a dead heart!**

The "heart of stone" is a dehumanized heart, hardened and insensitive, which is often hidden behind false concepts of mercy, detachment, austerity, chastity ... that have nothing in common with the "heart" of God, with the "heart of Don Orione".

² *Writings*, 94, 262.

³ *Writings*, 72, 8

The "*heart of stone*" is closed and it separates us from others, it makes us strict and implacable judges, the "*heart of stone*" is grumpy and distant from the heart of others, it does not feel others' pain nor joy: it is aggressive, individualistic and self-referential... The "*heart of stone*" is sad, pessimist, it does not know empathy nor affection or compassion, not even towards itself... The "*heart of stone*" is a heart imprisoned in sin, indifferent and full of itself.

In this time of Advent, we want to arrive at celebrating authentically the incarnation of the Son of God, freeing ourselves from what in us is "*of stone*"... stripping the old man and becoming the new man⁴ ...

Let's stop to reflect:

What attitudes and behaviours show a "*heart of stone*" in me? (in the relationship with myself, with the sisters in the community, with the poor and with the people who approach us or whom we serve)

And in our community and apostolate? (dialogue together in community)

To welcome the "*heart of flesh*"...

With the "yes" of Mary in the Annunciation ***the Word became a heart of flesh!*** Jesus is the incarnation of what he would have left us later as the first and greatest commandment: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is similar to the first: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*" (Mt 22: 37-40).



Therefore, to change our heart is to be reborn, it is to rise again to new life according to the law of God: "*I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my precepts and to be careful to keep my laws*". (Ez 36: 27).

The "*heart of flesh*" is a living heart!

The "*heart of flesh*" is nourished by the "*law*" of love. It is a "*deified*" heart in attitudes and "*humanised*" in concrete gestures and in life.

A "*heart of flesh*" is, first of all, a liberated heart, healed, pacified and reconciled with itself, with its history, its present and the world, because it is a heart that knows and feels itself loved; it is a heart clothed "*with feelings of mercy, goodness, humility, meekness, patience*" (Col 3:12).

A "*heart of flesh*" is sensitive, empathetic and compassionate in the face of the suffering of others; it is a heart filled with the charity of Christ: it is patient, kind, it is not envious, it does not boast, it is not proud, it does not lack respect, it is not self-seeking, it does not get angry, it keeps no record of wrongs, it does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth... everything covers with charity, everything believes, everything hopes, everything endures...⁵ .

The "*heart of flesh*" is a heart freed from sin and clothed with the feelings of Christ's heart!

Let's stop to reflect:

What attitudes and behaviours show a "*heart of flesh*" in me? (in the relationship with myself, with the sisters in the community, with the poor and with the people who approach us or whom we serve)

And in our community and apostolate? (dialogue together in community)

⁴ Cfr. Col 3, 10

⁵ Cfr. 1Cor 13: 4-6

Give us, Jesus, the heart of Don Orione ...

When Don Orione says that Christmas is *"the sweet feast of charity"*, he is telling us about the experience that he himself made of God. His whole life was a growing incarnation of the feelings of the heart of Christ in his heart and, then, in his life.

He himself will tell us that it is necessary *"to conform ourselves in everything to our Lord Jesus Christ, to live Jesus Christ, to dress inside and outside with Jesus Christ"*⁶, that is, to assume his life style and the style of his charity and mercy.

At another time, Don Orione will tell us that Child Jesus cries out from his poor straw cradle, saying: *"Charity! Charity! Charity!"*. The heart of Don Orione has been shaped on the *"flesh"* of the Son of God, who has become man so that we can understand how much the Father loves us.



In this journey towards the Christmas Feast, towards the *"feast of charity"*, let us ask the Child Jesus to give us a *"heart of flesh"* like the heart of Don Orione; let us ask him to experience his passionate love for Christ and his passionate love for her neighbour, to embody, in our own little way, the charity of his boundless heart.

A love that is nourished by the personal and communitarian encounter with Jesus, in prayer, in the Eucharist, in the meditation of his Word, and that thus, deified, returns humanized in the expressions and in the gestures of fraternal love. Don Orione still calls us today to have a love incarnated in charity as *"the vehicle of God's love"*: *"That charity which is a sweet bond of union, because it knows how to sympathize with others' defects; that charity which is humble, which is benign, which is patient, which is suave; that charity which is the precept of the Lord, who is the triumph of all things, and who makes us omnipotent in God and in the love for the neighbour. (...) The love towards our brothers and sisters is a **vehicle of God's love**: the fraternal love is the surest sign and the finest exercise of God's love. And the more you will work to increase the fraternal love, the more your spiritual strength will grow in you and in our brothers and sisters and in the small Congregation. Our value will depend on the most charity we may have: we could do everything as far as we will love God, and in God we will love each other and bear with each another, and will help each another to reach the Lord"*.

Let's stop to reflect:

Which aspects of this *"heart of Don Orione"* I feel I still have to embody in a deeper way? (in the fraternal relationships in the community and in the apostolate)

And in our community and apostolate? (dialogue together in the community)

Christmas, *"sweet feast of charity"*...

My dear Sisters, I would like that the celebration of Christmas this year may be, for all, as Don Orione wanted it, a *"sweet feast of charity"*. Of a renewed, tangible charity, born from the patient and tenacious process of transformation of our *"heart of stone"* into a *"heart of flesh"*, in the image of Christ and of our dear Founder.

Let's make this Advent season a *"laboratory"* of humanity, of charity, of fraternal love, of sensitivity towards the poor, of welcoming Christ who, even today, knocks on the doors of our



⁶ Don Orione, October 22, 1937; *LMSM Constitutions*, Introduction Chapter VII: Formation, page 87

⁷ *Writings* 34, 36-37, from Tortona, November 20, 1924 to the dear Fr. Garbarino.

heart, asking for hospitality to be born, to put his *"heart of flesh"* in us.

With this in mind, I invite you to create some communitarian moment for the reading and the reflection of this letter, and to identify together what we still feel of *"stone"* in our community and apostolic life. Then to commit ourselves to assume the concrete attitudes and behaviours of the *"heart of Don Orione"*, of a *"heart of flesh"*, renewed by the birth of the Son of God in us and among us.

May the celebration of this Christmas be pervaded by the spirit desired by Don Orione, and may it be, truly, a *"sweet feast of charity!"* that may also be renewed every day of the coming New Year.

For this we ask for the help of Mary, the Mother of the incarnate God, the first who has shaped her heart on that of her Son.

With Her, let us also welcome Jesus and let us love him, let us see him and serve him in our neighbour, especially in the poorest and most abandoned; with Mary let us live the profound joy of salvation that Jesus renews us in this Christmas and let us ask her, with the words of Don Orione: *"Give us, Mary, a great soul, a great and magnanimous heart that may reach all sufferings and all tears"*⁸.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year 2019 in communion and fraternity.

Your sister,



Sr. M. Mabel Spagnuolo
Superior General

Rome, Generalate House, November 8, 2018.

⁸ Don Orione, *Letters II*, page 480, from Argentina, June 27 1937, cfr. *In the name of the Divine Providence. The most beautiful pages*, page 121