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***"Jesus is calling us to the crib, as he  
once called the shepherds: to the  
school of Bethlehem" (D.O.)***

**Prot. MG 51/21**

**Re:** circular letter of Advent 2021.

**Dearest Sisters,**

once again we are back at the beginning of a new Liturgical Year and of a new Advent Season, which is offering us the opportunity to live again the great mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, and to open the doors to a new year.

This closing year has been full of spiritual experiences, from both the Church and the Congregation.

First of all, it has been the Year dedicated to St. Joseph: it has brought us closer to the figure of this great man and has made us rediscover not only his virtues, but also the depth of his humanity and his faith. I am sure that we all feel that we have now become more *"friends"* of this saint, and that from now on we will rely on his protection and powerful intercession on the heart of God, much more than before.

The opening of the preparatory work for the Synod is putting the whole Church in a new dynamism and in a new journey of communion and synodality in the light of the Second Vatican Council and the Magisterium of Pope Francis. It is also a strong call for all Christians to be brothers, and to build structures of fraternity and synodal life in all institutions within the Church.

Finally, as Orionine Family, we have lived (and will be living), a year of strong missionary spirituality, looking at the figure of Don Orione. He had a strong burst towards new lands, where he planted the seed of charity and mercy, through his daughters and sons.

The memory of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his arrival in the lands of Latin America, the year of preparation for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth and the celebration of the Orionine Vocational Year are other strong events that are rekindling our belonging to the charism, our missionary enthusiasm, our love for the Congregation and our vocation. They are giving us the opportunity of rediscovering the figure of our Founder in his prophetic and apostolic strength, in his deep and authentic love for God, for the Church, for humanity.

From these contexts and events many challenges are arising to our attention; we are living an historical moment marked by unprecedented realities and unavoidable challenges for us to answer as LMSC, in the here and now in which we are living and evangelizing.

It is precisely in these contexts that we are now entering to introduce ourselves into the new Liturgical Year through the Advent season and the celebration of Christmas.

***"Let's go to school...!"***

Honouring our Orionine identity, let's look at these times with courage, with hope, and as a possibility to find new ways to charity and holiness.

For us, this is the right time for a *"focus"* of our life and our works. Therefore, I would like to invite everyone to *"go to school"*! Yes! I am inviting you to *"go to school"* all together again: ***Let's go to the "school of Bethlehem"!***

Don Orione is encouraging us to go to school and he is coming with us!

Let's listen to him:

*"Ah! Thinking about Christmas, isn't it true that we feel confused and get lost in front of the boundless goodness of God, who has taken our similitude, born from the union of divine nature and human nature?"*

*Ah, let our hearts be broken by so much fire and flame of God's love, that God is grafted into man and man into God.*

*Oh most sweet and priceless love of Jesus in the cave of Bethlehem, accompany me and guide me, and lead me to the true school of the true doctrine of Jesus Christ, to his first and sublime school in Bethlehem!*

*Teach me what voluntary poverty is, which I have professed and which I do not yet know how to practice: teach me, oh holy cave of Bethlehem, what humility is, through which one goes to God, and one can please God: teach me the love to hide, while I am so presumptuous: Souls and Souls!"* (Writings 51,210; Mar de Hespanha -Minas Gerais, Brazil- on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1921)

In another letter, this time from Buenos Aires, he repeated again this invitation to learn at the "school of Bethlehem":

*"And in order for us to learn to love him without reserve, without interruption and perfectly, he wants to instil his spirit in us, and attract us to the beauty of humility, poverty, charity; he wants to found in our hearts the kingdom of these three great virtues, without which, oh my children, we will never truly be his disciples..."* (Writings, 88,117; from Buenos Aires, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1935).

What are we going to learn at the "school of Bethlehem"?

First of all, in a "school" there are "teachers" ... and who are our "teachers"?

In the classroom of this school, that is, "a stable", there are Mary, Joseph and the little Child who are giving us a profound teaching.

They are not teaching with spoken lessons, but with the eloquent silence of their life and attitude.

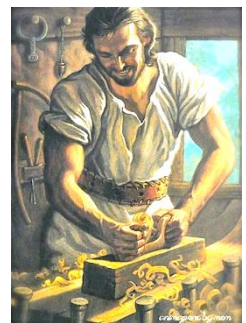
What do they teach us? If we read again the words of Don Orione, the main teachings that comes to us from the "school of Bethlehem" are: the beauty of humility, the beauty of poverty and the beauty of charity.

So, let's get ready and "go to school", so that, with Don Orione's feelings, we too may say:

- teach me Joseph *"what voluntary poverty is, that I have professed and which I do not yet know how to practice"*...
- teach me Mary *"what humility is, through which one goes to God, and one can please God"*...
- teach me *"Jesus Child the love to hide, while I am so presumptuous"* ...

### **Joseph's teaching: poverty.**

Saint Joseph, whom we have remembered so much during this year dedicated to him, wants to teach us about poverty, true poverty. A poverty which is industriousness: he is an humble carpenter of Nazareth. A man who, from his youth, trained in work, sacrifice, responsibility... Joseph lived a worthy poverty, made up of honesty, detachment, service and justice.



Joseph's poverty was not misery, nor passivity, nor was it meanness; Joseph's poverty was not carelessness, irresoluteness or imprudence. He knew how to live trusting God, aware of his duties as a man, as a husband, as an adoptive father, as a worker, as a neighbour, but always knowing that he was a creature, a son of the Most High, an instrument of his Providence.

Thus, Joseph has been able to be the *"right man"*, chosen by God to support and assume the responsibility of the Holy Family. The poverty that Joseph teaches us is that of not keeping anything for himself, but offering everything to God, and offering himself completely, even though this takes him to renounce to his plans, to his ideals and to his wishes for a future with his girlfriend, Mary.

Joseph's poverty makes him capable of detaching himself also from his reasoning, from wanting to be always right, from wanting to impose his justifications or ideas... for Joseph to be *"poor"* means to be *"free"*!

Even more, Joseph's poverty reached its maximum expression in *"trusting God"* rather than *"evidences"* when the Word became flesh in the womb of his betrothed. Joseph's *"yes"* is the maximum expression of poverty, and in this *"poverty"* God was able to carry out his plan of salvation. Joseph's poverty was mixed with essentiality!

#### **Now Joseph is asking us:**

- How are you living in poverty, the one you professed publicly one day? How does your daily *"yes"* make you *"poorer"* in the evangelical sense, I mean, to be richer in God, the only treasure?
- How much do you trust in Divine Providence and how much do you trust material things? How attached are you to things, roles or appearances?
- How much is attachment to your ideas, opinions, past prejudices, projects, preferences... hindering the purity of your surrendering to God in *"poverty"* and *"freedom"*?
- Does your life, your environment of work, your room, your needs... have the essentiality of the *"cave of Bethlehem"*?

#### **Mary's teaching: humility.**

Mary's whole life speaks of humility, the one she herself sang: *"the Almighty looked upon the humility of her servant"* (Lk 1:48). So, can Mary be truly *"humble"* by saying herself that *"she is humble"*? Of course! Because Mary's teaching is that of *"true humility"* which has nothing to do with the denial of one's own truth, of the gifts that God has given her, of what God has done in her.



True humility is truth! Mary recognizes herself as small, servant, in need of God ... Mary does not glory herself in her condition of being the *"chosen by God"* as the mother of the Messiah, she is not proud of having been raised to the immense dignity of being the *"Mother of God"*. Her humility makes Mary close to everyone, making her capable of creating a climate of communion, confidence, familiarity, freeing her from the sense of superiority and domination over others.

Mary's humility is that of faith and trusting obedience, for which the Almighty was able to bring Salvation to her people. Mary's humility is that of knowing that she is only a *"bridge"*, a *"channel"*, a *"tabernacle"* open, free, pure... For this reason, Mary is humble and teaches us true humility, which is the way to reach God, the same true humility for which one can *"go and please God"*, as we read it in the words of Don Orione.

Humility is also the path to reach the other, to walk with the other, to serve the other. You cannot serve the poor with a sense of superiority; you cannot weave interpersonal relationships with presumption or a sense of prevalence or domination; you cannot build communities with arrogance or self-referentiality; you cannot have an authentic relationship with God with hypocrisy and superficiality. This is not humility!

One can *"serve"* others only with humility! You can be a *"friend"* only with humility! You can be a *"sister"* only with humility! You can truly be *"of God"* only with humility!

### Now Mary is asking us:

- Your Founder said that through *"humility you go to God and you can please God"*: are you living humility as truth, in your relationship with God, in your consecration and in your spiritual life?
- How can others see in you the attitude of *"humility"* that makes you capable of creating communion, joy and familiarity around you? Can others say to you: *"Blessed are you who believed"*?
- How do you make yourself a *"bridge"* and a *"channel"*, capable of stripping oneself so that the others may discover Christ?
- How do you live humility as a generous service, as cordiality, as authenticity and gift, especially in your community?

### Jesus' teaching: love.

St. John left us the most perfect definition of God: *"God is love"* (1Jn 4:16), and this being of God became tangible in the Incarnation of the Son, in Jesus. The whole life of Jesus was an *"Epiphany"*, a human manifestation of God's divine love for humanity.

That's why Don Orione said with absolute conviction: *"Christmas! Feast of charity! ... The Child Jesus marked and mixed this feast of him with charity and love"* (Writings 94, 195).



At the school of Bethlehem we now find Jesus, a small newborn, naked, fragile, poor, humble, with his arms wide open, as we usually see him in our cribs. The teaching of Jesus in the school of Bethlehem is charity, a charity with *"open arms"*.

The *"open arms"* of the Child Jesus teach us, first of all, to embrace Father's Will in our fragility, our nakedness, our poverty and our humility. The arms of Jesus, open on the manger and open on the Cross, are his *"Yes!"*, the Amen, to God's will on him for the salvation of all.

The *"open arms"* of the Child Jesus teach us that love is welcoming, it is receiving the other as he/she is and in the condition he/she is, they also teach us the compassion and tenderness of God. They teach us to embrace, lift, serve, open ourselves up without fear, without discrimination, without conditions.

Jesus teaches us that our charity must have *"open arms"* and an open heart; he teaches us that our communities must be places of *"open arms"* where everyone feels welcomed and *"at home"*; he teaches us that our mission must be a mission of *"open arms and hearts"*, without barriers, without prejudices, without limits and borders of any kind.

In the school of Bethlehem, Jesus is the centre and heart that synthesizes in himself the teaching of Mary and Joseph. Jesus is the poor, humble, meek Master who teaches us the love of the Father and teaches us to love like the Father.

### Now Jesus is asking us:

- How do you feel in your life the power of charity which is God and which is the source of all that you are and do?
- How are your arms and your heart open to my Father's Will that you are welcoming today through the obedience you have professed?
- How are you able to become, you too, an *"epiphany"* of a charity with *"open arms"* with your sisters and with the people you meet?
- How much are you disposed to welcome in your community according to the style of the Family of Nazareth? How fraternal, loving, polite, kind and delicate are you with your sisters, with those who may come or stay for a while?



- How capable is your apostolic service of embracing everyone, without annoyances, without discrimination, without closures or fears of the new knocking at the door of the house or of the Congregation?
- How do you commit yourself so that in the Community it may be evident that "*Christmas is the feast of charity!*" as your Founder said?

### ***Dearest sisters!***

Let's go to school during this Advent; let's go to the school of Bethlehem and, like the shepherds and the poor one day, let's turn, today, docilely, to the teaching of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Let's have the will to "*learn*", but also to "*unlearn*" what may have slowed down our step towards the full realization of our vocation and our mission in the journey of our life. Let's "*unlearn*" what, perhaps, may have weakened in our fraternal relationships, in the experience of poverty, obedience, chastity, charity, with the years going and usual habits. Let's "*unlearn*" what may have weakened in the joy, enthusiasm, generosity of the "*first love*", with the routine of daily living. Let's "*unlearn*" even what may have made us "*close our arms*", shrink our hearts or demotivate our commitment after painful or incomprehensible experiences of life.

Advent is a new opportunity to "*go to the school of Bethlehem*" and start again with faith, with hope, with charity.

God always gives us a new chance! It is up to us not to remain in front of the Nativity only as spectators; it is up to us not to waste this time, not to let it go... Life is really short and, as Don Orione said, "*the time that has passed, we no longer have it; the time that is to come we are not sure of having it. Therefore only this point of the present time we have, and we do not have more*" (The Spirit of DO, Vol. I, II. Our spirituality; 1. A program of life).


So, my dearest Sisters: let us go together and let us all meet at this "school of Bethlehem"!

I want to conclude this letter with these ardent words of our dear Founder, which are a wish and, at the same time, an invitation to enter in his heart and live this time with his own feelings:

*"Oh my dear children, prostrated with the shepherds at the feet of the Holy Child, let's say to Him: come, oh Jesus, take possession and reign supreme in my soul! I want to be only of You: You are my God, come, oh Jesus, come! I dare to extend my hands towards You, I throw my life and heart at your feet: You are my Love, You are the heartbeat and soul of my soul: come, oh my Jesus, come!"* (Writings 88,117; from Buenos Aires, December, 8<sup>th</sup>, 1935).

I greet each one of you with fraternal affection, also on behalf of the Councillors, and let us always continue united in prayer, united as sisters at the "*school of Bethlehem*" which we will be attending together during this Advent season!

Your sister,

  
Sr M. Mabel Spagnolo  
Superior general

Rome, Generalate House, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021.