

Piccole Suore Missionarie della Carità
(Don Orione)
Casa generale
Via Monte Acero, 5 – 00141 Roma
www.suoredonorione.org

*“Lent is a fitting time
for self-denial”
(Pope Francis)*

Prot. MG 28/14

Dear sisters,

After this period of silence I address to each one of you today, first of all to thank your fraternal closeness and the prayers you have done and you still do for my health. I can say that Divine Providence has acted in the loving hands of the doctors and of all those who have contributed to my recuperation. Thanks a lot!!!

Today we are here to start the upcoming season of Lent that will prepare us to the great celebration of the Resurrection of Christ, our Savior and Redeemer.

The phrase I put at the beginning of this letter; *“Lent is a fitting time for self-denial”*, which we find in the Holy Father’s Message for Lent 2014, is the setting for this reflection I want to share with you.

Let us look at Christ poor

Since the beginning of his Pontificate, the Pope invites us to incarnate poverty. Surely we all remember with pleasure one of his very first words: *“I would like a poor Church and for the poor”*. Words that along this first year of his Petrine ministry we saw embodied with courage and coherence in his person. It’s easy to get excited and applaud the example of the Pope, but it is more difficult to imitate him living, assuming, witnessing.

At the same Message for this Lent Pope Francis says: *“let us not forget that real poverty hurts: no self-denial is real without this dimension of penance. I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt”*¹. So many times I note with pain, how far we are from this ideal! How far we are from the everyday life that common people, families, the poor, have to face day by day to support the family, to keep their job, to earn a piece of bread, to have access to worthy medical services, to give children an appropriate education... How many sacrifices! How many waivers! How many insecurities and anxieties for the future! And we? How much experience of a *“poverty that hurts”* we do? The Congregation offers us too many safeties and our risk is just *“to forget”* and to turn away from reality, living a life so often too superficial and comfortable, too *“easy”*, praising our poor sacrifices and renuncements, converting into *“mountains”* small problems, when in fact we miss nothing, nothing is denied to us, it costs us nothing ... Once a person told me, with a bit of irony, even though with a bit of truth: *“you, religious people, take a vow of poverty, and we live it!”*! Strong, right? Perhaps a little exaggerated? But let us look around ...

Sisters, how can we live Lent like this? How can we watch *“in face”* Christ, who *“became poor so that we might become rich”* (cfr. 2Cor 8,9), the One who *“though he was rich emptied himself so that he could be like us in all things”* (cfr. Fil 2,7)? Feelings are not enough! It needs the consistency of faith! It’s necessary to look at Christ poor and *“renounce”* everything that obstructs, that prevents to walk quickly in his *“discipleship”*.

During the season of Advent we meditated on chastity, and already at that reflection we could glimpse that there is not true chastity without true poverty. And the Lord will say in the Gospel: *“where your treasure is, your heart will be also”* (Mt 6,21).

¹ Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2014.

If our heart and our whole life is not reflected in the sweet face and suffering of Christ poor, of Christ denied, certainly is reflected in “other” things, in “other” idols, surely it is full of “others’ ” interests, needs, ambitions, desires... And these things will never satisfy us! They will not give us joy, serenity, peace, freedom!

The innovation of Pope Francis is his radical and coherent way to live the Gospel, evangelical poverty, of being poor. This is his prophecy with which is dragging the world!

Espousing poverty ...

*“Following the example of our founder, we love poverty as a solid wall of the Institute, convinced that espousing poverty means to incarnate the life of the poor. We also commit to give testimony of community poverty and, if necessary, we will seek new ways to express it”*². For Don Orione poverty goes by the hand of charity.

In the mystery of the Incarnation God has “*espoused*” our poverty and thus, becoming one of us and like us, became brother, neighbor... Only in smallness and poverty we can reach all: rich and poor, young and old, saints and sinners. Poverty approaches, richness separates; humbleness approaches, proud separates. Everyone can approach a person that is simple, poor, pure. Evangelical poverty makes us free, “*stripping ourselves*” from idols, from the superfluous, from “*misery*”.

Don Orione understood very well that only “*espousing poverty*” allows us to go in the footsteps of the Master. Poverty makes us free, generous, open. The poor heart is sensitive, supportive, helpful. The real “*poor*” knows that everything is grace, everything is a free gift of God’s Providence, is grateful to everyone and gives himself without reserves, without selfishness, without human calculations.

In this sense, even “*poverty*” (as chastity) is resolved in “*charity*”. God lives and acts in the hearts of the poor and dispossessed; He is the precious pearl of the poor, the treasure from which part to the brother and the sister with the same love with which we are loved from God.

The poor man is, by nature, generous. This is an experience that always strikes me, visiting the African countries. How poor people welcomes and celebrates the presence of a stranger, offering gifts from their poverty! I remember in Kenya, in Madagascar or in Ivory Coast, the procession of people who, during a visit or a religious profession, come to us bringing a dove, a chicken, a typical object, two eggs, an envelope with money... All things that are necessary for their subsistence but, in front of the value of the presence of the other, do not hesitate to deprive and give joyfully. They do not offer their surplus, but they strip them from what they use! But this is learned watching Jesus, taking Him and Him only as a model: “*we can do this to the extent that we will be conformed to Christ, who became poor and enriched us with His poverty*”³.

Finally, for Don Orione, was vital that the Congregation “*espouse poverty*”; it was a matter of life or death. He himself said: “*As long as the Congregation will love poverty and live it, the Congregation will prosper and will be blessed by God: when our little Congregation will leave to be poor, will cease to fulfill the mission that God has entrusted to her... Hold strong, not relax: keep strong in this spirit and the Congregation will go on, will progress until there will be spirit of poverty ...*”⁴.

At the school of the Master ...

Dear sisters, Lent time is a strong invitation to “*start again from Christ and to experience Him*”⁵. It is impossible to live this important time in any other way than “*centralizing*” in Jesus. The center is not penance, fasting, abstinence, silences... the centre is Jesus Christ! Everything else will make sense and will be fruitful only if it has Jesus at the beginning and at the end; to become like Him, to deprive us of everything that is not Jesus, everything that does not fit with his feelings and with His style of life.

² PSMC, Costituzioni, Art. 27.

³ Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2014.

⁴ PSMC, Costituzioni, Art. 33.

⁵ PSMC, Atti XI Capitolo generale, Decisione sullo stile di vita, n. 1, pag. 44.

The reading of the Prophet Joel, that we listen on Ash Wednesday, is a strong invitation for all of us: *“Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. Tear your hearts and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord, your God”* (Gl 2, 12ss.).

“Return”, then, on the way of discipleship, in the steps of Jesus!

“Return” at His school if we moved away, if we moved the centre of our lives, if we exchanged the *“Treasure”* for other *“treasures”*! God waits for us because He loves us: *“He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relent in punishment”* (Gl 2, 12ss.).

Let us enter with renewed enthusiasm and determination in the *“school of the Master”* and let us make new experience of *“his thoughts, words, feelings, attitudes, gestures, choices... of His style”*⁶. This is the path of true conversion which Lent invites us. This is *“tear your hearts and not the garments”*!

Let us remember our first *“yes”* with which we have adhered to the call of Jesus to follow Him more closely; let us recall the commitments that we have freely accepted and publicly professed through the vows of Chastity, Poverty, Obedience and Charity. Let us get back as true *“disciples”* to follow Him, and purify in this time of special grace that is Lent, His image that must reflect in us.

The Pope dreams of a Church *“poor and for the poor”*, a Church *“poor and missionary”*.

Let also we dream a Congregation *“poor and for the poor”*, a Congregation *“poor and missionary”*, regenerated first of all in each of us.

Let us look during this time, as the Pope says, our miseries: materials, morals and spirituals. Let us submit our lives to the values of the Gospel and the charism, and let us do the necessary purifications without the fear of the *“pain”*, remembering that *“real poverty hurts”*, the real *“self-denial”* hurts, the true *“conversion”* hurts! It's useless a conversion rose water, pleased with some community penances, sometimes reduced to a minimum. Let's go to the heart of the matter: the *“painful”* conversion of our lives!

Sisters: time is short. We experience it when we are faced to illness and fear of death! I also experienced myself in this time! So, let's get together, let us go back to the school of Jesus, watching only He and with Him we will go to the brothers and sisters to communicate the joyful experience and the beauty of mercy, forgiveness and love true and sincere; the experience of the transforming and tender love of God, in His Son Jesus, who became one of us, and loved us up to the end. Time is short! Do not waste it on useless words or useless actions!

I invite all to take up at this time the Pope's Message and particularly the Constitutions, articles 25 to 33, to meditate, pray, make them the subject of personal and community revision. To organize as community taking into account the articles 34 and 37 of the Norme Generali present in the Acts of the XI General Chapter, at the page 59-60, and make choices according to the *“spirit”* and not according to the *“letter”*; choices that help us to conversion and not only conform with the external practice.

Let us help one another on the path to true conversion and holiness.

A few questions can help us to reflect both individually and as a community:

1. What does the Pope's expression: *“Lent is a fitting time for self-denial”* demand?
2. In what *“things”* do I need to *“deny”* myself?
 - In the material aspect: what useless, unnecessary, superfluous things do I have in my room, office, house... (objects, clothes, animals ...)? What could I *“renounce”* in order to be in solidarity with who is in real need?
 - In the moral aspect: which vices and sins exist in me and contaminate my fraternal and apostolic relationships (irony, verbal aggressions, words and

⁶ PSMC, Atti XI Capitolo generale, pag. 44.

gestures which lack education and respect)? Which of these can I “*renounce*” in order to collaborate towards the common good?

- In the spiritual aspect: which things steal space for God and prayer (ideas, thoughts, feelings, activities, television, computer ...), which ones take me far from God and His love? How much space does “*my egocentric self*” occupy, giving more priority to my own will rather than His?
3. How do I use the material goods that Providence offers me? With what sense of belonging and with what transparency do I manage them? How do I give an account of what I receive in donation or by right (salary, pension, donation, presents ...), and put them at the disposal of the Congregation/community, thus incarnating the life of the poor and a true family spirit?
 4. The Pope says: “*I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt*”. What type of Religious life, of poverty and of self-giving do I choose in my daily life? The one that “*hurts*” or the one I “*like*”?
 5. How can I seriously commit myself to renewing my religious profession, and incarnate poverty in an effective way, espousing it, in order to collaborate in a Church/Congregation “*poor, missionary, and for the poor*”?

Dear sisters, these are a few of my reflections which come from my observations and listening to our reality. Very often they are cause for worry, looking at the Congregation which is close to celebrating 100 years of foundation, and which has a great and beautiful mission in the Church. The Congregation depends on each one of us, on every little missionary sister of charity. Therefore, my wish for all of you is that his Lent may awaken in everyone the love for Christ, the love for the Congregation, the love for the vocation freely received and welcomed, the love between us and the love for the poor.

May we approach Easter looking at Jesus and humbly and meekly going to His school, renewed in our hearts and minds, and in our spirit, and may we offer to the Church the gift of our conversion.

May Mary most holy accompany on this journey. She who was always close to Her Son, will also be close to us to guide and encourage us.

I fraternally greet each one of you, I trust in your prayers still, and may we be united in the common ideal for holiness.

Your sister in Christ.


Sr. M. Mabel Spagnuolo
General Superior

Buenos Aires, march 1st. 2014.