



Talks

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CHANGING THE WORLD STARTING FROM THE POOR

Friends of the poor: your theme is very dear to our Community and we thank you for offering us the opportunity of participating in this reflection. It is a theme on which we continually confront ourselves most willingly, such as the meeting in Naples, held last June, in which we reflected together with many organizations that work alongside new and old poverties.

“Changing the world starting from the poor”: this is the dream that the community of Saint Egidio shares with many other people, a dream that even today is proposed to us in this session of your Congress.

The analysis, that I would like to share with you, begins from the experience of the Community of Saint Egidio and it will be a sociological one not only in the analysis of who the poor are, today, but in a particular way for the research of what kind of society, better what kind of mentality, the poor have of themselves, today, and what answers we can find in order to help them as friends.

Being close to the poor is harder and harder; **our hope** is put to the test because their condition is deteriorating: the demolition of the social system, the economic crisis which becomes graver (and burdens them in particular). The poor increase and this reality is always less interesting; we even get used to suffering. It is this that makes us suffer more: **there is a crisis** of culture and practice of solidarity that seems out of fashion.

This crisis is only one aspect of **a society** which no longer sees its future, of **a western world** which no longer has any vision. Crushed by globalization and new geo-political scenarios, we are afraid because our world is going to disappear and because we see the decline of a world where Europe had a sure horizon.

60



This uncertainty is felt by all, there is no defence against this new direction of global history which influences culture, finance and future. In this frightening situation the poor become less interesting, on the contrary, they become disturbing phantoms of what all of us risk to become. Today, the great question is not the defence of the poor but the defence *from the poor*: the **homeless** trouble our streets, **gypsies** spark off campaigns far greater than their small number; **beggars** challenge our sense of dignity and the **ordinances** that forbid alms are multiplying, the **elderly** themselves are “**disturbing**”, because they remind us in our flesh of our own weakness and of our destiny of physical decline, and so they are isolated.

Even the condition of **sick people**, in public opinion, does not provoke anymore a sense of compassion and defence of life and people appeal to personal freedom in choosing his/her way of dying so as to protect himself/herself from the idea (and image) of suffering. Contempt and harshness are proclaimed in order to defend our peace and wellbeing and to remove threats of a dark future by keeping the poor at a distance from our horizons, our homes, our lives, while looking for a model of someone who is victorious, strong, a TV hero who does not exist in reality.

In such a weak society, without any cultural models, the proclamation of hatred and contempt is extremely dangerous and can only generate violence.

In this scenario we must ask ourselves again: **why should we defend the poor and dedicate our lives to them? Why do we choose to be “friends of the poor”?**

We believe that the answer must become stronger, it cannot be only a private answer of a few (or many) people of good will, but it must be a cultural model for the whole of society. **We must find again the reasons for proclaiming the human beauty of friendship with the poor so as to be able to put them again at the centre of society.**

In the last fifty years, this has been the experience of the Community of Saint Egidio, the experience of Christian people who, in meeting and being close to the poor whom they find along their way, discover the very roots of the evangelical experience. The first students who, in 1968, began to gather together around the Word of God, understood how the Gospel could not be lived far away from the poor: **the poor are our friends and the Gospel is the Good News for the poor**. The first form of service of the Community, when it was not yet called Saint Egidio, started with after-school help for marginalized children of the depressed areas of Rome.

Gradually this friendship embraced other categories of poor people:

- **physically and mentally disabled people, homeless people, foreign immigrants, terminally ill patients**
- **and in different situations: prisons, homes for elderly people, gypsy camps, refugee camps.**

During these years, a sensitivity has developed for every kind of poverty, old, new or emerging, as well as towards non traditional poverties, like that present in many European Countries of lonely, elderly people, even if they are well-to-do people. We will have the chance to tell you.

Today we feel there is a new challenge to be faced. We believe that friendship with the poor must not be considered a private matter just for a few people: we must re-propose solidarity as the flavour of humanity in many parts of Italy. We feel that a society without solidarity becomes dehumanized and corrupted, because the economic logic that the actual crisis forces on us, is wearing away a sense of gratuity.



The world of solidarity, of Voluntary Service, that in the 1970's was characterised by impassioned movements, today is just a personal tendency, simply a "hobby" in the best of cases, and even, at times, a remunerated commitment.

Today, we believe that it is important to rediscover the humanistic and spiritual foundation of friendship with the poor. We feel that our response must not only be of a sociological character, but spiritual and even "anthropological", so as to find a more vital, attractive and evangelical way of talking of the poor.

The poor cannot be marginalized in Christian life: friendship with the poor is the vital heart of Christianity. "The Church presents itself as it would like to be: the Church of everyone and in particular of the poor": with these words John XXIII opened the great Vatican Council II.

Pope Benedict XVI in a book for young people, "Christian fraternity", wrote: "Neighbour is above all the poor person I meet, because he is simply a brother of the Master, more and more present in little ones."

Meeting with the poor is not only a social reality, but a spiritual and mystical one, because in it real sorrow and spiritual depth intertwine. Fr. Congar, a great theologian of the Council, wrote: **"The poor are a reality of the Church ... a Christian community cannot exist without diakonia and without Eucharist."** The Orthodox theologian, Olivier Clement, affirmed that a further sacrament exists, **"the sacrament of the poor."** There is a spiritual dimension in this being closer to the poor that provokes the Church to be closer to Christ himself. It would be necessary, therefore, to take on a new audacity of bringing the poor into the heart of Christian experience.

And yet we feel even a "lay" value of friendship with the poor: the poor have a humanity to be discovered; it is necessary to find a way, a language in order to say this. There is need of friendship and humanity and we feel that for those who suffer there is a real and great need to have a voice ... there are many people who are never called by name, who do not speak with anyone.

We become sick because of lack of social bonds, friendship, recognition of one's own social importance. Friendship with the poor restores a name, a face to many people and responds to the expression of contempt. It responds even to our need of human and social relationships and then, in this new covenant, we become like family members: we can no longer distinguish between the one who serves and the one who is served.

Today, there is a lack of vision, we are resigned: John Paul II said: "Man is suffering because of a lack of vision, but if this is true the signs of the times must become more prominent." Well, there is an explosive sign of the times that allows a vision to be real: the poor increase, the weak feel more lonely and suffer more. Too many people suffer. Seeing the poor provokes a vision for the future. John Chrysostom said this: "If you eliminate the poor, you eliminate a great hope of salvation." It is like this: to eliminate the poor provokes corruption, the end of gratuity and it does not give security, on the contrary it takes away hope.

A great humanistic movement will spring up from the poor. There is a human and divine beauty in the poor. A new humanism springs up from friendship with the poor. Those who maintain this bond with them will not lose their sense of humanity.

It is a journey of happiness: "There is more joy in giving than in receiving", St. Paul reminds us. Thus we are not prisoners of sadness, on the contrary, we discover here a spring of great fullness.

Therefore it is necessary, as Christians, but I would say more so, as men and women, to recover hope in the face of resignation in order to find a new humanism that recognizes, in the essence of humanity, not omnipotence but weakness, not autonomy but inter-dependence. We cannot be fully human alone, we discover our identity only if we need the other person, so that starting again from the weakness of those who suffer is to find self, our true self.

Only then will we feel the urgency of giving a response to the weak and to their questions: we must say yes, first of all, even through many difficulties that we do not want to deny, because we are stimulated to love by the poor.

What is the purpose of being their friends?

Can we be incisive through our friendship?

In the face of these essential questions are we not condemned to be insignificant?

“He who saves a man saves the whole world” says the Talmud, and the Koran re-echoes: “He who has helped a person, has helped the whole of humanity”. The world changes when a person commits self to the other person, even one life is worth a struggle. Sorrow for the success of evil is already the beginning of hope, the beginning of a choice.

Friendship with the poor is a daily choice.

It is a personal choice.

**We must start from ourselves as persons and from the poor
whom we meet personally.**

To say yes is the beginning of the defeat of powerlessness; it is necessary to start, meet, take the other by the hand, to be faithful to a vital question, a thought, and the responses will come. It is love that makes us intelligent, it is love and fidelity that give us passion for the life of those who suffer, for the situations which seem to have no solution, for the paths of reconciliation.

Being friends of the poor is already a good start. Simple and important stories of solidarity with these little ones show that our challenge is not to become efficient in difficult situations but give more voice to our hope for change and to the poor, the voice of redemption and healing. Everyone is a witness of hope if he/she remembers his/her essence as a person and the humanity that he/she finds in the poor whom he/she meets and who shows me the humanity of those he/she will never meet.

Those Who Love are never tired
since Love knows no burden.

Magdalene of Canossa

63



Cristina Simonelli



“I recommend to you my Beloved Poor ... treat them with Simplicity ... Devotion ... Respect ...”

Expressions of two centuries ago do not always keep their freshness and relevance in the present. The expression used in the title of your gathering is perhaps half between past and present: on the one hand it is certainly important, on the other perhaps it is a little risky in as much as today, more than in the 19th century, charity takes on the characteristic of justice.

Thus, for these reasons I would like to link it with another expression, well known, that comes from another context but always from the words of Magdalene. As you certainly know, the second phrase refers to the breaking of Bread which is God's Word. It seems appropriate to use it here for many reasons.

1. **Firstly**, because it “translates”, in a particular way, what has been assigned to me with the proposed title, which indicates the passage of Mt 25:31-46, with those words "you have done it to me". It shows the theological importance, to be fulfilled on one's knees, with “devotion” in one's relationship with every "little one among our brothers and sisters."

2. **Further**, since everything takes on, in the combination of the words “poor/word/bread”, a Eucharistic trait: this does not refer neither solely nor primarily to the “rite” but to the existential dimension about which we spoke of above, that we have the possibility of living with gratuitousness and blessed gratitude.



3. Last, but not least, regarding the term *respect* which seems so insignificant compared with the important topics of Christian ethics and with the overwhelming ideals, around which, always more and more I convince myself, our relationships are forged and even more if these relationships deal with “help” that is offered to the poor. Help that is not characterised, as the first and essential element, by respect for the other person may become auto-gratification or even more, oppression.

Keeping in mind what we have said, the evangelical viewpoint on which we would like to reflect today is essential in preventing that our relation with the poor may not make us “good Christians” at a cheap price. For this reason, let us remember the need for justice which is revealed by the examination of the world situation presented in the talk of this morning. In fact, justice also means trying to understand its causes. The Synod held a few years ago in this Diocese thus expressed itself:

“We see the need to identify a reference frame in which to place specific situations through a political and structural analysis of the causes and the need for commitment for justice and peace in the light of the Gospel which forces us to look for lifestyles which are sober and coherent. Personal confrontation with *suffering* and *marginalization* and operational solidarity which is aroused, oblige us, at the same time, to search for the economic, social and political causes of this ‘poverty’, avoiding summarising everything in generic judgements about the ‘poor’”.

It is important to be aware of the model of economic development in which we live and the inter-connections of this model at world level which manifest the unbreakable ties between the selling of arms, exploitation of resources, the environmental crisis and the impoverishment of two thirds of humanity. It is evident that aid which does not arouse discussion about the causes which provoke marginalization or injustice, would be partial and inadequate, even though necessary as “short-term responses”.

A contradiction can be seen in the willingness to give money or sustain charitable initiatives of various kinds, and the consolidation of a culture which discriminates and excludes. (Diocese of Verona, *Libro Sinodale* - 2003).

Having said this, I would like to deal with the theme using some passages that are co-related to the *sign* of a Presence (no one has ever seen God, the Only-Begotten Son has made Him known, Jn 1:18, read together with Mt 25, “you have done it to me”) which promises/invokes care and respect and thus assures blessing.

The stranger and protection



³ I heard a loud voice call from the throne, “You see this city? Here God lives among men. He will make His home among them; they shall be His people and He will be their God.”
(Rev 21:3)

The Son, Only/Beloved/Jesus of Nazareth Crucified and Risen, is a Presence and narration of God in human language. We are reminded of this through the pericope of the “disciples of Emmaus”(Lk 24:15-18).

24 ¹⁵ Now as they talked this over, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side; ¹⁶ but something prevented them from recognising him. ¹⁷ He said to them: “What matters are you discussing as you walk along?” They stopped short, their faces down cast. Then one of them, called Cleopas, answered him: “You must be the only person staying in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last few days?”

His presence which was not recognised immediately needed signs which, eloquent in an ecclesial context, are certainly the Word and Broken Bread. But before these signs, the one that triggers off the itinerary of recognising Him, is the road travelled together with this *paroikos*, a stranger: in the situations of God’s presence in Mt 25 this is probably the most *difficult thing* to do in our opulent West, while in other contexts the greatest difficulty of obtaining food and water imposes different settings. Talking from my point of view, I would like to dwell, in particular, on this situation. In the light of the passage quoted, it is *obvious* that the presence of Christ is in the stranger, the prisoner and in each one of us.

This obviousness risks remaining such only on a theoretical plan: each one of us “knows” how much the spiritual, existential and political importance of this text is not to be taken for granted; it is not to be seen by evidence and in power, it is rather seen as a manifestation of the wind of the Spirit, whispering voice of silence (1 Kings 17) and it manifests itself in the powerful call to conversion.

A possible icon could be the women and men in the boats of desperation, those who died in the sea while trying to reach the promise of a better life, a personal and even family exodus. We know well the passage of Exodus: God listens to the cries of his people and he walks with them. In the Gospel text he identifies himself with them, not with Pharaoh and his chariots and horsemen. Some time ago an interesting book of Ettore Masina was published “on-line” that has something very efficacious to say:

«Whoever reads history books not only written by winners but also by listening to the cries and silence of the poor to whom the mass media of the powerful cut their vocal cords; those who investigate the facts of the past and those of the present and of which—whether we like it or not— we are responsible, protagonists and agents; those who do not forget the Gospel neither the hard, long and suffered experience of building a society in which man is brother to man and not a wolf, knows well that events happen which appear of little significance but instead, if one reflects, indicate the level of evil of which we are all responsible unless we actively pre-occupy ourselves with those who suffer a cruel denial of their basic rights. These events are not visible and do not make a noise like devastating wars or murders of tyrants, or bloody revolutions.”

Yahweh **guards you**,/ Yahweh shades you / with Yahweh at your right hand,
sun cannot strike you down by day, nor moon at night. /
Yahweh **guards you** from harm: / He **guards your lives**.
He **guards you** leaving, coming back. / Now and for always.
(Psalm 121).

Protection, therefore, can be experienced and received, and for this reason it can be taken on: even as fraternal guardianship. Refusing to be a guardian is to refuse the identity of a brother (or sister), it means going against creation because



(the earth) has again had to drink up *damim* (blood) of Abel, “thrown”, wasted, “drowned” in the ships ...

Protection, therefore, is a duty: of care and acceptance. And also the task of witnessing to the “centre”, a possibility of being fully humanized. Strangely enough, even the word which we usually translate with “watchman” is a word made up of the same letters, practically it means “guardian”:

«Someone shouts to me from Seir,
Watchman, (*shomer*, guardian) what time of night?
Watchman (guardian) what time of night?
The watchman (guardian) answers, Morning is coming... » (Is 21:11-12)

With respect and simplicity.

The practical and functional form of caring/protection needs, as mentioned above, deep respect. But there is a vision even more *simple*, that bestows truth on the whole value and can include both the aspect of respect and that of contemplation/devotion. It is the vision of simply being there, completely and even beyond one's possibility of action, even if useful, in order to reach the deep truth. This truth is anthropological as well as theological, in the Christian sense of the word, and underlines the preciousness of every life, going beyond roles and actions. The following affirmations come from particular contexts because they refer to consecrated life and, yet in their simplicity, they can be of value to everyone.

“Consecrated people, women and men, fragile and in love, compassionate and realists, must nourish — by recounting and living — nothing but parables of wounded existence healed by grace, witnesses of painful anxieties which dialogue brings to authenticity, provoking reactions that draw theoretical curiosity to transform itself into compassionate practice, gestures of casual meetings that compassion enwraps with new hope.” (B. Secondin - D. Papa)

«The prospect of the service of charity gives us the chance to address ourselves to religious people called, by their choice of life which makes them “poor and put aside”, to be signs of hope, witnessing the possibility given to every man and woman to break through the frontiers of society and of life by finding a meaning, a reason for which it is possible to live and give life.»
(CEI, *Comunicare il vangelo in un mondo che cambia* n. 62).

Those events, however, are fleeting signs that dissolve showing the deficiencies of our lives, collective and personal. That they are things with no value is an illusion of the powerful and perhaps even ours, of us as restless gentlemen and good women who turns their backs since “you cannot do anything anyway” (...)

What took place a few days ago in the burial ground of the sea in which the genocide of those wretches calling for mercy are abandoned, is a sign, according to me, of an anthropological change of terrible dimensions: it is going back to distant and cruel times that the history of civilization had disillusioned us to have

been forgotten forever, a tragedy like this: “In 1847, 84 ships were stopped near Grosse Isle, below Quebec. Among the Irish immigrants who sought refuge in shanty huts exposed to all sorts of weather 10,000 died. And 3,000 were forgotten and no one ever knew their names. As the Bible says, «I saw them strewn along the shore, I saw them drag themselves in the mud and die like fish out of water.”».

Thus, in which way "do we remember the poor"? How do we approach them? with devotion, with simplicity, with respect. What has just been said places us on the side of devotion, it makes us kneel, not before an “object of piety” but before the “sacrament” of a Presence who cares for our very humanity.

Protection - care - of which we are the object becomes even a duty and points out the practical aspect of this relationship. *Care* is the verb par excellence of the covenant, which is to be defended (as, for example, in Psalm 103:18), as is so often repeated in the Book of Deuteronomy [e.g. Dt 5:1; the whole of chapter 6, from which the use of “phylacteries”, of *phyllasso*, protect (cfr Mt 23:5)]. On the same level, the garden of “Eden”, situated in the East, is to be cared for [and God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it (*shmr*) Gen 2:15)], because it is the price of the agreement. A fraternal bond, too, is seen as “protection”: “Am I my brother’s guardian (*shomar*)?” asks Cain (Gen 4:9). But this is really possible because the guardian, who can only be God, as the psalm says, describes His blessing as care and protection:

I lift my eyes to the mountains: where is help to come from?/Help comes to me from God, who made heaven and earth. No letting our footsteps slip!/This **guard** (*shomer*) of yours, he does not doze! The **guardian** of Israel does not doze or sleep. God **guards** you, shades you./With God at your right hand the sun cannot strike you down by day, nor moon at night,/God **guards** you from harm,/ He **guards** your lives. (Psalm 121)

Thus "to remember" means to become a voice for every creature, to gather up the fragments “so that nothing may be lost” - perhaps in the desert ... in the end, it is the opportunity to find one’s own identity in being simply a *blessing*, before and beyond any activity undertaken.

God was in this place and I did not know it

“Rabbi, where do you live?” “Come and see...” (Jn 1:38-39)

Having brought to mind all this, I believe that the invitation we receive, like the first disciples of the IV Gospel, like the two disciples of Emmaus, is to let ourselves be convened, allow the Spirit to make our hearts burn in this listening, and to dwell in his presence. Probably a good spiritual exercise — while we look for concrete and practical ways in our commitment and our duty of justice, as citizens and as Christians, in a difficult time — could be that of “taking off our sandals” before people who are for us an icon of the Master who has nowhere to lay his head, asking them for forgiveness and acceptance. Awaiting the theophany in which His presence appears suddenly, like Jacob of old, we can say “God was in this place and I did not know it ... this is the house of God and the gate of heaven.” (Gn 28:17)

68





Fr. Gianattilio Bonifacio

Poor and Poverty in the Bible

In the First Testament

In the First Testament poverty, at first sight, is not certainly a spiritual ideal. It was instead considered a tragedy, an evil to be endured and also a despicable situation because it was connected to sin in regard to the concept of retribution.

Proverbs 6 ⁹ When are you going to rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little drowsiness, ¹⁰ a little folding of the arms to take life easier, ¹¹ and like a vagrant, poverty is at your elbow and, like a beggar, want.

Therefore the ideal condition in the biblical concept is described with great incisiveness in the prayer of the wise Agur present in **Pr 30:8-9**, where the principle of the happy medium appears evident:

Keep falsehood and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches, grant me only my share of bread to eat, for fear that surrounded by plenty, I should fall away and say, “Yahweh, who is Yahweh?”, or else, in destitution, take to stealing and profane the name of my God!

Nonetheless, even in this call to personal responsibility, the Bible recognizes also the existence of a dignified poverty, like the following that we find in **Qo 4:13**:

Better a lad beggarly yet wise, than a king old yet foolish, who will no longer take advice.

and then in the last resort it is not unrelated to God's will:

1 Sam 2:7 Yahweh makes poor and rich, He humbles and also exalts
Pr 17:5 To mock the poor is to insult his Creator; he who laughs at distress shall not go unpunished. **Pr 22:2** Rich and poor are found together, Yahweh has made them all.



Therefore, in the legislation given to Moses and to the people, God placed the poor person under his protection, commanding his people not to trample his rights but to be jointly liable with him:

Ex 23:6 You must not cheat any poor man of yours of his rights at law.

Dt 15:11 Of course there will never cease to be poor in the land; I command you therefore: “Always be open handed with your brother, and with any one in your country who is in need and poor”.

Also in the law, concerning sacrifices, there are clear references in order to help destitute people who do not have the possibility to buy expensive offerings:

Lv 12:8 If she (the woman who must purify herself after childbirth) cannot afford a lamb, she is to take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, one for the holocaust and the other for the sacrifice for sin; the priest is to perform the rite of atonement over her and she will be purified. **Lv 14:21** If he is poor and cannot afford all this, he need take one lamb, the one for the sacrifice of reparation and it is to be presented with the gesture of offering to perform the rite of atonement, a tenth of an efa (2/3 Kg) of superfine flour mixed with oil as a oblation, a log (ca ½ ℓ) of oil.

Then, in Deuteronomy, there is the famous triad of the people most in need composed of widows, orphans and foreigners, who enjoyed special attention – even at a socio-legislative level – in order to avoid, as much as possible, the spread of misery among people. Nevertheless, though the Mosaic legislation may have mitigated all these forms of protection, Israel did not follow these dispositions with particular fidelity. The growing spread of wealth among the privileged classes and the consequent secularization which spread, above all, during the kingdoms of David and Solomon and afterwards, had always caused more and more the evident and painful contrast between the rich and the poor. The strong inequalities which were created provoked very strong reactions of the prophets like Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah. The following sentences are a test of their invectives against the abuse of power of the rich:

Am 2 “Yahweh says this: For the three crimes, the four crimes, of Israel I have made my decree and I will not relent: because they have sold the virtuous for silver and the poor man for a pair of sandals, because they trample on them of ordinary people and push the poor out of their path; because father and son have both resort to the same girl, profaning my holy name; ⁸ because they stretch themselves out by the side of every altar on cloche acquired as pledges, and drink the wine of the people they have fined in the house of their god ... **Is 5** ⁸ Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field until everyone belongs to them and they are the sole inhabitants of the land.

Well, this violent and abuser richness, because it was acquired almost all the times both illegally and forcing legislation to one's own advantage, could not anymore be considered an expression of the blessing of God. Besides the inequality which compelled the poor to go to the margins, made emerge in them the strong awareness that the only help in which they could trust was the Lord. Because of this approach, forced by certain reasons, poverty acquires gradually always more and more a connotation of devotion and openness to God and becomes often a characteristic of a pious person who is searching for God:



Psal 86:1-2 Listen to me, Yahweh, and answer me, poor and needy as I am. Keep my soul: I am your devoted one, save your servant who relies on you. You are my God. **Pr 28:6** Better a poor man living an honest life than a man of devious ways, rich though he be.

But not only devotion is one of the characteristics of the poor, to them justice is associated. To the just man, in fact, is promised the full consolation and the return of what he was lacking because provided by the justice of God, as Psalm 37 proclaims.

It is interesting to note how the Greek translators of the Psalter, by terms *ptochos* (destitute) and *penes* (needy), there is also the word *prays*, which means meek and Jesus used it in the Beatitudes: “Blessed the meek (*praytes*), they shall have the earth as their heritage.” (Mt 5:5).

Thus poverty, from a simple and socio-economic condition, became that essential disposition, that is humility, which is closer to **justice** (**Zp 2:3**: *Seek Yahweh, all you, the humble of the earth, who obey his commands! Seek integrity, seek humility! You may perhaps find shelter on the day of the anger of Yahweh!*), to the **fear of God** (**Pr 15:33**: *The fear of the Lord is a school of wisdom, humility goes before honour*) and to **faith** so that it may be identified with the same Moses (Nm 12:3: *Moses was the most humble of men, the humblest man on earth.*)

Now we understand well the profound meaning of the expression “the poor of Yahweh”: they are those who, though suffering, approach God with such attitudes and thus become the objects of his love, until they become the first offering of the “humble and simple people” whom the same Messiah will gather together:

Zp 3:12-13 In your midst I will leave a humble and lowly people, and those who are left will seek refuge in the name of Yahweh. They will do no wrong, will tell no lies; and the perjured tongue will no longer be found in their mouths. But they will be able to graze and rest with no one to disturb them.

In the Second Testament

Jesus and the first Christians insert themselves fully in this atmosphere of comprehension about poverty. It is clear that for Jesus the poor is particularly close to the Kingdom of God (cf Mt 11:5; Mk 12:42) and, therefore, poverty must not be considered only in a material sense, but rather as simplicity, humility, awareness of being the little ones: Jesus proclaims blessed he who is “poor” in this way (Mt 5:3).

Nevertheless this spiritualization of poverty must not incur the risk of thinking of an indifference for the concrete needs of the destitute. On the contrary, in all the Christian writings it is commanded explicitly to take care of them.

The first Christians were selling their goods and give them to the apostles so that they could distribute them to the poor and thus the Church might witness the communion and the same care of God in just relation with all brothers and sisters (cf Acts 2:44-45; 4:3ff: it is the case of Ananias and the negative case of Ananias and Sapphira in chap. 5). This effort of redistribution of goods became also an essential form of assistance because the Christians – for the sake of their choice of faith – had lost the security



of the social previous relations (a job and familiar solidarity) and were left out from any kind of Judaic charity.

- This is evident in the case of the "widows of Christians of Greek language", for whom the apostolic Church prepared a real and appropriate ministry of assistance in the persons of deacons (Acts 6).
- Even Paul was continually committed to provide for the poor of the Mother Church of Jerusalem through the collection of funds from the well-to-do pagan-Christian communities (cf Rm 15:26; Gal 2:10). And the apostle does all this both by his example (2 Cor 8:1-5), and urging the Corinthians to offer contributions, keeping in mind the good level of their communitarian life (v. 7 ff.), and also remembering Jesus' example (*He was rich, but He became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of his poverty.* cf v. 9)

2Cor 8 ¹ Now here, brothers, is the news of the grace of God which was given in the churches of Macedonia: ² and of how, throughout great trials by suffering, their constant cheerfulness and their intense poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity. ³ I can swear that they gave not only as much as they could afford, but far more, and quite spontaneously, ⁴ begging and begging us for the favour of sharing in this service to the saints, ⁵ and what was quite unexpected, they offered their own selves first to God and, under God, to us. ⁶ Because of this, we have asked Titus, since he has already made a beginning, to bring this work of mercy to the same point of success among you. ⁷ You always have the most of everything - of faith, of eloquence, of understanding, of keenness for any cause, and the biggest share of our affection - so we expect you to put the most into this work of mercy too. ⁸ It is not an order that I am giving you; I am just testing the genuineness of your love against the keenness of others. ⁹ Remember how generous the Lord Jesus was: He was rich, but He became poor for our sake, to make you rich out of his poverty.

72



NOTES

1. That is: the personal condition (miserable or flourishing) depends from the level of fidelity to the divine law.
2. The isolation of the poor was a condition almost inevitable: **Pr 14:20**: The poor man is detestable even to his neighbour, but the rich man has friends. **Pr 19:4**: Wealth multiplies friends, but the one friend the poor man has is taken from him!
3. **Mt 11** ⁵ the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor. **Mk 12** ⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasure and watched the people putting money into the treasury. And many of the rich put in a great deal. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two small coins, the equivalent of a penny. ⁴³ Then He called His disciples and said to them: "I tell you solemnly. This poor widow has put more in than all who have contributed to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For they have all put in money they had over, but she from the little she had has put in everything she possessed, all she had to live on."



Fr. Gianluigi Andolfo
Canossian Father

“I Recommend to You My Beloved Poor”

according to St. Magdalene’s Charism

“I recommend to you as strongly as I can my beloved poor, for God’s sake, make every effort so that one day they may all go and enjoy the Lord, and this by your holy instructions, prayers, acts of charity and hard work (efforts), always guided, though, by obedience to your Superiors”.(1)

This is a precise and complete expression that has inspired the theme of our Congress, a phrase not easily found in her writings, taken from her **“Letter of farewell”**, a sort of spiritual testament, written by Magdalene a few months before her death. In this talk I would like to keep to the style and sensibility of this text which reflects well the soul of Magdalene and which I think bring to the fore the aspects that follow .

Magdalene shows concern for the real ‘poor’, those she well knew and whose situations of need she had described; for them, first of all, she asks people to have an availability imbued with love, care coming from the heart.

Her recommendations have, as their final and supreme aim, the eternal salvation of the beneficiaries. Magdalene never separated spiritual salvation from the material and concrete assistance that becomes a sign and prelude of eternal salvation.

The poor must be helped by the ‘*holy institutions*’, specific works she had set up



characterised by ‘charity and hard work’ and ‘directed... by obedience’.

The aim of this talk is also to make us think over our Canossian apostolate from Magdalene’s point of view, that is according to her ‘charism’. When we use the word ‘charism’ we do not mean to talk only of a theoretical view or about mere spiritual values, especially when we refer to a topic of this kind so linked to a concrete human and social work. When we speak about her ‘apostolic charism’, we mean to talk about all that Magdalene had carried out, starting, certainly, from considerations on values and on choices inspired by the Holy Spirit, but then getting down to facts, that is to all that she, in one word, will call: “The Work”: her Institutes and her institutions such as the laity (or Tertiaries, to use her own language), wholly committed to the works of charity.

The *charism* is an incarnation of the Gospel in our history, it develops in the people, in their actions and in historical works. However, it is important to remember that everything is born from the gift of the Holy Spirit, who pours Himself into our spirit, our choices and keeps quenching our thirst as a spring of living water. Our charism is a lighthouse guiding us in our spiritual and apostolic choices, as individuals, as a community and as an Institute.

How should we live our charism today in our apostolate? I would like to clarify at once that the purpose of my report is not to answer this question. Surely the Holy Spirit works in us, even as Lay Canossians, and, since He has given us this vocation, so He will keep working so that we may live our charism in dynamic faithfulness, incarnating the Gospel in our time.

In this task, the road of primary importance is to know our Foundress, her spiritual journey, the works she started and how she brought them about, so as to discover the motivations leading and inspiring her. Starting from this knowledge it will be easier for us to make fruitful the inspiration of the Holy Spirit today.

74



I - LOVING TO THE POINT OF SERVING AND SERVING WITH LOVE

Very clearly our Foundress shows **Christ Crucified** as the inspirational centre of our charism. From the very beginning of her vocational search she had learnt to ‘follow the Crucified Lord’ as the One Love of her life: ‘*Inspice et fac secundum exemplar*’ (2). (look and act according to the model). This Word of God (Ex. 25:40), well impressed in her mind, becomes the urge, the point of reference, the way to ‘search for God’ in prayer and in action. ‘*God has so loved the world to give His only Son*’ (Jn 3:16). Christ is the new manifestation of the Father’s Love and in the Cross He shows the apex of this Revelation; love for her is the first virtue to copy from the Crucified Lord. Which are then the characteristics of love as revealed on the Cross? How does Magdalene read this mystery of love?

Christ on the Cross reveals to her the attitude of the Servant, obedient to the Father’s salvific plan. St. Paul has well caught the meaning of this mystery in the hymn of Ph. 2: 5-11. God, as revealed in Jesus, is not jealous of His privileges, but becomes man and the servant of man, lowering Himself to obedience on the Cross. From here Christ starts the way back, together with man, the way to salvation, leading him to take part in God’s Glory.

Magdalene’s consideration starts from this point, not only about the virtues, but also on the deep meaning of her life and of her ‘Work’.

In contemplation (inspice) and in action (fac) Magdalene and those who follow her charism, learn to draw everything from the Crucified Lord. She has called us *Daughters/Sons* because the Father's Love has renewed us. She has called us *Servants* because our work for the poor, moulded on the Cross, becomes service.

In the depths of her spirit Magdalene welcomed the love of the Son-Servant and conceived a new way of living when she understood that the love she offered the poor as a young and indeed generous lady was not enough. She felt that she was called by God to follow the Crucified Lord, to become a **servant of the poor**, then she was able to leave the palace, lowering herself and placing herself on the same level as the poor to the point of serving them. The Charism is recognized not by how much one can give, but rather by *how love reveals and leads to Christ*. 'From being a lady to becoming a servant of the poor' this was 'the turning point', the radical choice of her life. She has handed it down to us as a testimony so as to teach us how to become servants.

This specifically charismatic way to live charity in service has been explained by Magdalene at the centre of the Unabridged Rule by three chapters that propose '**obedience, humility and poverty**' (3) as the virtues characterizing service and borrowed from the Crucified Lord. **Gratuitousness** enriches and specifies the apostle's service. In Magdalene's way of thinking to act gratuitously is a natural and necessary choice for the one who works for the poorest, but it is also a spiritual attitude, it means 'looking for God Alone' and 'His Glory' without any reward and personal advantage, either material or spiritual. Our charity inspired by the Crucified Christ should be characterised as **universal and missionary**. After the experience of 'Euntes' (Go forth) (4) our Foundress has matured a 'great love' with a strong **universal, ecclesial and also missionary passion**. In her, universal love worked a great openness to all the demands of the poor. Even while making specific choices for her Institutes, in her plans she always declared herself available to the needs of the poor, especially those more wide-spread and urgent; this is a characteristic which could be defined as **human universalism** (5).

75



There is another word Magdalene uses to characterize our charism and uses it in a very special way to describe the spirit of the Sons of Charity. She, a woman now mature and expert in the ways of the Spirit, uses an adjective for the Sons that summarizes the spirituality of the Servant and qualifies the love drawn from the Crucified Lord as **most generous**. She uses it in the 'Riflessi' (6), the document that, as she herself says, portrays: 'the Spirit I believe is necessary for such a work (7)'. 'Most generous', the term expresses with strength a great and universal love like that of Christ, but also implies the *sacrifice* proper to such an oblation. The superlative, used on purpose, even if redundant, does nothing other than strengthen the two concepts. For our Foundress every aspect of our lives must be drawn from meditation on the Passion of Christ, from the love of the Crucified Lord. With distinctive effectiveness Magdalene thus outlines the apostolic spirit for the Sons:

'And finally a most generous spirit, making you lead a life dead to all that is not God, keeping your heart ready, as the Apostle of the Gentiles declared himself to be and indeed he was, to face chains, imprisonments and death itself rather than parting from the Charity of Jesus Christ, and to become, as he too wished, anathema for his very brothers, that is, ready to bear with any fatigue and suffering for their salvation (8).

The above text taken from Rom. 8:31-9:3 deserves a 'lectio'. It is the most generous love of the Apostle that Magdalene sets as the ideal model of our apostolic spirit, or better still, it is the love of Christ Himself the first cause of this generosity. This is the style of Canossian love.

II – THE CHARISM AT THE SERVICE OF THE POOR

It happened to Magdalene what often happens to us as well. We think we agree with those who work with us, but when the moment comes to put our intuitions into practice, we realize that we have very different points of view.

When Magdalene tried to collaborate with Naudet concerning her foundation, she realized that she had a view of life more active than the other Foundress and felt the pressing need for a more radical choice in favour of the poor girls and women of the district of St. Zeno, both as a social class and as an educative method.

Bertoni, Founder of the Stigmata Fathers and Naudet's confessor, nearly accused her of having in mind a merely secular Institute. When she went to Venice, in a situation of extreme material and spiritual poverty, with a few Sisters, at last she succeeded in founding the first house with all the branches of Charity she had foreseen in favour of the poorest ones. And here she feels fulfilled (9). A charismatic person needs these confrontations, hard though they may be, to clarify things.

Even more enlightening is the encounter our Foundress, now well established and more confident about her charism, will have with the great philosopher and theologian Antonio Rosmini, when he was still a young priest. She kept him informed about her own ideas and projects concerning the Sons of Charity and was fostering great hopes putting him into contact with the people she had gathered together in Milan (10) in her first attempts to establish a male foundation. The great priest from Rovereto approved Magdalene's spirituality and project with joy, involving himself in her idea to the point of taking the project to heart as if it were his own, but he added other ideas, increasing the commitments a little. It is worthwhile re-reading the passage of this famous letter where Magdalene teaches us the method concerning '*inspice et fac*', and makes us understand how important it is that the choice of the Apostolate be according to the gift of the Spirit.

'Regarding the Congregation of the Sons of Charity I desire and I believe it to be the best thing that it should come to life on Calvary, between Jesus Crucified and Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, and grow by being watered by the Divine Blood and by Mary's tears, thus burning, or rather flaring up with Charity, but remaining in humility and in the obscurity of the Cross.' (11)

Magdalene does not accept this change, even though she is aware that her refusal will cause her to miss the most promising chance of a male foundation, and, once again, she remains alone with God Alone.

In both these experiences of different charismatic interpretations, Magdalene does not accept their collaboration, certainly not because of human reasons, but only so as not to betray God's gift. She is aware that the spirit of her Institute lies in the **charity of the Servant**, and is not consistent with the apostolic choices suggested by the other two Founders. The Works, according to her charism, must be carried out as **ministries of charity geared to the poorest**. In both cases the difference of choice in this specific field emerges.

The concrete apostolic choices cause the separation, but the main motivation for her is faithfulness to **her charism at the service of the poor**, that very gift the Spirit has given her and that she knows she cannot change. Faced with the choice between faithfulness to her charism and the risk of failure of her Institutions, she has no doubt, she chooses to remain again alone, waiting that **‘God Alone’** may carry out the Work according to His Plans.

III - THE BRANCHES OF CHARITY OR MINISTRIES

The charitable activity of the Canossian ‘Work’ is like a big tree extending its branches all around so that many may find shelter and love in its shade. This is the image Magdalene likes best when describing the apostolate of our Institutes in the specific field of charity. In the Unabridged Rule, in view of the second commandment of love, she analyzes our charitable activities (12) just calling them: **‘branches of charity’**; even for the ‘Sons’ she makes similar choices .(13)

According to her way of thinking at that time, all the charitable activities had to be present in each house, like the branches of one tree, thus offering a service as complete as possible to the poverties of the place and witnessing to universal love. Let us keep in mind that even to the laity, or rather to the tertiaries to use her terminology, she would ask similar charitable activities according to their situations, but without demanding that their activity should become an organized Work.

In the ‘Plan’ for the Sons of Charity our Foundress prefers to use the expression: **‘ministries of Charity’** (14) to define the apostolic activity, throwing on it a specific light. The ministerial action brings forth in the apostle the identity of a **servant** (the steward who administers his Master’s goods with responsibility) and underlines its characteristics.

The branches of charity undergo a partial evolution with the passing of time from the first idea as described in the initial Plan (15) to the first concrete accomplishments, but three are always the works most clearly oriented to the poor. After the first experiences, when she comes to draw up the Rule, the branches become five and as such will always remain for our Foundress.

In her ‘Plans’ for the foundation some guidelines emerge certain criteria used to define the works. First of all, the criterion of **the greatest need** (16) **determines her choices**. This condition, though, is first of all analyzed not as the need of the individual, but as the more widespread and generalized situation of the place. With her great capacity for observation Magdalene also takes into consideration the various charitable initiatives of her time, grasps their characteristics and uses all this as a indicative criterion of choice; she only wishes to make them become *‘a constant and perennial spring’* (17), thus giving **stability and continuity** to the works.

Analyzing the works of her time she realizes that they are run by **‘pious persons’** (18) and are inspired by **‘spiritual needs’** (19) which, among all other needs, have absolute priority. Thus Magdalene reveals to us her soul and makes us understand how the branches of charity have come to life and with which religious motivations they should be conducted. She does not take for granted this prospective and priority.

The branches of charity are, for her, precise and constant choices that last forever, even though she is open **other works** as well. They witness to a true, **universal**



love open to all the new poverties which may come up. Let us now see the single branches she herself suggested.

First branch: THE SCHOOLS OF CHARITY

The Schools of Charity (20) are certainly the branch that has undergone the greatest evolution regarding the first Plan (21). The need for 'education' that she had pointed out, at first, moved her to plan a kind of boarding house for the most vulnerable and abandoned girls. (22) When Magdalene asked for the opinion of the Bishop of Verona he disconcerted her, advising her to revise many things in her plan and, most of all, as she herself writes in her Memoirs:

'He suggested the schools of charity, for which this person had a great aversion.' (23)

In this passage Magdalene's obedience to the Bishop seems to me exemplary even though he had not understood her charism (later she will actually carry out various plans he had not recommended). But this obedience turned out to be providential for Magdalene because it brought her to discover, against her likings, the branch which fully corresponds to her charism: the schools of charity. In the plans that followed and in the rules it will always be the first branch.

We, however, run the serious risk of not understanding this work. If we start from our present idea of 'school' we could totally distort (twist) the meaning of this activity, without grasping the importance of her choices that were quite different from ours now. Some considerations will help us understand the difference at once. (24)

The girls accepted in this branch had to be absolutely poor:

From the name – schools of charity – you can easily understand what the qualities of these girls are (...) The most miserable and abandoned ones must come before all others, (...) if they are not miserable they must be at least poor'. (p. 98)

The school was open every day, morning and afternoon (except for lunch), including Saturday and Sunday. In a way, this work combined together the school activities and Sunday school.

The classes were not determined according to the abilities of the girls. Examinations were totally excluded and on purpose because they would have brought about the elimination of the poorest and the least capable. The classes, therefore, were determined only by the age of the girls (25) (p. 99).

Every class had two teachers and was usually had 30 pupils. The Sisters normally provided the books and sometimes, according to the needs, food and clothes, as well as material for work. (p. 112-113)

Every activity had to be absolutely gratuitous without even accepting presents:

'The Sisters will never receive even the smallest thing in the way of presents, rewards and offerings, either from the girls or from their relatives, as they all must work gratuitously and only for the love of God' (p. 116).



These considerations should already make us understand the differences between these schools, but what makes them even more different are the methods and the contents of the teaching. A deep study on the pedagogy and the didactic contents implemented by Magdalene in a time and in a society basically illiterate and poor, not only materially. I shall also give only some data about the method.

In the school timetable Magdalene gave absolute priority to **religious education**, not only as a general orientation, but also with regard to the quantity of time given and the methods of pre-eminent Christian formation. She spent most of the time teaching prayers (Rosary, novenas, psalms, etc...), forming the girls to 'Christian doctrine' and accompanying them.

The second pedagogical dimension suggested by Magdalene could be defined as **education to practical life** (education of manual skills of Pestalozzi). Magdalene, in fact, made much room for activities such as: personal hygiene and cleanliness of the environment, attention to manual work (sewing, working with flowers, wool, pearls). Her goal was very clear:

'the reason why these schools have been instituted is not only to educate good workers, but also to form mothers of families who love God'. (p. 98)

Interesting are the criteria she asks to be adopted in the choice of the activities to be propose to the girls: *'With regard to the quality of the activities, it will be necessary to respect the customs of each country, the wishes of the parents and the attitudes of the girls'.* (p.108)

The third pedagogical dimension is the education of the intellect which means being able to read, write and calculate; a preparation that Magdalene wished to be given according to the State programmes as fully as possible. (p.103) *'Besides, both for the girls in class 1 and for those in class 2, there are two other teachers, who teach them how to write and do arithmetic ...* (26).



1st Branch: 'Instruction and education of poor boys' (27)

Both in the Plan of the Sons of Charity outlined by Magdalene, and, in concrete, in the first period of its realisation, this branch was, first of all, a **school of charity** organized for the boys in the evening when they were free from work. D. Luzzo calls *'teachers'* his first collaborators. We know that Carsana and Belloni too had sufficient preparation to be teachers. (28) Even in this case Magdalene's method stressed religious education in a very special way: *'to foster Christian Piety in them'* (29).

In this education a time for innocent relaxation, especially on feast days, was also included. There is no doubt that Carsana and Belloni, though still conducting the school, gave a greater stimulus to cultural and recreational activities (theatre, puppets, games etc...) probably availing themselves of their previous experience, turning the Work into a kind of Sunday school, as we traditionally know it. In this activity there is a clear option in favour of **the poor sons of the people**, warranted also by the fact that it was totally **free**. The school of charity now has a name with a precise meaning; it educates to the deepest love: *'Jesus is not loved because He is not known'*. (p. 97) Magdalene chose the poorest among the poor, but, according to her, the greatest poverty is the absence of Faith. That is why she asks the Sisters to devote themselves entirely to this ministry with an exclusive dedication. In fact, she considers it a *'great exercise of patience, charity, meekness and tenderness'*. (p. 118)

Second Branch: CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Even this branch starts early on in Magdalene's experience since who felt the need to fill the void of religious formation in her servants: 'docebo iniquos ...' (30) 'I shall teach transgressors Your Ways...' (Ps 50:15); an experience which then overflowed into the first Plan together with the first ideas about the 'country missions' planned for the male Institute and the Spiritual Exercises. (31)

This Branch, however, will soon be clearly defined in the Unabridged Rule (32) as **'Assistance to the schools of Christian Doctrine'**. This work was usually carried out in the Parishes or even in the houses when it concerned the formation of adult women (pp. 121 e 126).

Magdalene used to exhort the Sisters to be 'very zealous' since that was the way to **'make Jesus known'** and urged them **'to love the Lord and make Him loved'** with patience and meekness (p. 119-120). We are amazed by her insistence and by the number of concrete norms on the style of service that she suggests especially for this branch. We may easily be brought to think that this activity of Christian formation should be free of any selfish interest. She writes:

'Especially in this work, may the Sisters remember all that Our Divine Saviour, the Omnipotent and the Most High, said and did when He took flesh on this earth for our salvation; He affirmed that He had come not to be served but to serve. May they also remember that in the House of God each ministry, each task is always great' (p. 120).

Actually the Sisters could not take up 'any role of authority' and had to accept whatever class would be entrusted to them. Magdalene would exhort them to teach with humility, **'as we are poor women sent not to preach but to 'break the bread' for children' (p. 125)**, with the heart of one who has learnt **'to serve and not to be served' (p. 122)**.

She proposes the same Branch in favour of the boys of the male Institute as well; they had to accompany the boys **'to the Parish Christian Doctrine' (33)** with the clear intent to prepare them for the Sacraments. Religious brothers should be in the front line in this work, also evangelizing adults, if required, even in their own houses and doing everything with the heart of a servant.

Without a doubt, I think it is apparent that this branch, being directed to people of the lower classes, is the service to the poor that Magdalene takes most to heart: the poverty of being without God, **'and one of the best means to make Him loved, is to make Him known'**. (p. 119)

Third Branch: THE HOSPITAL (34)

"We cannot deny that too much would be lacking in an Institute, that bears the name of Charity and that in so many ways practises it, if it did not have this particular one (Branch) of visiting and assisting the sick in hospitals, who are in a situation to be pitied and in need of consolation." (ibid)

Some introductory remarks are necessary to understand the expression: **“a situation to be pitied”**.

“In the past, the hospital was the shelter of the poor, of the abandoned ones, of those who, struck by illness, had no decent dwelling, neither mother, nor wife, or sister, who could relieve their suffering with loving care and soften their sorrow in their weakness and need for help. In hospital, therefore, there were only the poor, the marginalised, those left on the fringe of society, who did not have anybody who could stay with them and offer them the warmth of human care, the joy of feeling still alive.” (35)

Today, on the contrary, a hospital is the best place to be and receive medical cures: in Magdalene’s time those who could be assisted at home would not have to go there, not even the Sisters. The **‘hospital’** was only for those abandoned, without the possibility of being cured or assisted.

It is also useful to recall what she calls **‘genio’**, that is Magdalene’s natural inclination to the kind of assistance that she speaks of, since the first charismatic experience she made at the very beginning, helped her to discover her vocation to an active life. (36) Even in the first Plan she gives priority to this Branch. (37) In the Unabridged Rule she reminds us that:

“... in this holy exercise everything is repugnant to our human misery since it demands a most ardent charity, that is why I must remind the Sisters of Our Divine Saviour’s words; He affirmed that He would consider as done to Him whatever we shall do to the least of His Poor. In fact, I shall place the Holy Crucifix before the eyes of the Sisters, reminding them all that He Himself suffered on the Cross for them and for the sick they go and visit, with unconquerable patience, meekness, sorrow and tenderness, forgetting Himself out of love and sacrificing Himself in everything in order to redeem us.” (p. 129-130)

In this text we sense all the difficulty Magdalene had already pointed out, concerning this work, but also all the richness of the spirituality that sustained the Sisters at the service of the sick.

Then, in the Rule, she makes a list of the objectives in this Branch of Charity:

“When visiting the sick, the Sisters must have in mind three things, in a very special way: firstly, to console them, secondly, to instruct them and lovingly prepare them for Confession, other Sacraments and even for a holy death, if such is the Will of God, and thirdly, obtain an improvement or change of life, if they should recover.” (p. 136)

The detailed explanation she gives of these objectives makes us understand how, though paying due attention to the human situation, the Foundress’ priority is always the spiritual and moral recovery of the sick and their eternal salvation. It is important to remember how, in this branch too, she keeps recommending us not only to be available, but also to be so with the heart of a servant, together with the absolute gratuitousness required from the Sisters assisting the sick.



To round off this topic, I should simply recall the third branch, as it was proposed by the Foundress to the Sons of Charity: **‘to visit the hospitals’**. She was mainly asking the priests a religious-ministerial assistance, while suggesting that the Brothers should provide them with a human and Christian assistance **‘by instructing, consoling and helping the sick’** (38), an activity very similar to that of the Sisters.

The whole orientation of this branch should deserve a further reflection to enlighten the style of service suggested by the Foundress. The Sisters are sent to work in hospital as outsiders, today we should say, as volunteers, not as employees, or as workers inside the hospital structure, least of all as heads in places of responsibility. A style of service that should be rediscovered and that, I feel, has again become urgent in our present situation. But this may become a topic for further reflection.

Fourth Branch: THE COUNTRY TEACHERS (39)

With this branch we enter a different dimension of apostolic activity oriented more to collaboration. Nevertheless, according to me, we meet here with the most inspired of Magdalene’s works: it shows how far she was able to become involved with the lay people of her time.

Her reflection starts from the awareness that her Institute will never be able to establish itself in small villages, given its organization as envisioned in the Rule. Each Community had to develop all the five branches of Charity, provide for the formation of the Novices, elect the Superior and choose the Sisters to be responsible for the various ministries, among its members. Such a rich and complex organization would only have been possible in big centres.

And yet, even in the countryside there were the same needs and a demand for similar works. Magdalene had come to know the countryside thanks to the properties owned by the Canossa family and knew that there she could find country girls willing to remain virgins, or exemplary widows, who could devote themselves to these works (ibid. p.146). This is the description:

82



“Among these women, then, chosen by their parish priests, or by upright and clever people, those teachers should be identified who, while staying with their families, and being well-known in their villages, after the time appointed for their instruction and minimal formation, without being a burden to anybody, but rather being of help to their families themselves, with a little remuneration from their pupils, can personally and directly supply to the need of these poor girls to be educated and for the assistance in Christian Doctrine, and can, then, either directly, if they are widows, or indirectly if unmarried, volunteer to assist the sick in the way we now shall clearly try to explain.” (p. 146-147)

She plans for them a time of preparation in the houses of the Institute and then she goes into detail about the methods and the contents. However, I do not think it is important to dwell on these texts. I would only like to point out how great Magdalene’s heart is, ever striving to spread her works, not only by opening new houses, but rather by spreading the Charism, sharing it with lay people, as well, and giving them the chance to live it in new ways.

The country teachers devoted their lives to works of charity, urged by Magdalene's same spirit. Just like the Canossian Sisters, by whom they were educated and guided, they were nourished by the same spirit and they too were imbued by the same spirituality, working in activities similar to theirs, but they lived with their families, with a Canossian heart. And yet Magdalene plans this branch with a definite aim: to reach out and help poor, illiterate girls, the sick, Sunday Schools in the country parishes; in a word, the final goal is always the poor, especially if they lack love or are far from God.

Fifth branch: THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES FOR NOBLE LADIES (40)

The Spiritual Exercises for noble or well-to-do Ladies certainly is a work less oriented to the poor, at least not as its first aim, that is why Magdalene felt the need to explain her motivations again and again in the text of the Rules that we quoted above, adding that it is an activity that only takes place twice a year. She gives at least three motivations, when proposing this branch of the Institute:

“... This branch is not devoted to the singular service of the Poor, but, since Charity embraces all sorts of people, for the good of the noble Ladies and to keep them closer for a greater service of God, we work together with them in Hospital and in the Schools of Christian Doctrine for the greater Glory of God...” (p. 169)

We could summarize the above quotation in the following way:

1. The Institute is devoted to the poor, but charity embraces everybody, it is universal.
2. Magdalene helps the Ladies in the service they carry out, together with the Sisters, both in Hospital and in the Schools of Christian Doctrine where they often have leading roles, and this makes collaboration easier.
3. She spreads Divine Glory, looking for the good of the ladies themselves and of their families. (cf. p. 170-171)

I do not think it is the case to talk at length about the method and the contents of this branch too, but it is noteworthy how Magdalene's greatest concern was **absolute gratuitousness**. Considering that the Ladies paid everything, she filled the text of the Rules with recommendations and instructions, fearing that the activity might be turned into a source of money for the Institute. She repeatedly recommended the Sisters never to ask for any benefit either for the Institute and even avoiding to make its needs known, or for their families. (p. 183)

They should not receive any profit, **‘all the surplus belongs to the poor’** (p. 183), or any reward, alms or holy things (p. 186), not even the leftovers of the meals (p. 185); they should not even make any friendship with this intent (186). **Gratuitousness**, in the end, was the guarantee that the branch had no other purpose than the good of the ladies themselves and of the poor they assisted. It is worth considering how Magdalene has managed to put these two objectives together: looking for the good of the poor becomes the good of the Ladies themselves. That is why she tries to make them sensitive to the problems of their servants (p. 176), to make sure that justice and charity are respected when paying them their salaries and to pay attention to the poverty of the farmers.



In this last branch Magdalene reveals a spirit of reflection that shows her human and spiritual maturity; this certainly is the fruit of her experience: the experience of a noble and rich Lady who has given herself completely to the poor, discovering the **‘good’** of her life in this gift. At times, in some reflections, she becomes an expert interpreter of the Word of God: **‘expert’** not thanks to any special studies, but because she filters the Word through the experience of her life.

“Remember the duty you have to give the surplus to the poor, as it really belongs to them.” (p.179)

Though keeping in mind the interpretation, which today is outdated, of the term **‘superfluous’** (Luke 11:41), we are struck by the **‘duty’** of the Ladies to give and the **‘right’** of the poor to be loved and helped. The Lady who freely gives does not gratify her generosity, but carries out an act of justice before God.

The true pearl of her interpretation of the Gospel, her penetrating intuition that is a true reflection of her life, is to be found in the last part of this branch of charity. Magdalene must have had in mind the Beatitude of the poor, the owners of the Kingdom (Mt. 5,3) and certainly she is here referring to the sumptuously laid banquet, where the privileged guests become the least, the marginalised. (Lk 14:15-24)

Above all, though, Magdalene must have **‘manifested’** her choice of life in these words making herself a **‘servant of the poor’**; here is the key to her interpretation:

“... As it has always been said, the one and only reason why this branch of Charity has been embraced by the Institute is to give these Ladies the chance to earn a place among the Poor in the Kingdom of Heaven.” (p. 187)

Perhaps we too have come to this Congress thinking that, in some way, we are the saviours of the Poor. With Magdalene we can now rediscover, in the light of Jesus’ Word, that **‘we ourselves’** are the ones who, first of all, need to assure for ourselves **‘a place among the Poor in the Kingdom of Heaven’**.

There is no **A**ct of **C**harity
towards our **N**eighbour more perfect
than that of helping him
Love **G**od.

Magdalene of Canossa

NOTES

1. Magdalene of Canossa's Farewell Letter to all her Daughters. Bergamo, 16th January 1835, in T. Piccari OP. *Sola con Dio Solo. Memorie di Maddalena (MEM)* Milan 1966 pp. 687-689.
2. Memoirs: to find the quotations more easily and to check Magdalene's text, I shall quote the three different Italian editions each time, keeping in mind that the first two draw on the original texts, while the third is a translation into modern Italian. When quoting them I shall use the following abbreviations:
 - **MEM.** - **TP:** TARCISIO PICCARI: *Sola con Dio solo, Memorie di Maddalena di Canossa*, Milan 1966.
 - **MEM.** - **Sc.Sp:** MADDALENA DI CANOSSA: *Regole e Scritti Spirituali*, a cura di E. Dossi, Par. I, Rome 1984.
 - **MEM.** - **EP:** MADDALENA DI CANOSSA: *Memorie. Una contemplativa nell'azione*, a cura di E. Pollonara, Milan 1988.

This quotation is taken from: MEM. TP p. 328-329; Sc Sp p. 319; EP p. 29
3. MAGDALENE OF CANOSSA: *Rules of the Institute of the Daughters of Charity*, Unabridged Rule, (abbreviation: **UR MI**) Manuscript of Milan, Milan 1978 pp. 17-31.
4. MEM. TP p. 327; Sc Sp p. 319; EP p. 26
5. MAGDALENE OF CANOSSA: *Epistolario (EP)*, by Emilia Dossi, Isola del Liri 1978; *Plan B6*, Ep II, 2 p. 1426; *Plan B8*, Ep II, 2 p. 1425; UR MI p. 145.
6. Reg e Sc Sp, Part II, 'Considerations drawn from the seven commemorations of the most Precious Blood and of Mary's Sorrows' (**Rf**) n°6, p. 182.
7. Ep. II,2 p. 760.
8. Rf. n° 9, p. 183.
9. cf. MEM TP p. 435, 445; Sc Sp pp. 354, 360.
10. EP pp. 186, 254. cf. Ep. II,2. various letters, pp.756-825.
11. Ep. II,2, pp.800-801.
12. cf. Rg. 42-45.
13. MAGDALENE of CANOSSA, *Plan for the foundation of the Sons of Charity (P.Fi.C.) under the protection of our Most Holy Mother of Sorrows*, *Epistolario III*, 3 Rome 1981, pp 2428-2430; A 127.
14. P.Fi.C. In this text she uses this expression three times in three pages, whereas in the whole unabridged rule (MI) she uses it 5 times; much more frequent is the use of the term 'Ministra' to mean the one responsible for that Branch of charity.
15. cf. *Plan B.6*, in Ep. II,2 p.1415-1416.
16. *ibid.*
17. P.Fi.C. Ep III,3 p. 2428.
18. *Plan B7*, Ep II,2 p. 1420.
19. *Plan B8*, Ep II,2 p. 1425.
20. UR, MI pp. 95-118.
21. cf. *Plan B.6*, in Ep. II,2 p.1415-1416.
22. *ibid.*
23. MEM TP p. 331; Sc Sp p. 320; EP p. 33.
24. All the following data refer to the above mentioned Rules, cf. footnote 21.
25. Class 1: from 4 to 10 years of age; class 2 from 10 to 13; class 3 from 13 onwards
26. *Report on the schools in Verona*, in Rg and Sc. Sp., vol. II, Verona 18th January 1822.

27. P.Fi.C. Ep III,3 p. 2430.
28. Ep II,2 p. 824-825.
29. P.Fi.C. Ep III,3 p. 2430.
30. MEM TP p. 327; Sc Sp p. 319; EP p. 26.
31. *Plan B.6*, in Ep. II,2 p.1417.
32. UR MI pp. 119-128. All the following passages on the teaching of Christian Doctrine are to be referred to these pages.
33. P.Fi.C. Ep III,3 p. 2430.
34. UR MI pp. 129-143. All the following passages on the Hospital are to be referred to these pages.
35. G. CASSETTA, *Il Servo di Dio D. Carlo Steeb*, p. 67.
36. MEM TP p. 326-7; Sc Sp p. 319; EP p. 26.
37. cf. *Plan B.6*, in Ep. II,2 p.1415-1419.
38. P.Fi.C. Ep III,3 p. 2430.
39. UR MI pp. 145-168. All the following texts on this topic are to be referred to these pages.
40. UR MI pp. 169-187. All the following texts on this topic are to be referred to these pages.

Magdalene proposes a Fourth Branch to the Sons of Charity: 'The Missions in the most abandoned Rural areas' (P.Fi.C. Ep III,3 p. 2430). This branch of charity, that has not become part of the experience of our Institute, requires little explanation. It is about the traditional Missions for the people, already well practised in the 1800s in the territory of Verona, but that initiative would easily exclude the countryside. The work, planned by the Religious, demanded full agreement with the Local Religious Authority and implied the traditional preaching of the priests, but also, and here a touch of Canossian originality can be sensed, a concrete testimony of charity, accomplished mainly by the Brothers. Even if it does not have a direct relation and is addressed to totally different beneficiaries, a comparison with the 'branch of the Spiritual Exercises' may be useful.

Let us be Happy with
what God Arranges for Us
because it is always
the Best.

Magdalene of Canossa





IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ST. MAGDALENE

Witnesses of the Greatest Love
Remembering our Baptism

CELEBRATING LIFE

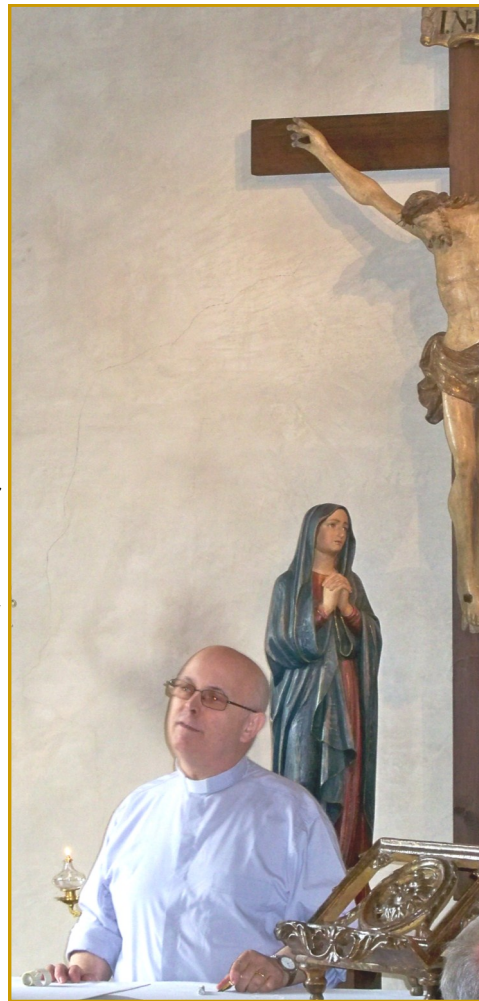
Cel Dear sisters and brothers, on the day of your Baptism you were signed with the sign of the cross so that you could soon listen to the Word of God and profess your faith. Today we begin this celebration with the same sign of salvation.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

All Amen

Cel The Lord, who called us to life and faith, be with you.

All And with your spirit.



First Stage: Canossa Palace

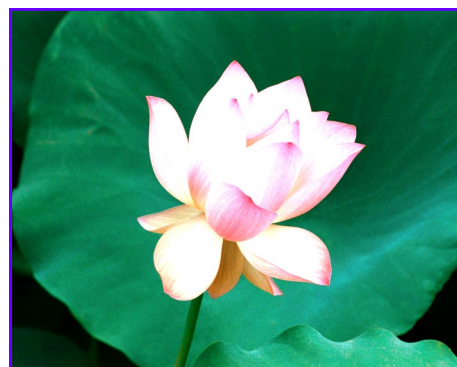
Flower

Cel Let us pray: May You be blessed, God our Father,
Creator of heaven and earth:
in the gift of life
You show your love for humanity.

You guide the life of human beings,
with care and kindness,
as if it were a precious flower.

Lay out your hand and bless us
and this flower
in remembrance of our Baptism
and brighten, in our hearts, the light of faith
and the fire of your love.

Through Christ our Lord. **Amen**



Second Stage: St. Lawrence's Church

water and white robe

In the Old Testament, through water God worked great deeds for the salvation of his people. Those marvellous deeds were the presage of even more wonderful deeds which He would have accomplished through the water of Baptism.

Now the water is blessed and, sprinkled by it, let us remember what we lived on the day of our Baptism. At the end, each one of us will receive some water and the white robe as a sign of a new life in Christ's image.

Cel Almighty God,

listen to the prayer of your people
who, remembering your wonderful deeds
for our salvation,
turn to You.

Accept to bless this water

which You created so that our land
may be fruitful
and may sustain our bodies.

Revive in us, Lord,

with the sign of this blessed water,
the memory of our Baptism,
so that we may be united ever more
to the joyful assembly of all sisters and brothers,
baptised in the Paschal Mystery of Christ,
our Lord.

He lives and reigns forever and ever. **Amen!**



Cel In remembrance of your Baptism, may you be sprinkled in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

All Amen.

89



Third Stage: St. Zeno's Basilica

Witnesses of the Light candle

Cel Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the Light of the world. He is the One who must guide all our choices in a concrete life of faith. The candle is the symbol of it.

**In the symbol of the candle, receive
the light of Christ and always shine
forth in His Light.**

Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.



Fourth Stage: Mother House

bread

Cel In **Baptism** the *Our Father* was “consigned” to us as the prayer of the sons and daughters of God and sisters and brothers in Christ. Let us pray it together with a sense of newness and freshness, overcoming the risk of routine:

All. Our Father ...



Cel **Bread** has various meanings, from the gift of the Eucharist to the daily necessity of its presence on our tables. Magdalene, through the contemplation of the Eucharist, became bread for many people and, along the streets of this suburb, She gave bread and hope to many little ones and the poor. May all of us continue to do what She began.

Cel **May Almighty God**, who revived us to new life by water and Holy Spirit, bless you all so that, always and everywhere, you may be living members of his people, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

All **Amen.**

Cel May Almighty God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, give you His peace.

All **Amen.**

90

Song



Maddalena ancora ci invita,
soprattutto fate conoscere Gesù
amatelo e annunzietelo
e con la vita parlate di Lui.
A tutti popoli (3 times)
della terra.

**The challenge of Magdalene
calls us above all,**
to make our Brother Jesus known
by loving Him and being his witnesses
with our life, in all of our ways,
among all people (3 times)
throughout the earth.

