

Tortona, August 29, 2017

"Awaken the heart"

Very dear Confreres,

It has been more than a year since we completed the 14th General Chapter and it is necessary to keep repeating the theme that recalls an expression of Don Orione: "**Servants of Christ and of the Poor.**" With this theme - we should remember – we traced the concern and the central object of the chapter work, namely, the "person of the orionine religious", his human, spiritual and apostolic identity, and his inclusion in the current cultural and ecclesial context.

In the time of preparing for the Chapter, the whole congregation was involved in reflection and discernment, so that the contribution of analysis and proposals which reached the Chapter, was really "general", the result of the effective participation of all. And to further enhance the understanding of the subject pertaining to the person of the religious, a "socio-religious inquiry" was carried out, involving all the Confreres, through the Internet as well. The conclusions were presented, during the General Chapter, by its Coordinator, Don Vito Orlando, and was also considered by Fr. Amedeo Cencini, who, on the basis of the investigation, presented a pedagogical reading.

The feeling of everyone, Chapter members and external experts, in evaluating the results of the survey, was very positive, even though it has highlighted many challenges and some shortcomings in our lives. I find the synthesis of these opinions in P. Cencini's reaction which has emphasized the following points of positivity: "*The very wide, truly Catholic, ecclesial and universal overview, emerging from all the answers and proposals, free of the tendency of self-referentiality, often present in a work of this kind. The vitality that the Institute manifests and the attention it gives to the world and the Church today. The truth with which everyone has spoken, and that we notice even in the critical and self-critical observations.*" And he concludes: "*But above all, the positive feeling is related to the overall picture that emerges from this survey: in an Institute where the positive data outweigh the problematic ones or even the negative ones.*"

Among the many data collected on the fundamental points of our lives, some with major provocations to our present time and for our future, I would like to focus my attention on one aspect of the investigation that questioned the reactions that we should have and the strategies to be adopted to face the challenges of change: "*Today we are immersed in profound and continuous changes that question our identity as religious.*" Therefore, what resources should be put in place and what care needs to be taken so that we will not find ourselves unprepared in front of the new one?

The result of the investigation, in this case, gave important indications to support the position of the orionine religious, to keep him "standing" in a context of profound and

continuous changes. According to the results of the research, it is crucial to: 1) *Strengthen the charismatic identity*; 2) *To cultivate the sense of belonging to the Congregation*, closely linked to 3) *Promote the spiritual renewal*.

It is immediately apparent that these are relevant and fundamental points. In fact, being aware of our charismatic identity is the condition for affirming our place in the Church in order to better serve the People of God in the present situation of profound changes. This means that *the more orionine we are*, the more we can make a contribution to the Church in a constantly changing world. But the result of this question also says that our identity cannot be understood without the sense of belonging, but with a double reference: belonging to the Congregation (affective and effective bonds) and "belonging to the Lord", out of which the insistence on the care of the spiritual renewal is born.

The answers revealed that in addition to the attention to the charismatic identity and to the double membership, it is also essential to be careful about implementing strategies and resources that are able to "*awaken the heart*." More than a third of the confreres said so.

The same attention has also been sought for in some contributions sent by the Provinces to the Chapter, after the various stages of reflection (personal, community and provincial). While acknowledging the enthusiasm of "*many confreres who show the joy of being orionine and serving the people*," the contributions have highlighted the need to be alert to some signs of dissatisfaction and discouragement, inertia and inoperability. They also mentioned the risk that some [religious] live an "adapted" lifestyle, sometimes with an "appearance" of religious life, made of external observation, which goes on, but with a "switched off heart". Attention has also been drawn to the risk of a certain "*spiritual depression*" due to a "*poor spirituality, decentralized from Jesus*", characterized by a lack of passion for the Lord, for the community and for the apostolate.

Collecting these data, the Chapter Fathers realized that it is "*particularly urgent to pay attention to the humanity of the religious himself*" (cfr. 14GC, No. 5) and that this "*attention*" – I am referring to the Line of Action No. 1 – should be concretized especially through the decision of putting into action "*an integral and permanent formation*" which ought to give the possibility of "*taking on and, when necessary, heal one's own history and thus growing in the likeness of Christ*". They also called for ad "*more experiential kind of formation*", not only theoretical or informative (cognitive dimension), but one that should include the whole person, in an integral way.

To strengthen the need of a response at these levels and to promote the dynamics of an on-going formation, the result of the survey offered one more weighty datum, one which makes us think. It is significant that the majority of those who thought it important to insist on a strategy of "**reawakening the heart**" should be confreres of 6 to 35 years of perpetual profession, above all in the section of 35 to 60 years of age, among whom those who are priests would have between 10 to 30 years of ministry. We are talking, therefore, of the so-called "second age" of life; of a generation which has already gone beyond the period of initial formation and also of the first years of ministry, and in which people are beginning to notice the advancement of age and maybe the lessening of the "strong" enthusiasm of youth; a generation conditioned by a less illusory look at life, which recognizes more easily some

situations of vocational doubt and certain contexts of spiritual aridity, perhaps with some experience of discouragement, due to the perception “*of the excess of the need and the limits of one's own work*” (see *Deus Caritas Est*, 35). In other words, a generation able to identify **those hearts immersed more in *sleep* than in *dreams***. Therefore, needing to be “**awakened**”.

Amor est in via - Love is on the way

A heart immersed more in *sleep* than in *dreams*: how can you wake it up? We start from the Word of God and from a legacy of the Chapter.

The Word of God, proclaimed daily during the Chapter, especially at Holy Mass, determined the pace of the work. How can we not remember the text of the opening celebration next to the body of Don Oriano (Mt 25: *Whenever you did these things to one of my brothers, you did it to me ...*)? And the Gospel of voting day (Mk 10: *The Son of Man came to serve ...*)? Or that of the Mass at Sant'Anna, when, before meeting the Pope, the Lord warned us against the risk of presenting ourselves as a fruitless tree and full of leaves (Mk 11)?

Every day the Chapter *was born* from listening to the Word of God and welcoming the Gospel as its standard of living (cfr. *Verbum Domini*, No. 83). And it was so specially on the last day, in the Chapel of the Paterno, in Tortona. The last word of the Chapter was the Word of God, the time when the Lord “*fired our heart*” (see Lk 24:32) by handing us an *evangelical icon* for the post-chapter. It was the X Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C) and the passage of the Gospel was the encounter of Jesus with widow of Nain (Lk 7: 11-17).

We can let ourselves be inspired **by the *evangelical icon of Nain*** to discover the secret of an “*ever-waking heart*” and certainly also the itinerary to follow, with its content and conditions, to “*awaken the heart*”, ours and of others. Therefore, looking at Jesus, we observe that his humanity is, as Saint Augustine said, “*the way to go to reach the goal that is his divinity*” (see St. Augustine, Homily 42, No. 8). In that itinerary I propose to let ourselves be guided inward by these questions: Why is the heart of Jesus always “*awake*”? Why is his heart “*a heart that sees*”? (see *Deus Caritas est*, No. 31).

At the beginning of the passage of the meeting at Nain we already find a guideline to the answer. Luke, throughout his Gospel and especially in the text in question, presents Jesus as a “*heart*” in motion, moving, never stopping. If we try to imagine what the daily life of Jesus was like, “*by reading the Gospels, we can say that most of the time he was walking along the road. This means closeness to people, proximity to problems. He did not hide.*” (Pope Francis, in Genoa, 27/05/2017). Because of this style, the road was frequently the place of God's surprises, unexpected and unplanned meetings, but always transformed into a “*space*” of salvation, of “*vocational decision*” and of evangelization. The road was always “*missionary*”. In fact, if we ask the “*why*” of this attitude of Jesus or, more specifically, we ask what prompted him to go to Nain, we would find the answer by going further in St Luke's text and stopping at chapter 8, verse 1, which says: “*he was going through the towns and villages (lived in the road), preaching and announcing the good news of the kingdom of God.*” Therefore, there is no justification for the geographical destination. His “*agenda*” was

"orientation" (An "oriented person"! Towards the *east*, where the light is born!). His "heart" was a "passion". He engaged all his affections and all his desire in a single content: to announce the good news of the kingdom of God. And always "on the road" because "*Amor est in via*, St. Bernard would recall, **love is always on the road 'Love is always on the go.'** (Pope Francis to the Chapter members, 27/05/2016).

In what follows, the evangelist informs us that the steps of Jesus stopped at the gate of the city of Nain. But His "heart" did not stop! It continues to move internally and this movement is intensified by a situation that His eye catches instantly. How impressive is the description of the scene. On the one hand, with Jesus, there are "*the disciples and the great crowd*" (Lk 7:11), on the other, "*many people of the city were with the widowed mother*" (Lk 7:12). We rightly imagine many people, but Jesus' eyes immediately take hold of the suffering mother. He only has eyes for her, as if she were the only presence on the scene: "*Seeing her, the Lord was taken with great compassion for her*" (Lk 7:13). Here is, "*the man of the penetrating eye*" (Nm 24: 3), the Lord has eyes and sees like no other person, and therefore the widowed mother has entered into his heart. In that gaze, that lasted an instant, the Lord made a "*lectio humana*" (a human reading) of the suffering body of the mother. Thus, his heart does not just become "passionate", but also a "compassionate" heart. In fact, so goes a medieval saying, "*Ubi amor, ibi oculus*" (where there is love, there is the ability to see". According to Luke, in the passage of Nain, even the reverse is true: "*Ubi oculus, ibi amor*".

We know well that "compassion" is a word very dear to Luke. Here, in the Nain's passage, this feeling is expressed in a "relational" way, causing the rebirth and awakening of life in the people involved. The heart of the mother is transformed, awakens when the light of her eyes in tears meets the light of Jesus' eyes. She perceives the nearness of God (She would have said with Luke 1, 68: "*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel because he has visited his people and redeemed them!*"). But it is above all the young man who is transformed, by rising and resuming the ability to communicate and to relate. Luca merely tells us that "*the dead man began to speak.*" But what would he say? With all his heart, simply: "Thank you!" And perhaps he would add: "*I was dead and I came back to life*" (Lk 15:32). Finally, even for Jesus, the looking at the face full of tears of the mother and the body of the young man, becomes an opportunity for transformation, awakening, conversion, "*in the sense of helping him to focus more clearly on his own the vocation of the compassionate Kyrios, the messenger of God.*" (In: Nicoletta Fusaro, *Con-Passione*, Ed. Cittadella, p. 128)

There is another aspect in this *Gospel icon* that deserves to be emphasized. When Jesus, at Nain's gate, observes that "*a dead man, the only son of a widowed mother, was taken to the tomb*" (Lk 7:12), he immediately caught up with a "disorder" that had to be cured. It is "out of order" that a mother should bury her son. The action of Jesus, therefore, is destined to "put order," to "reorder", to bring harmony into creation (It is true that the young man given back to his mother will die one day, but not before her!). Everything happens as "in the beginning," in Chapter 1 of Genesis, when chaos was made ordered by a divine word. Like then, "God said", "Get up!", which means "Awaken!", "Rise!".

At the gate of the city of Nain two processions meet. About that of Jesus and his disciples we are solemnly informed that they "were walking". Instead, of the other procession, it is simply said that "they were carrying a dead man to the grave."

The two processions are a metaphor for our lives. **Not rarely it is up to us to decide where to be.** Those who have the "heart awake" accompany Jesus, are "on the way," they are moving, like Him. Also in this procession are those who "*in certain places*" were known as "*the priests who run because they were always seen in motion, in the midst of the people, with the quick pace of those who care*" (see Pope Francis, to the Chapter Members, 27/05/2016).

A borderless heart

To Nain's *evangelical icon* may correspond, for us, to the *orionine icon* of the episode of the matricide's confession. Of course, it is not easy to select in the life of **Don Orione** - given the abundance - a single fact to show his "**ever-awaken heart**", "*always turned*" towards the needs of his neighbour, or to identify "*the calm tenderness of his gaze*" as Ignazio Silone reported. However, the encounter with the sorrowful matricide on the road from Castelnuovo to Tortona has become highly symbolic.

The story, narrated by Don Orione several times, is well-known and happened after the lively preaching of a mission to Castelnuovo. "*One evening I was talking about confession,*" says Don Orione. *Then - I would have never thought of it - the Lord put this thought on my lips: - Look, I said, God's mercy is so great that if one of you had put the poison in his mother's bowl, if he was sorry, there would be mercy for him too. - I heard confessions till one in the morning. I was really tired (...). I left Castelnuovo to walk back to Tortona. At one stage in the road I saw a black shadow, a man wrapped in a cloak, standing, looking back at me. (...) When I was near him: Good night, good man; are going to Tortona? - No, I was waiting for you ... - Tell me ... - Please, hear me out: did you say that if one had put poison in his mother's bowl, there is mercy for him too? - Yes - Do you really believe in what you said? Yes, my son, I said it and I believe it. - Look, I am the one, you know? I am the one!" (Parola XI, 234-235). "He knelt down and then, crying, made his confession and I gave him absolution; then he got up and hugged me and held me, always crying, and he did not know how to get away from me, so much was the consolation from which he was overwhelmed. I also wept and kissed him on the forehead and my tears became mixed with his. He wanted to accompany me almost to Tortona and, just for my insistence, finally turned back, and I went on my way with great consolation, with such a joy in my heart the like of it I never felt in my life (...). I got to Tortona all wet; that night I took off my shoes and lay on my bed, and dreamed ... What did I dream of? I dreamed the Heart of Jesus Christ; I felt the Heart of God, how great is the mercy of God." (Don Luigi Orione and the Little Work of Divine Providence V. III, p.124).*

As it was for Christ, the "road" is also for Don Orione the place of the "surprises of God", the place of "encounter" and "salvation", the place where the "dead heart" of a sinner is awakened by being welcomed by a "heart full of God".

Such an encounter is wholly "providential", divinely providential! In fact, it is Divine Providence which arranges the meeting of the saint and sinner on that roadside. And so, in Don Orione, *"the unity of extremes"* was realized, a miracle that only divine mercy could accomplish: *"the person [of Don Orione] was the 'place' of encounter between the merciful God and the soul of a sinner"*(Paolo Clerici, Don Orione, A Merciful Face of God's Mercy).

It seems almost irrelevant - given the crystal-like coincidence - to say that Don Orione gathered in himself the dynamism and style that Pope Francis asks from us, today. But it was Pope Francis himself who recently approached our Founder, citing his name in a speech to the clergy and consecrated persons of the Diocese of Genoa during the Pastoral Visit. It was May 27, 2017. In presenting the criteria *"to live an intense spiritual life"* (it was the subject of the question of a diocesan priest), the Pope sealed with an expression of our Founder a lifestyle, a dynamism that keeps the heart constantly awake. Almost an "exegesis" of the matricide's episode.

Pope Francis's response is a long one, punctuated by silent pauses, in which he emphasized concepts and keywords, also using images and examples of everyday life. The fundamental criterion for *"living an intense spiritual life"* - he says already clearly at the beginning - is *"imitating the style of Jesus"*. And how was this style? the Pope asks. *"Jesus spent most of his time on the road. This means closeness to people, nearness to problems. He did not hide. Then, in the evening, he often hid himself to pray, to be with the Father."* Here is the balanced dynamism of the *"ever-waking heart"*: *to maintain the harmony between "not hiding from people" and "hiding for prayer". Being "always on the go," like Jesus, entails the risk of being "exposed to scattering, being crushed." But the Pope warns: "We must not be afraid of the movement and the dispersion of our time. The biggest fear we have to think about is a static life (...) I fear a static [religious]. He scares me. (...) The [religious] who has everything planned, all structured, is generally closed to the surprises of God and misses the joy of the surprise of the encounter. The Lord takes you when you least expect it."* Thus, *"One first criterion is not to be afraid of the tension we have to live in: we are on the road, the world is so. (...) A heart that loves, which gives itself, will always be so."*

Another criterion, according to the Pope, is to set one's life under the perspective of the encounter: *"You, [religious], meet with God, with the Father, with Jesus in the Eucharist, with the faithful: you meet. (...) Be silent [before the Lord], listen to what he says, what he makes you feel ... Meeting. And, the same with the people. (...) letting people tire you; do not overprotect your own tranquillity."* And he concludes mentioning our Founder: *"The [religious] who leads a life of encounter, with the Lord in prayer and with people until the end of the day, is 'ripped off', **saint Luigi Orione used to say 'like a rag'.**"*

Just so, "like a rag" in the hands of Divine Providence. Don Orione is, for us and for the Church, for Pope Francis, a model of a man of encounter (*"he saw a man ... when I he got near him"*), a man of the tabernacle (*"the Lord has put this thought on my lips"*), a man of the road (*"I set off ... at some point on the road ..."*), man with *"with a good ear"*, who can hear (*"I confessed till one in the morning. I was very tired"*). Everything is contained in the episode of the matricide which, however, reveals another detail about which Pope Francis is very keen. Don Orione is also "the man of tears" (*"then he got up and embraced and held me, always crying ... I too wept and kissed his forehead and my tears were mixed with his"*).

It may seem strange and, for some, even a little atypical, to realize that Pope Francis insists on the theme of weeping and tears: "*Jesus, in the Gospel, wept (...) He cried in his heart when he saw that poor widowed mother carrying her son to the cemetery. (...) If you do not learn to cry, you are not good Christians.*" (Speech to Young People, Manila, January 18, 2015).

There are several references in this regard, especially when it comes to clergy and religious. "*When the tears of a religious dry up, there is something that does not work,*" he told clergy and religious in Nairobi (26/11/2015). It means that the religious has lost "*the feelings of Jesus (see Phil 2: 5) and his heart, "with the passage of time", has become hardened and is now "incapable of unconditionally loving the Father and the neighbour "*. And he warns: "*It is dangerous to lose the human sensitivity necessary to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice!*" (See Speech to the Roman Curia, 22/12/2014). Hence the question: "*Tell me: Do you cry? Or have we lost the tears? (...) how many of us are weeping before the suffering of a child, in the face of the destruction of a family, in front of so many people who cannot find the way? ... The cry of the [religious] ... Do you weep? Or in [this Congregation] have we lost the tears?*" (Speech to Parish Priests, 06/03/2014).

Don Orione, with his life, gave an answer to these questions: "*Love of souls. Souls! Souls! I will write my life with tears and with blood!*" (25/02/1939). It is up to us "**To be Don Orione, today**".

Progressive - continuous and permanent - assimilation of Christ's feelings

What was the synthesis of this reflective path that started from the need, felt in the preparation phase of the Chapter, to activate strategies and resources that are capable of "*awakening the heart*"?

When writing these pages, in a moment of leisure, I allowed myself to be taken by curiosity. *I have never heard of cancer of the heart!* And I consulted the internet to verify, discovering that the tumours that originate in this vital organ, indeed, exist, "but they are pretty rare." And the cause of such low incidence - always answered on the internet - "*would seem to be in the on-going activity of the heart muscle.*"

A continuously and permanently moving "heart" in which the Nain's passage and the episode of the matricide are symbols of a lifestyle of Jesus and St. Luigi Orione. There are two word - **continuously and permanently** - that we normally match with the noun "formation": Continuing Formation - Permanent Formation.

I think this is the synthesis: the "awakening of the heart" is a continuous and permanent process, achieved through the strategic choice of giving priority to a "formation that leads us to have the same feelings of Christ" (14CG, No. 2). However, "*It is obvious that such a project implies a training process that cannot be reduced to the canonical years of initial formation; a process which embraces one's entire person must be life-long, one totality evokes the other, that is, if one wants to reach and change his heart, he must work at it continuously, without any interruptions.*" (A. Cencini, The serious case of continuing education ... In: Sequela Christi 2016/01 Vol. 2, p. 132).

Unfortunately, it also seems that in us "*There is no culture about the importance of lifelong formation, seen more as isolated acts than as a continuous journey that affects the whole life of the religious.*" This was the conclusion of one of the groups formed during the Chapter to analyse the contributions sent in by the Communities and after listening to the reflection of the experts.

It is therefore a matter of paying particular attention to Action Line No. 1 which asks "**to decisively put into practice an integral permanent formation ..**" in the awareness that "*formation is really continuous [permanent] only when it is ordinary, and is fulfilled in everyday life*" (CIVCSVA, *New wine in new wineskins*, No. 35c).

Towards this aim, our Constitutions, in Article 111, indicate the route to be put into practice: "*To promote this continuing education, we first and foremost emphasize the ordinary means of stimulating personal and community growth. These may include: - the practice of spiritual direction; - fidelity to daily spiritual meditation and reading, the monthly recollection and revision of life; - diligent study of Church documents; - an accurate choice of personal readings.*"

It will be important, then, that they "*be formed by everyday life, by their own community, by their brothers and sisters, by everyday things, ordinary and extraordinary, by prayer and by apostolic fatigue, in joy and in suffering, until the moment of death.*" (CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, No. 15).

Conclusion

In presenting the document of the 14th General Chapter, I wrote that "*the success of the Chapter will not be measured by the written words, but by the ability and willingness to engage personally and as a community with the spirit of the proposed action lines.*"

In this sense it is true, as Don Roberto Simionato wrote, after seventeen years of life in the curia, in one of his last circulars: "*Transformation is not produced either by a circular nor a canonical visit, nor the reform of the Norms. Some things cannot be achieved by any government action. They are outside the realm of order and promotion. They depend on everyone's free decision*" (see Acts 212, 204).

No transformation will come by "force of law", even though it may be canonical or because it is issued by the General Chapter, the "*supreme authority in the Congregation*" (Art. 138). It depends on "*the decision of each one*" of wanting to fight the strongest and most powerful evil that might hurt us. Don Flavio Peloso, in his first circular letter, in October 2004, identified this evil in this way: "*Indifference, boredom, flat cardiogram of feelings and life's ideals. Yes, indifference is the number one enemy to fight in oneself and in the apostolate*" (see Acts 214, p. 100).

The driver who travels guided by the "navigator" - let me take this example - knows that it's not enough to tap in the destination and see the time, calculated and scheduled, of arrival. If he does not decide to leave or makes an overlong stop or if there are slowdowns and queues, the arrival time will always be moved forward. So, it's not enough to schedule things: you must decide to set off in the dynamics of meeting with God and people.

Don Orione is walking with us. On the way, he wants to "awaken our heart" as he tried to do by writing to Don Pierino Migliore in 1936 and in the plural form, meaning to address his words of encouragement to all his children: *"We cannot remain indifferent and apathetic, but we have to cooperate with so much grace of God. But I need, my children, to be understood, to be followed, to be seconded and, I would say, surpassed. I do not need to waste my last energies in galvanizing you, in pursuing you with the strength of four oxen: I do not need to find you dead before you die, but living, ardent spirits of good, great hearts, that are prepared for all sacrifices for Christ, for the Church, for souls."* And later, in the same letter, giving news of his activities in Argentina: *"Here, thanks to God, everything is functioning: do not stay put and immovable; H. Scripture says a great deal, my dear ones, when it tells us that the wife of Lot, because she stopped and, instead of looking ahead, looked back, became a statue of salt. «Non progredi, regredi est» (Not to progress is going back). I do not want statues in the Congregation, but living people who are going ahead and looking up at God! (...) Caritas Christi urget nos! Charity, that is the love of God and neighbour, is urging us forward! Courage, my children!"* (Scr 29, 267-268).

The heart of Don Orione! It never falls asleep. Nor does it sink into sleep. But it dreams! After meeting with the matricide *I went on my way with a great consolation, with a joy in my heart the like of which I never felt in my life. I got to Tortona all wet; that night I took off my shoes and lay on my bed, and dreamed ... What did I dreamt of? I dreamed the Heart of Jesus Christ; I felt the Heart of God, how great is the mercy of God. "*

Don Orione, whose *"heart is always awake"*, has the final word: *Courage, my children!*

Fr Tarcisio Vieira