

The eucharistic Charity of Luigi Orione

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Reflection on spiritual apostolic praxis

An immense number of messages and letters written by Saint Luigi Orione is preserved in our archives. Some of them are very important because they help to mark the stages in the development of the personal reflection of the Founder on issues of great importance, such as the spiritual and apostolic style of the Little Work with which he tried to give at the ecclesial and social challenges of that time. In this documentary heritage it is possible to find the four loves that characterize the identity of the foundational charism: Jesus, Mary, the Pope and the souls.

The life and apostolate of St. Luigi Orione, in fact, was always marked by «*the spirituality of arms rolled up*». That is, from the contemplation of Christ served in the poor and in whom it is possible to experience the love of the Lord. The spirituality and missionary spirit of Orione is a true synthesis between contemplation and Christian action. On the night of July 22, 1936, from the city of Buenos Aires, he wrote to don Carlo Sterpi:

3° The particular and special aim is to spread the doctrine and love of Jesus Christ, the Pope, and the Church, especially among the people; to draw and unite with a most sweet and close bond of the whole mind and heart the children of the people and the working classes to the Apostolic See, in which, in the words of Chrysologus, "*Blessed Peter lives, presides and gives the truth of the faith to those who ask for it.*" (Epist. ad Eut. 2.).

And this with **the Apostolate of Charity** among the little ones and the poor, using those Institutions and Works of Mercy most suitable for the education and Christian formation of the children of the people and for leading the multitudes to Jesus Christ and his Church. ¹

The key to reading, therefore, which helps us to interpret the spirit of what he wrote is as follows: the orionine consciousness that was embodied in his letters is the fruit of the reflection of pastoral praxis. In this sense, the researchers have a huge work to offer us: that of illuminating the writings of our Founder with his creative gestures. The evangelist John tells us that the Word became man in Jesus, and therefore we can affirm that, in the humanity of Christ, God has pronounced the true and defining word of his love. Similarly, in the written reflection born from the spiritual apostolic praxis of Luigi Orione we find the original identity and strength to update permanently the mission of the Little Work.

The eucharistic celebration alive

Those who have had the opportunity to read some of our Founder Father's biographies recognize that some facts in his life speak more than a thousand words. Some decisions, in particular, born after so much prayer gave rise to some apostolic initiatives that were good for their time and are still good for ours. With this study we would like to join in the celebration of the 130th anniversary of the priestly ordination

¹ L. ORIONE, ADO, *Scritti*, V059T021 59,21c. For a more in-depth look at this topic: F. FORNEROD, *La legge dell'amore; il percorso legislativo della Piccola Opera della Divina Provvidenza dalla Costituzioni dei Figli della Divina Provvidenza fino al I Capitolo Generale 1940*, vol. II, Gorle, Velar, 2023, pp. 143-146; 188-190.

of Luigi Orione. For this reason, we will reflect on the eucharistic charity of Saint Luigi Orione.

We know that Luigi Orione received the Eucharist frequently already in the time of the Salesian Oratory in Valdocco.² Many have witnessed the piety with which he celebrated Holy Mass and his desire for perpetual adoration in the «Little Cottolengo».³

To understand how the Eucharistic charity of Saint Luigi Orione was manifested, we will reflect on three events in his life.

The Eucharistic Fraction of Life

The first describes the gesture of exquisite charity when he assisted with his care to the dying Msgr. Claudio Andrè. Everything happened in the early hours of April 13, 1895, before his ordination to the priesthood:

«There was many years ago - recalled Don Orione -, a Vicar General of the diocese of Tortona, Mons. Andrè, who was assisted in death by me, just the day of my first Mass...».

And Don Sterpi confirmed this event: «Don Orione wanted to prepare himself for priestly ordination, doing a work of charity that made him less unworthy to approach the altar. Finding himself in-patient Mons. Claudio Andrè, General Vicar, right here - not at the Santa Chiara Institute, since Mons. Claudio Andrè died here in our house (the current Mother House), but it was his first and then passed to the Oblates and then to us - Don Orione assisted him until the last moments, because he died in the night.

After having dressed the deceased, he knelt to recite the prayers of suffrage, leaning on the side of the bed where

² Cfr. *DOPO I*, 301 ss.

³ G. VENTURELLI, «Don Orione, apostolo dell'Eucaristia e suscitatore di adoratori», *DOPO III*, 42-61. A. GEMMA, «Don Orione, anima eucaristica», *Messaggi* 55 (1983).

the corpse lay. Overcome then by tiredness and the vigil, Luigi Orione fell asleep. In the morning they came to call him, so that he might prepare himself for priestly ordination». ⁴

Jesus, fire of charity

We also know perfectly well the love that Don Orione expressed for the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Many are the accounts that speak of the time lived in front of the tabernacle in an attitude of adoration to the Lord. The second chapter we will discuss is a publication of a poem. In it, Don Orione describes the spirit of prayer that led him to a deep relationship of love with the Lord. We highlight one that was published in the magazine "L'Opera della Divina Provvidenza" on 15 August 1898:

IN FRONT OF THE LORD

Alone..., at night..., in the long and dark church!
Deep silence covers everything.
From above the shadows descend...;
there at the end, by the altar, the lamp!

It's a pale quiet light!
From time to time a breath..., and a beam of light is
projected on the wall to kiss the painted figure of a
cherub.
And the cherub, to this gentle caress, seems to move
gently and get detached..., as if a wave of heavenly love
revived him.

Pray well..., at night, ... at the altar!...

The world is silent, the desires are silent, the dreams of
fantasy are silent. The peace of the Lord spreads for all
the soul, peace..., deep peace, imperturbable!

⁴ *DOPO II*, 162, no. 5e.

Oh! you lucky, humble lamp, that always you see,
languishing before my Jesus.

Familiar to this environment, saturated of love, that
circulates the Heart of my God, tell me, you know the
most ardent friends, the inexpressible sweetness?

Come, blessed light, penetrate into my heart, deep in its
secret chambers... tell me about good Jesus, of his love!
Your gentle and gentle warmth will gently revive my
spirit, and make you open the seeds of virtue and
sacrifice.

Oh, sweet Jesus!... oh, if in my heart a perennial flame
of love emulated the vigilant lamp in burning for you,
intensely, today... tomorrow... always!!... ⁵

The eucharistic Charity

The third episode refers to an event that, among so many
Eucharistic gestures, stands out among many: the one
experienced by Don Orione precisely in 1920, when he
celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of his priestly
ordination. This paternal help speaks to us of the love for Jesus
in a very deep and special way. We are talking about the service
that Don Orione himself performed to the seminarian Basilio
Viano (1899-1920), while in the «Paterno» was being held the
party in honour of the Director of the Little Work.

Don Orione decided in these circumstances, to celebrate his
silver priestly anniversary by attending one of his dying sons:

There have been no celebrations here. I did not allow
them to be held for my 25th of priesthood. That day I was
to spend it in Bra, in recollection and in the Lord; but on
the eve I remembered that my dear friend, the
seminarian Viano, was getting worse in his health and I
decided to stay in Tortona.

I spent the night at the bed of Viano, and celebrated in
the morning the Mass at the feet of the Virgin of Divine

⁵ ODP 15 August 1898, 2-3; *DOPO I*, 603.

Providence; [...] Come the time of lunch, I will tell you how I spent it. Viano continued to get worse, but he kept his lucidity. Since a few days ago, that poor son, despite the medicines, had not improved.

Until, towards noon, he had bowel movements, but he did not realize it until it happened, poor boy! Then the seminarian Don Camillo Secco (now is sub-deacon) who is a nurse and perhaps will continue to be, raised the dear sick and we changed everything: the bed and the sick.

In this way, while the others were eating, I, with warm water was washing and cleaning, doing with Viano, our dear sick, those humble services, yes, but holy: what a mother does with her children. At that moment I looked at the seminarian Camillo, and I saw him crying.

We were confined in the infirmary to keep anyone from entering, while they knocked insistently so that he would go quickly to lunch. I was sure that it was best to fulfill with love and humility this holy work, of God, and I said to myself: it is much more this, than all that I have preached in my life! [...] See? With this love we love each other! ⁶

The original document of this letter is in the Monastery of S. Maria de São Paulo (Brazil). The reservation and discretion of this intimate scene is very great, since, Don Orione did not refer to this in the circular letter addressed to all his religious in which he communicated the death of Basilio Viano.

Fr. Luis Heriberto Rivas, a great Argentine biblist, helps us to understand the place of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John:

The Gospel of John does not have a "last supper" narrative like that found in the synoptics. Whereas for these it is the Paschal Supper in which Jesus and the Twelve participate, John refers to a meal that takes place on the night before the feast of Easter.

⁶ L. ORIONE to F. Casa, 01.06.1920, ADO, *Scritti*, 29, 116-119; (*L. I*, 191-195: om.); cf. IDEM, *Sccir.*, 19.04.1920, (*L. I*, 161-174).

[...] The account of chapter 13 does not describe the incidents peculiar to the dinner of the Synoptics (delivery of bread and wine ...), but focuses its attention on the washing of feet, a fact unknown by the other gospels. [...] The narrative of the washing of the feet is done practically without comments. [...]

The reporter points out that Jesus "gets up from dinner". This is not a superfluous fact, because it is showing the novelty of the gesture. The action of Jesus will have another meaning. The task of washing the feet of diners, reserved for servants in the light of Jewish traditions, could be interpreted as a gesture of sumptuous hospitality when undertaken by the owners of the house.

[...] however, through the gesture of washing the feet of his disciples, among which is the traitor and the one who will deny him, Jesus is showing the "love to the end" by which he gives his life to "wash" totally "his own". The "love to the end" is not only seen in the act of humility, but it also embraces the inspiration that He makes in the disciples so that they can be participants of his glory.

Only by accepting this act of love can one come to "share with Him" participating in his eternal life.⁷

The account of how Don Orione lived the celebration of his priestly anniversary is moving, because it resembles the Joanic context of the washing of feet where Jesus anticipates with this prophetic action the definitive surrender of his life.

In the gestures of charity for the poorest and neediest, the gaze of faith allows us to experience that it is Jesus himself who continues to wash our feet. This is what eucharistic Charity is: charity makes Jesus the servant present, as real as he is in the consecrated Bread. Therefore, the love of Don Orione to Jesus

⁷ L. RIVAS, *El evangelio de Juan. Introducción, teología, comentario*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones San Benito, 2008, 366-370.

Eucharist, cannot be separated from the service of charity. It is more: it is its very content.

The liturgy of charity

Just as the new existence, manifested in charity, is a true confession of the merciful action of God, he who does not live this attitude of service and self-giving life, is rejecting not only the poor but, in him, God himself. The confession of faith brings with it the experience of charity.

Give us, Lord, that sweet and gentle charity which is the strength and core of all virtues; that charity which restores the weary, gives vigour to the weak and softens the yoke of truth.

Make the Little Work of Divine Providence like an altar, on which burns like a fire, the inextinguishable fire of charity, and its flame reaches to You, O Lord, and illuminates and nourishes us all. ⁸

The Christian life, life given in the following of Jesus, charity of the Father, in favour of the poor, is the most precious sanctifying action; the true liturgy of praise. ⁹

When Don Orione speaks of the transforming charity of Christ, he does so, addressing in particular all those who form his great family. It emphasizes that the work of God can be perceived as real and true, to the extent that we give ourselves without measure to his love. The Lord Jesus wants to reach our heart and that of all men. Charity removes all that prevents us from living in this new condition: the lover because he is a believer,

⁸ L. ORIONE, Christmas 1934.

⁹ D. BARSOTTI, *La dottrina dell'amore nei padri della Chiesa fino a Ireneo*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 1963, p. 20; citation: *Didache*, III.

lives his existence in liturgical terms of self-giving, holocaust, offering, that is to say, **eucharistic Charity**.