

Pope Leo XIV visits the Cottolengo in Claypole

Don Orione wanted to bring the heart of the poor to the Pope; now the Pope is coming to meet them beside the very heart of the Founder.

Dear Confrères,

DEO GRATIAS!

I can find no more beautiful, simple or truthful expression for the feelings that fill my heart at the news that Pope Leo XIV will visit our Little Cottolengo in Claypole, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina, on 9 November. **Deo gratias!** We feel deep gratitude, but also wonder and emotion at an event of such beauty and significance for our entire Religious Family. We feel that we have received a gift beyond anything we could have expected, and we welcome it with joy and humility. Even before trying to understand its meaning, we feel the need to lift our eyes to Heaven and say, with Don Orione's heart: Thank you, Lord, thank you!

This will be Pope Leo's first visit to an Orionine house since he was called to the See of Peter. It is therefore not news that concerns only our confrères in the Argentine Province. It concerns the whole Little Work, in every country where Providence has placed us. For this reason, I would like to share with you some reflections on the meaning of this gift and on the attitudes with which, as true sons of Don Orione, we are called to receive it.

The Pope is coming to meet our poor

In the programme of an apostolic visit, invariably full of meetings and commitments, the Holy Father has set aside time to meet the people welcomed into our Cottolengo and those who care for them every day. I would like to emphasise this aspect, highlighted in the Holy See's official programme and reported in greater detail by Vatican News (21 September 2026). The Vatican website describes the Cottolengo in Claypole as a veritable 'village of charity', recalling that Jorge Mario Bergoglio, when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, also visited it several times and supported its initiatives and activities. Pope Leo XIV will now enter this house to meet its residents and staff personally.

This gesture moves us deeply and fills us with gratitude. Yet it is also a gesture worth pondering, because it speaks to us of our vocation and of the deepest meaning of the charity entrusted to us by Don Orione.

Pope Leo XIV is not coming simply to visit one of our large institutions, to see the size of our facilities or to pay tribute to the Congregation's history. Above all, he is coming to meet people: men and women living with vulnerability, disability or illness, who in our houses must find not only care, but above all a welcome, respect, affection and dignity.

This brings us straight back to the heart of Don Orione's insight. The Little Cottolengos were born of his conviction that no one should feel abandoned; that every person, whatever their circumstances, is precious in God's eyes; and that Christian charity must reach especially those at risk of being forgotten. I recall his words of 13 April 1935: *'The Little Cottolengo will always keep its doors open to every kind of moral or material misery. To those who have been disappointed and those afflicted by life, it will offer comfort and the light of faith (...) in short, to all who, for one reason or another, need care and help but cannot be received in hospitals or shelters and who are truly abandoned: whatever their nationality, whatever their religion, even if they have no religion: God is the Father of all!'* (Lettere II, 225).

The visit comes at a difficult time for the care of people with disabilities in Argentina. This too gives it particular significance: the Pope draws near to the most vulnerable and to those who care for them every day with effort and fidelity.

We can imagine the joy of the residents of Claypole as they welcome the Holy Father. Yet I would like all of us, wherever we are in the world, to feel visited through them. Symbolically, the Pope is entering each of our Little Cottolengos, our residential homes, our centres of educational charity, our parishes and our missions, where Orionine charity seeks every day to become tangible.

The Pope's decision to devote part of his visit to the most vulnerable and to those who care for them also invites us to ask ourselves: are people truly at the centre of our works? Do our institutions and activities express the family-like, attentive and personal charity that Don Orione desired? Above all, do those whom we welcome genuinely feel loved and regarded as part of our family?

In this regard, it is good to reread Don Orione's description of life in the Little Cottolengo: *'At the Little Cottolengo people live joyfully: they pray and work as far as their strength allows; they love God, and they love and serve the poor. In the abandoned, they see and serve Christ, with holy joy. Who could be happier than we are? And our dear poor also live contentedly: they are not guests, they are not inmates, but the masters, and we are their servants. That is how we serve the Lord! How beautiful life is at the Little Cottolengo! It is a symphony of prayers for benefactors, of work, joy, songs and charity!'* (Lettere II, 227).

These words of Don Orione find a beautiful echo in the apostolic exhortation *Dilexi te* (no. 104), in which Pope Leo XIV reminds us that the poor are not merely a social problem but 'a family matter'; they are 'our own'. Therefore, 'our relationship with them cannot be reduced to an activity or an office of the Church'. It is not enough, then, to offer them a service, however professional: we must share life, give our time, listen, accompany and make each person feel welcomed and loved.

This is precisely the family spirit Don Orione wanted in his Little Cottolengos and which we are called to preserve.

A history of affection and communion with the Popes

Leo XIV's visit is part of a beautiful history linking Don Orione and the Congregation with the successors of Peter.

We know of our Founder's extraordinary love for the Pope. For him, union with the Successor of Peter was not merely a matter of ecclesiastical discipline but an essential dimension of his spirituality and mission. Serving the Pope meant serving Christ and the Church, helping to lead people, through works of charity, to faith and ecclesial communion. He wrote: *'Love for the Pope is our sacred love; it is our vocation, our Creed, the heartbeat of our entire life, my dear sons!'* (Scritti 49,125).

This bond remained alive after Don Orione's death and has been manifested on many occasions through the words and actions of Pontiffs who have repeatedly recalled the Founder and the value of his work. Indeed, fidelity to the Pope belongs to our very charismatic identity, so much so that we can affirm that *'we consider it the highest honour to bind ourselves by a particular vow of special fidelity to the Supreme Pontiff'* (Constitutions 6).

Among the many expressions of this mutual closeness, I would like to recall a few papal visits to our houses, which take on special meaning today in the light of the event we are preparing to experience in Claypole.

I think first of Paul VI's visit to the Church of Ognissanti in Rome on 7 March 1965, the First Sunday of Lent. It was a historic event for the entire Church: the Pope chose this very parish of ours to celebrate the first Mass in Italian according to the new liturgical provisions, marking a decisive step in implementing the reform promoted by the Second Vatican Council. In his homily, he emphasised the importance of that *'new way of praying, of celebrating Holy Mass'*, which enabled the faithful to understand the words of the liturgy and participate more consciously in their dialogue with God.

An unforgettable chapter was John Paul II's visit to the Little Cottolengo in Genoa on 22 September 1985. To recall that event more vividly, I took down the November 1985 issue of our bulletin, *Don Orione*. In it I found an account full of details, testimonies and photographs which convey all the beauty and intensity of that encounter.

The Pope arrived at Paverano at 10.40 a.m., coming from the Shrine of Our Lady of Safekeeping on Mount Figogna. At the entrance, two lines of Cottolengo residents awaited him, those whom Don Pensa liked to call *'our aristocracy'*. According to the account, the Pope was in no hurry: he stopped before people, caressed them, often kissed them and looked at each one with deep tenderness.

At one point, he wished to go up to the fourth floor for a private meeting with Angela Carta, a woman who had lived for thirty-five years in a state of extreme suffering, offering her life for priests. No one ever knew what they said to one another, but those present noticed that, as John Paul II left the room, he was wiping away tears.

In his address to the residents, the Pope spoke words that still move us today: *'As I draw close to each one of you, I bow with emotion before your suffering.'* Referring to Don Orione, he added: *'Here, truly, everything speaks of him'*, recalling that in 1933 our Father had personally opened that institution to comfort the poorest and neediest of his brothers and sisters.

The account of that visit contained a particularly beautiful expression: '*A meeting of two loves*'. It referred to Don Orione's two great loves, the Pope and the poor, which on that day came together tangibly in the same work of charity.

The following year, on 8 June 1986, John Paul II visited the Don Orione Centre at Monte Mario in Rome for the Italian Championships in Sport for People with Disabilities. On that occasion too, he recognised in our mission a commitment to human development, solidarity and overcoming marginalisation, highlighting the spirit of fidelity and complete availability to the Church and the Pope that characterises our Religious Family.

Another visit worth recalling is that of Benedict XVI to the Don Orione Centre at Monte Mario on 24 June 2010, for the blessing of the statue of the 'Madonnina', restored after being damaged by violent winds. The Pope recalled the statue's history, connected with a vow made by the people of Rome to Our Lady during the Second World War, and stressed how the Orionines had united Marian devotion with practical works of charity by welcoming orphans and children maimed by the war into the Centre. Addressing the religious, who had just concluded the 13th General Chapter, Benedict XVI recalled the Founder's programme: '*Only charity will save the world*', encouraging us to rekindle the Congregation's spiritual and apostolic dynamism. Above all, he left us with a precious instruction: our works must never be reduced to mere philanthropy but must be a concrete expression of God's provident love. He therefore invited us to be, in Don Orione's words, '*kneaded with the most gentle charity of Our Lord*', so that we might move '*from works of charity to the charity of works*'.

Fifty years after Paul VI's visit, on 7 March 2015, Pope Francis returned to the Parish of Ognissanti for the 50th anniversary of the first Mass in Italian celebrated by his predecessor and the 75th anniversary of the death of Saint Luigi Orione. After the Eucharistic celebration, the Pope stayed in the parish courtyard to greet the people warmly. Recalling the Church's courage in embarking on liturgical reform, he urged everyone with simple, incisive words: '*We must always move forward, always forward, and anyone who goes backwards is mistaken. Let us move forward along this path!*' We too can hear this invitation addressed to our Religious Family: to move forward, with the courage to renew ourselves, without losing fidelity to the charism and mission entrusted to us by Don Orione.

Before concluding this brief historical journey, I would like to return once more to the November 1985 bulletin. The same issue that recounts John Paul II's visit to Genoa also includes an account of the pilgrimage of the relic of Don Orione's heart through Argentina, which in those months inspired expressions of faith, affection and gratitude everywhere. The relic also stopped at the Little Cottolengo in Claypole, where it was venerated especially by the residents. Fifteen years later, on 29 August 2000, that heart returned permanently to Claypole, fulfilling the Founder's wish: '*I leave my heart in Argentina, where I hope to return soon!*'

And now, forty-one years after John Paul II's visit to Genoa, Pope Leo will come to Claypole itself, where the relic of Don Orione's heart is kept. This coincidence invites us to contemplate once again the profound unity of our Founder's two great loves: the Pope and the poor. In Genoa, the Successor of Peter bowed with emotion before the poor; now, in Claypole, the Successor of Peter is coming to meet them precisely where the heart of the man who loved them so deeply is kept.

These encounters remind us that our love for the Pope cannot end with affection and devotion: it must find expression in concrete ecclesial fidelity and a readiness to respond to the needs of the Church and humanity.

Don Orione wanted his works to be visible signs of the Church's motherhood, capable of bringing even those furthest away closer to Christ. This is the responsibility we continue to carry today.

They will look at him; they will look at us!

We know well the force of this expression, which Don Roberto Simionato passed on to us on the eve of Don Orione's canonisation. It was an invitation to recognise that, in looking at the Founder's holiness, people would also turn their gaze towards us, his disciples, to find in our lives a continuation of his example, but perhaps also some contradictions between his teaching and our way of living.

This expression came back to me as I reflected on the Pope's visit to one of our works of charity. It seems to me that today we can use it with a new meaning: *'They will look at the Pope, but they will look at us too!'*

Of course, we can be pleased that the Holy Father has chosen to visit one of our works. We can rightly rejoice at the visibility this event will give to the service of so many religious, staff members and volunteers who, often quietly and without any public recognition, devote their lives to the most vulnerable.

Yet this visibility also brings responsibility. The visit is already attracting considerable attention in Argentina and will certainly receive wide media coverage. Eyes will be turned not only towards the Holy Father, but also towards our work, our way of welcoming and serving the poor, the style of our charity and, ultimately, our fidelity to Don Orione's charism. It will be a valuable opportunity to make our mission known, but also an occasion to question the consistency of our witness.

For this reason, I believe the most important question is not what this visit means for the Congregation's prestige, but rather: what does the Lord wish to tell us through the Pope's presence in our house in Claypole?

Perhaps he is inviting us to rediscover the simplicity of our vocation, to appreciate the value of small daily gestures and once again to place personal relationships with those entrusted to us at the centre. He invites us to consider whether, in our works, the quality of care is always accompanied by the quality of human relationships; whether necessary organisation leaves room for closeness, listening and tenderness; and whether administrative demands sometimes end up distancing us from people. In the encyclical *Magnifica humanitas* (no. 114), Leo XIV reminds us that *'the quality of a civilisation is measured not by the power of its means, but by the care it is able to offer'*. This criterion challenges our works too: professionalism and good organisation are necessary, but they must never take the place of personal relationships and charity.

Perhaps he is also asking us to look beyond the works we already have. When Leo XIV passes through the entrance to the Little Cottolengo in Claypole, he will also, in a symbolic sense, bring with him the needs and sufferings of the world: the pain of those living through war, the tragedy of those forced to leave their homeland, the loneliness of so many people, and

new forms of poverty and exclusion. He will enter a house that welcomes the poor, but will remind us that many others are still waiting to be noticed, listened to and helped. His presence therefore invites us not to rest content with the works we already have, but to keep our eyes and hearts open to humanity's new needs, responding with the same boldness and generosity as Don Orione.

Ultimately, our concern should not be to make a good impression on the Pope or on the world, but to be faithful to Don Orione, even when no one is watching.

What attitudes should we bring to this visit?

I would like to suggest, in particular, a few attitudes to accompany us in our preparation and, above all, in the time following this encounter.

First, gratitude. Let us thank the Lord for this gift and for the history of charity entrusted to us. Let us give thanks for the many confrères who went before us, for those who generously devote their lives to the mission today and for the lay people who share the charism with us. Let us also give thanks for our poor, who continue to teach us the truest meaning of generosity without expectation of return and of love.

Then, humility. We must not forget that our works were born of Providence and belong, first and foremost, to the poor and to the Church. We are not the owners of charity, but its servants. Our achievements, however important, must never become a reason for self-sufficiency or self-promotion. In the face of the Pope's visit, the most authentically Orionine feeling is not pride in showing what we have done, but gratitude for what the Lord continues to accomplish through our poverty.

Also, ecclesial communion. Our fidelity to the Pope must be lived not merely through affectionate words or outward displays of devotion. It is expressed above all in welcoming his teaching, sharing the Church's concerns and being ready to work with her. To love the Pope in Don Orione's spirit also means allowing ourselves to be guided by his directions, especially when they invite us to change our attitudes and behaviour.

Finally, the courage to renew ourselves. Every papal visit brings a grace and a responsibility. I would not wish that after 9 November, everything simply returns to the way it was. How good it would be if every community and every work asked itself what concrete step it could take to make our witness of charity more authentic. Sometimes great projects are not needed: greater attention to one person, a change in the way we welcome people, a more meaningful presence of religious among the residents, or a new initiative to reach those left on the margins may be enough. Let us remember that we have promised to bring *'the little ones, the poor and the people to the Church and to the Pope through works of charity'*.

The visit to Claypole: a message for the whole Congregation

The Little Cottolengo in Claypole has a particular link with Don Orione's history and his love for Argentina. It is one of the most significant expressions of the charity which the Founder wished to take beyond Italy's borders, trusting in Divine Providence.

For this reason, the joy of our Argentine confrères will be the joy of the whole Congregation. I wish to express, even now, my special closeness to the men and women

religious, the staff, the residents and their families, who will have the grace of welcoming the Holy Father in person.

Yet I would also like none of us to feel detached from this event. The visit concerns us all, because it calls us back to the same vocation and the same charismatic responsibility.

I therefore invite every community to prepare spiritually through prayer for the Holy Father and for the fruits of his apostolic journey. Wherever possible, let a community gathering also be organised to follow the visit and, afterwards, to reflect on the words Leo XIV will address to our Family.

Above all, I would like our houses to make room to listen to the people we serve as well. They are not merely recipients of the Pope's blessing. They are a living part of our family and its mission. Their experience, expectations and witness can help us better understand the gift we are receiving.

What will remain after 9 November?

Dear Confrères, this visit will certainly leave photographs, images, stories and memories that we shall cherish. They will be precious testimonies to a historic moment for our Congregation. But I hope that, above all, something deeper will remain: a greater awareness of the beauty of our vocation and a renewed resolve to live the charity of Christ in the spirit of Don Orione.

In this regard, I would like to share with you a remarkable coincidence of dates that has particularly struck me. On 9th of November 2009, exactly seventeen years before Leo XIV's planned visit to Claypole, the then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio recorded a video message for the confrères gathered for the Chapter of the Province of 'Nuestra Señora de la Guardia'. Unable to attend in person, he wished to express his closeness to a Congregation which, as he himself said, he loved very much.

In that message, which we can now revisit with particular emotion, Bergoglio gave us some powerful guidance on our identity and mission. He asked us to go to the existential peripheries, to be a Congregation able to go out into the streets and to live in poverty, trusting in Divine Providence. Above all, however, he pointed to the Little Cottolengos as *'the most concrete existential frontier of your charism'*. And he added words we should never forget: we must *'spend time, use up time with them, because they are the flesh of Jesus'*.

It is truly striking to think that, on that very date, 9th of November, seventeen years after the video message, Pope Leo XIV will enter the Little Cottolengo in Claypole, a house which makes visible that frontier of charity identified by Bergoglio. Where the relic of Don Orione's heart is kept, the Successor of Peter will meet our dear poor. The words of the future Pope Francis and the gesture of Leo XIV thus seem to echo one another, inviting us to recognise in the Cottolengo not merely a great care institution, but a beating heart of charity, where Christ's presence continues to be revealed through love for the most vulnerable.

Another expression of Bergoglio now takes on a particular meaning. Speaking about service to the poor, he said: *'Rest assured, the newspapers will not be talking about you.'* This time, however, the newspapers and other media will certainly be talking about Claypole and our work because of Leo XIV's visit. Yet the true greatness of Orionine charity will continue to

show itself above all in everyday, quiet and hidden service, when the cameras have been switched off and the Pope has departed.

After 9 November, after Pope Leo has left, the most beautiful image I would like to remain in our hearts is that of the Pope among the poor, the poor at the centre of the Church's attention, and we, the sons of Don Orione, called to serve the poor and the Church with all our love.

Cardinal Bergoglio ended that message of 2009 by wishing that we might live with such fidelity to the charism that we could continue to exclaim, as in the Founder's day: 'Deo gratias!'

And it is with this very expression, with which I chose to begin this circular letter, that I wish to conclude it. Deo gratias! For the gift of this visit, for the good the Lord continues to accomplish through our Family, and for the responsibility he entrusts to us once again.

Let us entrust the Holy Father and the entire Orionine Family to Our Lady of Divine Providence, asking that this encounter inspire fresh trust, fraternity and apostolic generosity. Above all, may it make us ever more faithful to our vocation as servants of Christ and of the poor.

With fraternal affection, I greet you all in the Lord.

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