

A NEW GAZE FOR THE FUTURE - CREATIVE FOOTPRINTS OF THE COTTOLENGO CHARISM

I will try to share some charismatic footprints that we, the Cottolengo Family, certainly already know, and which I find somewhat collected in these words of our Saint: *"Always and in everything may the will of God be done. Generosity in every event accepting out of love any adversity. Deo gratias, thanks be to God always: Paradise, Paradise"* (Cottolengo, Sayings and Thoughts, 3).

The footprints of the path of St Joseph B. Cottolengo that I wish to share, I hope they open and orient our gaze to the future in serenity and joy, in hope and trust, constant attitudes in his life as Founder of the Little House of Divine Providence. Even though we know that in the 5 or 6 years before the charismatic inspiration of 2 September 1827, the priest Cottolengo went through a time of tribulation, difficulty and confusion, a time of crisis that he lived in faith, in abandonment and as an opportunity, experiencing that whoever *"casts his affliction upon the Lord, and He will sustain you"* (Ps 54:23), because *"we are all sons of our good Father"* (ST 57).

The footprints of Saint Cottolengo that he points out to us can change our gaze towards the future and direct our walk together as the Cottolengo Family.

1. Fraternal trust and filial abandonment in God the Father

Cottolengo first of all invites us to relate to one another and to gaze at the world with eyes of trust, to live interpersonal relationships with mutual esteem in order to welcome the grace of overcoming loneliness, isolation, indifference, with closeness, proximity, solidarity.

In order to grow in mutual trust, we must recognise that we are brothers and sisters among ourselves, and this is a consequence of feeling that we are sons and daughters of the same God the Father: *"Be calm and don't fear; we are all sons of our good Father, who thinks of us more than we think of Him"* (ST 57) and *"these little poor ones are your masters, and all together your brothers"* (ST 190).

Growing in filial abandonment in God the Father and in fraternal trust among ourselves is a daily path of concrete life that the Saint Cottolengo proposes to us for a fruitful future.

2. Vulnerability and fragility of the human person

We are increasingly aware of the vulnerability and fragility of the human person, we are indeed sons of God, little less than angels, we are finite creatures infinitely loved by God, but we are also dust. We need to gaze at ourselves and others by accepting and living this reality, this truth of the human being, without allowing ourselves to be deluded by ephemeral anthropological ideologies.

We all know that difficulties, hardship, sacrifice, suffering, and even death, are realities that touch our human life, they are part of our condition as creatures, (I am not talking about the pain of illness, which thanks to medical science can now be diminished and alleviated). Our vulnerability and fragility, taken on by Christ in His incarnation and encounter with His Divinity, have been transfigured by His resurrection, and thus are no longer weakness but strength, no longer an accident of the journey but an opportunity for grace, and in the Risen Christ they are blessing and salvation.

3. Hope in the Lord

Just as we are living in a time full of fears and insecurities, so too the life of Saint Cottolengo went through difficult and destabilising times. These are precisely the moments in which we glimpse in our Saint a more intense gaze of hope that led him to concretely experience the paschal mystery. On 13 January 1827, still tormented by the crisis he was experiencing, he wrote: *"Remember that God is the father of all compassions and therefore many times in those same things, in which blind*

human prudence apprehends misfortunes, our happiness is prepared by the Divine Council" (Cottolengo, Sermons).

Like Cottolengo, we too must be convinced that within the disruption of this time of pandemic, war and energy crisis, lies an unimaginable novelty, which is beyond our calculations and perspectives and which only Divine Providence knows. "*Have faith in Divine Providence, and be quiet; hope in the Lord, and you will see that everything will prosper*" (ST 274). God always goes beyond, God is the unimaginable for man, we cannot understand Him, "*therefore, let Him act*" (ST 53).

4. Mothers and fathers of the poor

We, the daughters and sons of our Founder, are all called to be mothers and fathers of each other, and in particular of the loneliest and most rejected, most neglected and 'orphaned' of our various individualistic and consumerist societies. This is a strong invitation to 'take care of life and its meaning'.

Cottolengo motherhood bends down towards the poor to give them life, care, dignity, trust, hope, to welcome and safeguard their diversity with love, to support their fears and insecurities, and to respond to each according to their need.

Cottolengo fatherhood is oriented towards communicating security and protection, teaching values, transmitting meaning and significance in life, and "*setting them on the path of work and health*" (Cottolengo, Carteggio, I, 27 August 1833).

Each of us experiences, in our filial relationship with God, the divine motherhood and fatherhood, as the Saint Cottolengo says: "*let's fear nothing, because we are sons of a good Father and of a good Mother, who desire our welfare more than we could wish it for ourselves*" (ST 182).

5. Solitude and diligent

In a letter to Sister Carola Cubito, dated 25 January 1835, we read: "*... I want you all to be good, willing to take care of sick ... Be reliable ... diligent*" (Carteggio, I, p. 380; ST 240). Cottolengo invites us to live human relationships as disciples of Christ, relationships of listening, closeness, tenderness, patience, dedication.

Many times Cottolengo writes to do "*as much good as one can*" (ST 11), to be simple, indulgent, not rigid, "*very tolerant and patient with the poor*" (ST 192), with stretched hands out because "*will do good*" (ST 22), to be "*reliable, humble, docile*" (ST 219), he exhorts us to be "*solicitous and diligent first of all and above all*" (ST 336).

To be diligent for the Saint meant "*put our best effort into doing what the Lord wants us to do*" (ST 230) with commitment, responsibility, conscience, attention, industriousness, precision, assiduity, in order to avoid negligence, carelessness, inattention that obstruct Providence.

We learn to be solicitous by gazing at Mary, our good Mother, on her way to her cousin Elizabeth. Mary, forgetful of herself, of the difficulties and tribulations that trouble her, is all outstretched towards her cousin and almost rushes towards her to meet her, help her and bring her the joy of Jesus.

These evangelical attitudes are very Cottolengo attitudes, they are human and humanising attitudes, which create relationships of goodness and blessing, which concretely express loving one another and mutual caring, which lead us to experience the Love of God the Father that embraces us, that makes us feel good, that urges us to go out to others to give love with solicitude and diligence.

6. Let us leave it to Divine Providence

Dr Granetti, in the Ordinary Process, testifies that Cottolengo: "*...always said, let us leave it to God, we are in good hands, and what He will do, He will do for the best*" (Ordinary Process, sess. 61).

I think we have much to learn from this absolute conviction that inhabited the heart of Saint Cottolengo, that guided and oriented his daily walk, discernment and action. He did not set out to

study, plan and describe the birth and development of the Little House he founded. He lived among the people, he saw them, listened to them, talked to them, mingled with them, sensed their needs and perceived the possible answers that Divine Providence placed before him, and, as a humble 'instrument', he tried to implement them. Sister Clara Massola testified that Cottolengo used to say: *"Let us leave it to Divine Providence who knows more about it than we do"* (OP, sess. 460).

We too, in these difficult times, are called to leave it to Divine Providence, not to go before it by planning the future at a desk, but rather to follow Providence which *"does all things well"* (ST 268). And I think that to follow Providence we must mingle among the people, go to the suburbs of the cities, live in the existential poverty, stay with the discarded, listen to the forgotten, accompany the sick and the dying, discover those who have no one, and there, in the concrete needs, poverty and loneliness, Divine Providence will suggest its response, what to do and how to act, and it is up to us to follow it with diligence and solicitude, because *"... it is the Divine Providence ... who cares for us so much and loves us ... it is just this good Mother who does everything, and I do really nothing"* (ST 196).

7. Go on cheerfully in Domino (in the Lord), Deo gratias (let us give thanks to God) always!

Sister Ferdinanda Cagliaris testifies that *"We could see in the Little House in general a cheerfulness in all the people who belonged to it, thus imitating the habitual hilarity of the Servant of God"* (OP, sess.240).

The Cottolengo in particular gives us today this imprint that I consider important for gazing into the future: the evangelical joy, the joyfulness of being together, the happiness of the feast and the cheerfulness of conviviality. Sister Genoveffa Pregno again testifies that Cottolengo: *"... I heard him several times exhort the in-patients to be holily cheerful"* (OP, sess. 209), because he said that *"cheerfulness has never spoiled holiness; and the saints are the most cheerful people"* (ST 77).

The joy, that our Saint desired for the residents of the Little House, came from being enveloped by the Love of God the Father, from feeling that they were His true sons, and from being embraced by the tenderness of their sisters and brothers. From Cottolengo testimony of life we learn that only from a profound spiritual life inhabited by the Risen Christ do the joy and cheerfulness of being sons and brothers spring forth, and a holy and joyful daily life that becomes gift, service and prayer.

This Cottolengo joyfulness is today a prophecy and at the same time an anticipation of the Joy of eternal life, where, as the Saint said, *"how happy you will be in Paradise!"* (ST 193). Together with joy, the gratitude was the refrain that echoed in the hearts and resounded on the lips of Cottolengo and of his children.

The Deo gratias, the gratitude to God, always, because *"all comes from the hand of God, both the more and the least"* (ST 37), must continue to accompany and sustain our lives as daughters and sons of St. Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, to be credible witnesses of his charism in today's synodal Church and in so many different cultures.

The points of reflection that I have shared with you I hope may touch our personal lives and our interiority, may regenerate the various ministries of charity of the Little House, may bring closer, more proximate, interpersonal relationships in our places of care and education, in our residences of life, in our religious communities and in the families of us all.

Above all, I hope I have helped you to discover the light that radiates from the Cottolengo Charism, a light that, in these difficult, confusing and unsettling times, reveals a possible path of hope and meaning, a path towards the future of mutual trust between us, women and men of every culture, elderly and young, lay and religious, healthy and sick, a path of trust among us Cottolengo Family and a path of faithfulness in our God, the good and provident Father.

Deo gratias! Let us give thanks to God!

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