

Little House of Divine Providence

Prayer and care for spirituality, first commitment of the Little House
Pastoral Orientations for the year 2023 -2024
of Father Carmine Arice

“O Lord Jesus, the universal Church, led by the Holy Father Francis, is walking, pilgrim of hope, towards the Jubilee of 2025, solemn memorial of Thy coming into history. The whole Church has been invited, in the coming year, to prepare for this important event with prayer. The Little House also wishes to set its heart on the foundations, where it can find the sap of life and the profound meaning of its actions... Make us aware, O Lord, that the care of spirituality, too, is a necessary commitment for every person, healthy or sick, caregiver, educator, consecrated and lay person. All of us need meaning and a convincing reason to live with hope our daily lives; for every man and woman living on the face of the earth, spirituality is a need to which we must respond”.

Dear sons and daughters of the Little House, with this prayer at the end of the Corpus Christi procession of 2023, I announced this year's pastoral theme, in tune with the one indicated by the Pope to prepare for the great Jubilee of 2025, also hinting at some keys to understanding which, in these Guidelines, I would like to develop more extensively.

The subject, indeed, the topics that would deserve to be addressed in order to deepen the pastoral theme would really be many and also very complex. I will limit myself to making some reflections in three separate chapters, albeit with strong connections:

1. The care of spirituality
2. In the school of Jesus, the Master of prayer
3. Prayer in Cottolengo spirituality

A delicate and precious journey: the Little House in a time of change

Before delving into these themes, however, allow me to make a few considerations on the historical moment that the Little House is experiencing, as delicate as it is precious, in which we are called to renew our fidelity to the Cottolengo charism in changing circumstances and thus face the challenges of this time as an opportunity for new life and evangelical joy.

A glance at history tells us that, from that 17 January 1828, the day Father Giuseppe Cottolengo started the Little House of Divine Providence by opening the Depot for the Sick Poor in Turin, in via Palazzo di Città, until today, there have been epochal changes both from a political and social point of view and in the ecclesial sphere.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, which for over two thousand years has been proclaimed and lived out by those who have the grace to accept it, needs to be proclaimed with ever new languages and different modalities to continue to intercept the hearts and minds of men and bring them the Love that saves. With the same intention, Ecumenical Councils, General Synods of Bishops and Territorial Assemblies are periodically celebrated. Even Consecrated Life, in these two hundred years of history, has undergone considerable changes and deepening, both in theology and in its self-understanding, always distinguishing the essential from the contingent, the organisational and historical forms that have changed considerably, from the unchanging purpose:

to be a sign of the primacy and the absolute of God, to live following Christ and in the service of the brethren.

The Little House of Divine Providence, too, has seen its organisational form change several times, always careful, however, not to lose its original charism, identity and mission. Born from the heart of a man of God, Giuseppe Cottolengo, volcanic in his initiatives and capable of involving many in his adventure of charity, the Work he founded has undergone unimaginable developments, until it spread to four continents, especially since 1972 when the Church's invitation addressed to religious families to go in *missio ad gentes* was accepted.

The Founder, with his first lay collaborators, initiated numerous male and female religious families, which in the 1960s united into three branches: Sisters of Apostolic and Contemplative Life, Brothers and Priests, united by the same charism. In 1969, the Holy See approved the first common rules of governance of the Little House, which are virtually unchanged to this day.

In its parable of life, the Little House has seen a significant growth in its members, especially the Sisters, until they became several thousands, who almost exclusively ensured the educational, pastoral and care service for the sick or guests, in collaboration with Brothers and Priests who were, however, always a small number. Today the presence of lay people is very numerous in all our services and we thank Divine Providence for how many of them feel they have found in the Little House of Divine Providence not only a place to work but also a meaning to their existence¹. These are just hints of a story that would be interesting to know in depth.

Well, in this continuous evolution, we are grateful to Divine Providence for having kept our Work faithful to the essentials: the awareness of its supernatural origin and therefore its vocation to live to the glory of God for evangelisation and the witness of charity; the choice of the poor as the privileged recipients of the mission; the awareness that the service must be carried out with love and competence and, last but not least, the unitary structure of the Cottolengo family.

In view of the changes quickly described, the Little House has long felt the need to rethink some fundamental questions, among which is that of its governing bodies. For this reason, in the common reflection among the three Cottolengo Institutes of Consecrated Life, which took place during the recent General Chapter of the Cottolengo Priests, the decision matured to ask the Holy See "to be accompanied in the revision of the norms to redefine the various governing bodies of the Little House of Divine Providence to better respond to the changed circumstances" ². The process we are facing is certainly a delicate one, given the size and complexity of our Work. What seems important to me, however, is to always keep in mind the objectives that must see us united in our intentions and in our daily commitment, such as creative fidelity to the charism of the Founder, the mission that has been entrusted to us, the unity of the Cottolengo Family and the communion among its different members. Divine Providence continues to be present and to love the Little House, but it is up to the commitment and the will of each one to seize this moment as an occasion of extraordinary grace to deepen the charismatic patrimony that unites us and to make the mission entrusted to us alive, as well as spiritually fruitful, in the diversity of the memberships, roles and competences.

¹ "In the Little House of Divine Providence everyone can find meaning in their existence, realize the deep desires of the heart, contribute to the building of a new humanity founded on love, friendship and the hope of eternal life." (Mission, n. 6).

² cfr. Assembly of the Three General Councils of the Cottolengo Institutes of Consecrated Life, *Communiqué to the Cottolengo Charismatic Family*, 19th October 2023.

1. Care for spirituality

1.1. *Spirituality as an existential dimension*

In the light of what has been said so far, I believe that this year's pastoral theme is providential, because it is a reminder of the question of meaning, of what guides our actions and animates our lives. Inner motivations are the engine that moves our hands and feet in a certain direction and, above all, make our hearts beat for compelling reasons. Therefore, taking care of the spiritual dimension of our life is essential to get up in the morning with a useful motivational force to face the joys and sorrows that the day holds. How important it is to find a possible meaning to all the inevitable labours that each of us must face; what a gift to be able to live for a credible and true purpose, capable of directing one's path! We all absolutely need a reason for living the way that life has in store for us; we all have the joyful and grave responsibility of helping those whom Providence has placed in our path - and even more so those who live experiences of loneliness and abandonment and are entrusted to our care - to perceive that their life too is important, dignified and can have meaning.

1.2. *Spiritual needs*

Pierre Teilhard De Chardin (Jesuit, philosopher and palaeontologist 1881-1955) wrote: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience" ³ and this applies to everyone, healthy or sick, religious and secular, believers and non-believers.

An interesting research published by the National Institute of Health at Oxford University, signed by eminent neurological scientists⁴, shows the positive influence of "spiritual practice" on human brain activity, especially when frail. In order to be well, man does not only need to enjoy good physical health, nor even, if ill, to have only adequate health care or assistance; the human person also needs meaning, needs to understand what moves his actions and what gives meaningful orientation to his life.

Cicely Saunders (1918-2005), social worker, nurse, doctor and psychologist - a person, therefore, with an integral view of the human person - known in the history of medicine for having initiated the "hospices" for palliative care, wrote: "After working for so many years with people in the terminal phase of their lives, I realised that spirituality belongs to each one of us by the mere fact of existing, and this also for those who do not profess a religious belief" ⁵. Hence the importance of considering not only physical pain but, "total pain", as Saunders defines it, for a therapeutic approach that also takes into account psychological, social and spiritual pain.

One understands, then, the importance of accompanying people spiritually, especially when they experience times of trial, suffering and illness. I am convinced that relating to the meaning of life, being reconciled with oneself and one's loved ones, "accepting" our frailty and thus the suffering related to it, as well as the prospect of death, in the search for a possible meaning, are recurring needs in human life that must be identified, listened to and processed, otherwise there will be only place for immense sadness, disquiet and disorientation. I am also convinced that a journey such as this requires accompaniment: "Pain isolates absolutely and it is

³ Cfr. T. De Chardin, *Il fenomeno umano* (1938-1940), Il Saggiatore, Queriniana, 1995.

⁴ Miller e Balodis, *Neural Correlates of Personalized Spiritual Experiences*, *Cerebral Cortex*, Volume 29, Issue 6, 2019, pp. 2331-2338.

⁵ Cfr. Cicely Saunders, *Vegliate con me. Hospice un'ispirazione per la cura della vita*, Bologna, 2028.

from this absolute isolation that the appeal to the other, the invocation to the other, is born”⁶ wrote Emmanuel Levinas, a personalist philosopher. Rich and poor, supposedly healthy and sick, we all have to cross the ford of suffering. That is why it is important to find a friendly hand that helps not only to survive but also to heal the wounds of the soul that are sometimes no less deep than those of the body.

Thinking about the story of a very dear friend now in heaven, a guest with severe physical disabilities who had been received at the Little House since childhood, I have always wondered whether his joy was greater when he learned to eat with his stumps not very pretty to the eye, or when, after a long journey of reconciliation with his history lasting decades, he had the strength to look into the face of his family who had abandoned him, to forgive and die without rancour.

In the “Western” world, in particular, the paradigms and theories that guide services and supports for and with persons with disabilities are defined from a combination of two models: the “medical” and the “social” ones. But neither theoretical model pays significant attention to the spiritual and religious dimension of disability. In his qualified and scientifically documented analysis, Prof. William Gaventa⁷ writes: “Working with people with even severe disabilities, it became clear to me that the greatest spiritual needs were “celebration” and “belonging”, that is, being appreciated and loved and having connections that counteracted the immense isolation and loneliness of the people there. I realised that the spiritual needs were relational and experiential, not intellectual”⁸. Consequently, Gaventa identifies the spiritual questions around the existential questions of the person:

- *Who am I?* What are the person's core values, meaning and identity?
- *Why am I?* What purpose does the person give to his existence and what active participation does he have in pursuing and realising it?
- *Whose am I?* what connections and relationships does the person have with self, with others, with the sacred, with time and place?
- *What kind of choice am I allowed?* What possibility does the person have to express and pursue preferences?
- *What consideration is there of the uniqueness of my person?* What consideration is given to the history and cultural heritage of the individual person?

Spirituality, understood in this way, is not at the margins but at the centre of what we are, at the centre of human existence and part of the life of individuals, families, services, faith communities and the wider social community. The greatest challenge is to operationalise all this also in the planning of personal services; a great challenge also for the Little House in the present day of its history. Courageously, Professor Gaventa concludes: “If we cannot find a way for a person, however disabled they may be, to use their gifts and interests, this says more about our lack of creativity than about their abilities”⁹.

The Little House was created to announce the love of God the good and provident Father to the poor, but this proclamation would have little credibility if it is not first of all able to accompany their need for meaning, life and spiritual well-being.

⁶ E. Lévinas, *Une éthique de la souffrance*”, in *Souffrances*, Paris 1994, p. 133.

⁷ William Gaventa, Director of the Institute of Theology and Disability of New York.

⁸ W. Gaventa, *Nascosto in bella vista: spiritualità, disabilità intellettive e dello sviluppo, integrità, Spiritualità e qualità di vita*, XI/2021, p.12.

⁹ *Idem*, p. 17.

It may be useful to ask ourselves, then, what attention we give in our services to our guests' need to be seen as a *personal subject* and not just the recipients of a service, to their need to give meaning to life, to suffering, to death, to their need for reconciliation with themselves, with their wounds and possible guilt, with their family, and with God. We need to ask ourselves what attention we give to their need for solidarity and closeness with loved ones and, in a word, to their need to be loved "in body and spirit". In this way, the mission proper to the Little House of proclaiming the Love of God the good and provident Father and responding to the religious needs of our guests and students, even those most wounded in their intellectual capacities - since reason is not the only way to access a relationship with God - can also be effective. In the following statement by the Scottish professor John Swinton¹⁰, we can grasp an important admonition: "Our earthly relationships are inextricably connected with our transcendent relationship to such an extent that God is present and at work within our earthly relationships"¹¹.

To sum up: spirituality is a fundamental human need and represents the explication of the person's continuous search - whatever his or her condition - for a purpose, for knowledge that transcends the contingent, for meaningful relationships, for love and absolute value. It may seem daring, but it is good to be aware of this: today we are also required to take a more scientific approach in assessing the spiritual wellbeing of the people entrusted to our care, both in their vertical, i.e. religious, and horizontal, i.e. existential dimensions¹². We are not surprised to learn that the most important American, secular, accreditation agency for healthcare facilities, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organisations (JCAHO) does not accredit hospitals unless spiritual and religious care is also guaranteed. It is extremely significant that it explicitly states that attention to the spiritual and religious aspects of the patient and even the patient's family must also be included in the treatment procedures¹³.

1.3. Integral training of workers, including spiritual training

I ask myself a question: is care for people's spiritual needs possible without an integral training of caregivers that also includes attention to the spiritual dimension? In her captivating and provocative book on "Caring for others", Marie de Hennezel, a French psychologist who has worked extensively with the terminally ill, reports this confession of a doctor: "Every day I felt I had a guilty conscience. Of course I had the impression that I had done my job correctly from a technical point of view, but I also had the feeling that I had betrayed the meaning of this profession, that I had not really known my patients. I had studied cases, I had not treated men'. Let us pay tribute to the humility of this great doctor, who acknowledged that he had neglected human values. Our medical faculties churn out excellent scientists, but human relations training is almost non-existent in them. Although future doctors are mostly destined to deal with the anguish, human suffering, and fear of death of their patients, they receive no psychological or ethical preparation for such face-to-face work. Is it normal that people who choose to care for others are never asked in the course of their studies about their ability to listen to suffering, about their specific human responsibilities? It is not by introducing here and there a few courses in

¹⁰John Swinton (1957) Scottish theologian, founder of the Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability of the University of Canterbury.

¹¹J. Swinton, *Restoring the Image: spirituality, faith, and cognitive disability*, Journal of Religion and Health, 36/1, 1997, 21.

¹²Cfr. Paloutzian ed Ellison, *Loneliness, spiritual well-being and quality of life*, New York, 1982, pp. 224-237.

¹³T. Proserpio - C. Arice, *Il supporto ai bisogni spirituali nella cura ospedaliera; prospettive di integrazione nell'ospedale moderno*, in *Recenti Progressi in Medicina*, 105 (7-8), 2014.

psychology, human sciences and ethics that doctors will be taught to be responsible men, but by overturning from top to bottom the very spirit of the training they receive. Man, human nature must be taught comprehensively. Medical students must be prepared to become complete persons”¹⁴.

Workers and educators are also asked to tread paths capable not only of nourishing their minds, of refining their skills, but also capable of maturing their hearts, of strengthening their will for goodness, of strengthening their spiritual personality understood as the soul of action and their capacity to love. The Italian Bishops write: “Training cannot be limited to remedying cognitive ignorance, but must aim at maturing attitudes that touch all the dimensions of the person. The worker, in fact, is called to grow not only at the level of knowledge, but also at the level of knowing how to be and knowing how to do. It follows that, in the training process, spirituality and professionalism must be pursued with equal attention and intensity”¹⁵.

1.4. Spirituality as a Christian way of life

When we have the grace to discover that the fullness of life has the face of God, and that all the little 'true whys' that can give meaning to our existence are but part of the 'big why' to which we tend, revealed to us by the Gospel, every day can become an extraordinary divine adventure. The care of spirituality is coloured and becomes living according to the Spirit of the Gospel, assimilating its values and following Jesus who definitively saves man's life.

In this journey that lasts as long as one's entire existence, the Word of God, meditated upon, welcomed and lived, is the compass, because in it is the inspired revelation of who God is, who man is, and what his destiny is, and the proposal of the new life that flows from the encounter with Christ: “The Christian life, animated by the Spirit and enlightened by the Gospel, gives a progressive experience of the mystery of God and an ever fuller, freer and more conscious participation in the life of Christ in the Church... The very name 'spirituality' indicates the author of these ways of living the Gospel: the Holy Spirit, who introduces us to a 'deeper understanding of spiritual things’”¹⁶.

How many times has it happened that, precisely in dark moments of life, a new revelation of the Lord's presence has opened up for us, which may not have magically solved our problem, but has helped us to live it with faith and with that charity that remains forever and opens to hope. Day after day, stage after stage, crossing both existential deserts and gardens of peace, the person matures “until we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to the perfect man, until we reach the measure that corresponds to the full maturity of Christ” (Eph 4:13). In this precious journey, prayer is light in the darkness that helps to understand the good will that God always has for man and his desire to see children living their earthly day with dignity and joy and their yearning for life forever. Caring for life in the spirit, through prayer, becomes an experience "that makes us dear to God", as the Cottolengo tradition teaches, not because of the reward He gives for our tribute - a logic foreign to Christianity - but as a condition that allows the Lord to pour into our hearts the abundance of His grace and gifts.

¹⁴ M. De Hennezel, *Prendersi cura degli altri. Pazienti, medici e infermieri e la sfida della malattia*, Lindau, 2008, p. 20.

¹⁵ Commissione Episcopale per il servizio della carità e la salute della Cei, *Predicate il Vangelo e curate i malati*, 2006, 67b.

¹⁶ Cfr. J Castellano, *Senso e valore della vita cristiana nella fedeltà al carisma*, in *Spiritualità Cottolenghina*, Atti del Convegno, 2002.

In the light of the Founder's teachings, the Little House is aware that those entrusted to our care need God, to know him as Father and to encounter the face of his Son. For all of us, what Pope Francis wrote in his first Apostolic Exhortation sounds like a provocation: "I wish to affirm with sorrow that the worst discrimination from which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual attention. The immense majority of the poor possess a special openness to faith; they need God and we cannot fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his Word, the celebration of the Sacraments and the proposal of a path of growth and maturation in faith. The preferential option for the poor must primarily translate into a privileged and priority religious attention"¹⁷. It seems to me to be a Magna Carta for the pastoral and evangelising action of every Cottolengo reality, of every house and every service.

1.5. *Cottolengo spirituality*

Father Jesus Castellano, a theologian of Consecrated Life, at the conference on Cottolengo spirituality in 2002 said: "In every charism there are the founding lines of spirituality, that is, those aspects of the mystery of God, the mystery of Christ, the reality of the Church, love of neighbour, the evangelical virtues, which were particularly emphasised by the Founder... There is no lack in the Founder [Cottolengo] of those which are the founding elements of the Trinitarian mystery"¹⁸.

Cottolengo lived his charismatic inspiration in docility to the Holy Spirit, pointing out to religious and lay people a way of conformation to Christ. It seems useful to me to list the characteristic traits of Cottolengo's spirituality that animate the life of every son of the Little House who wishes to walk after Christ in the footsteps of the Founder. They are presented in this way in a precious document shared by Cottolengo religious men and women¹⁹:

- a. the filial industrious abandonment to *Divine Providence* in the search for and faithful fulfilment of God's will²⁰;
- b. the "*Caritas Christi urget nos*" (2 Cor 5,14) lived in the communion of life and in the service of the poor and the suffering²¹, a true act of worship to Christ²², and in fraternal life, following the model of the first Christian community of Jerusalem²³;
- c. the "*detachment from all creation*"²⁴ and from oneself and the gift of self, which make it possible to be open without reserve to the appeals of God's grace and human misery²⁵ and generate true joy
- d. profound *communion with God*²⁶, in living always in his presence²⁷, contemplated in all his manifestations²⁸, in continuous prayer "the first and most important work of the Little

¹⁷ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Città del Vaticano, 2013, n.200.

¹⁸ Cfr. J. Castellano, in *Spiritualità Cottolenghina*, Atti del Convegno 5-6 ottobre 2002, Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza, pp. 25-28.

¹⁹ Cfr. Edited by a Commission of the Cottolengo Religious Institutes, *Testo Unico sul Carisma*, 2010.

²⁰ Cfr. C, vol. I, p. 337.

²¹ Cfr. C, vol. II, p. 29; L. Granetti, PO, sess. 61: ASV, FR, vol. 3909, f. 467.

²² Cfr. *Vi adoro* in RR, par. 174-175.

²³ Cfr. G. Biandrà, PO, sess. 30, art. 42: ASV, FR, vol. 3908, f. 308.

²⁴ *Regole per le suore*, art. 2 in RR, par. 137.

²⁵ Cfr. C, vol. I, p. 282.

²⁶ Cfr. suor Clara Massola, PO, sess. 473, art. 85: ASV, FR, vol. 3912, f. 2494.

²⁷ Cfr. RR, par. 199-200.

²⁸ Cfr. APC, SC, copie, tomo 6,7,171; APC, SC, copie, tomo 6, vol. 7, p. 167.

House"²⁹. especially in the form of the "*Laus perennis*", in daily attendance at the *Eucharist*³⁰ and in filial devotion to the *Virgin Mary* our good Mother³¹;

- e. the wonder of gratitude, expressed with the "*Deo gratias*", for the benevolent and provident intervention of God towards His children³²;
- f. the acceptance and contemplation of the *mystery of the Cross*, lived in a spirit of faith, which transfigures human suffering;
- g. the certainty of the blessed *hope of Paradise*³³ as the "last act of Divine Providence"³⁴, in which the mystery of the Cross finds the saving light that comes from the risen Christ³⁵.

A small suggestion: it might be a good thing, during this pastoral year, to consider the various points of Cottolengo spirituality, deepen them personally and perhaps also in moments of community sharing.

2. In the school of Jesus, Master of prayer

The intent of this year's Pastoral Orientations, besides stressing the importance of caring for spirituality, is also to recall the centrality of prayer in the life of the Little House. We do this in tune with the whole Church as it prepares for the celebration of the Great Ordinary Jubilee of 2025. In this second part of the orientations, before considering some of the teachings of our Saint and the Cottolengo tradition on prayer, it seems important to me to take a brief "journey" in the Gospel of Luke, which paid particular attention to this theme, in order to grasp the example and teachings of Jesus.

2.1. *Jesus, Master of prayer*

St Luke is considered, among the evangelists, to be the theologian of prayer. He, in fact, dedicates numerous pages of his Gospel to this theme, narrating both the many moments in which Jesus is in prayer, and some of the Nazarene's catecheses on prayer, made directly or through parables. Luke insists a great deal on the theme of prayer, aware that in the life of the disciple, the time to give to God in prayer is indispensable so that the time lived for God in evangelisation and the witness of charity is fruitful.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is in prayer at all the decisive moments of his life and mission. At the Jordan, having received his baptism "he was in prayer" (3:21); when his fame was spreading more and more "Jesus withdrew to solitary places to pray" (5:16); before the choice of the Twelve Apostles as with every other important choice, he spends the night in prayer (6:12) so that the Father may work in him. The question addressed to Peter about his identity "Who am I according to the people?" (9:19) also arises at a time when Jesus "was in a secluded place praying" (9:18).

In an atmosphere of prayer Jesus clarifies his identity "The son of man, he said, must suffer greatly, be reproved by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, be put to death and rise on the

²⁹ Cfr. DP, n. 24.

³⁰ *Regole per le suore in provincia*, art. 8 in RR, par. 69.

³¹ Cfr. suor Clara Massola, PO, sess. 473, art. 85: ASV, FR, vol. 3912, f. 2494.

³² Cfr. G. Costamagna, PO, sess. 179: ASV, FR, vol. 3910, f. 988s.

³³ Cfr. BENEDETTO XVI, Lettera enciclica *Spe Salvi*, n. 31.

³⁴ V. DI MEO, *La spiritualità di S. Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, Pinerolo 1959, p. 272.

³⁵ Cfr. G. B. Magliano, PO, sess. 362: ASV, FR, vol. 3911, f. 1894.

third day" (9:23); and he elaborates the plan for himself and his disciples: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me" (9:23). The extraordinary event of the transfiguration also takes place "while he was praying" (cf. 9:28-29).

In Chapter 11 of Luke's Gospel, beginning a section of his Gospel entirely dedicated to the theme of prayer, Jesus teaches the *Our Father*. Luke emphasises the circumstance! Jesus was in a place praying, and when he had finished, one of the disciples said to him: "Lord, teach us to pray" (11:1).

In the events of the Passion, Jesus' prayer re-emerges with particular importance. During the Last Supper, Jesus assures Peter that he prayed for him so that his faith would not fail (cf. 22:32). In the Garden of Olives Jesus insistently returns to the theme of prayer. Addressing the disciples he admonishes: "Pray so that you do not enter into temptation" (22:40). Then he goes away and, "kneeling down he prayed" (22:41). Again, "in anguish he prayed more intensely and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground" (22:44). "Rising up from prayer" (22:45) he admonishes "get up and pray lest you enter into temptation" (22:46). Jesus' last words are two prayers addressed to the Father: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (23:34) "Father into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46).

2.2. *To receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*

For the evangelist Luke, prayer is necessary because it is the privileged place to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We read in his Gospel: "Having received the baptism Jesus stood praying, then heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended" (3:21). The Holy Spirit is the gift that the Father gives to those who ask Him insistently (cf. 11:13).

Fundamental is the text of Acts 1:14: the Apostles (mentioned by name) gathered with Mary, are "persevering and with one accord in prayer". The Holy Spirit descends on this group gathered there; also in 4:31: "When they had finished praying, the place where they were gathered trembled, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaimed the Word of God with boldness".

Authentic prayer is a moment of Pentecost, that is, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The biblical scholar R. Fabris writes: "The Holy Spirit is the only gift of answered prayer. Jesus' promise: ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you, is not a magical assurance to bend God to our desires of omnipotence nor the secret to doing extraordinary things. The only thing promised is the Holy Spirit, the root of faithfulness and the source of the freedom to proclaim the word, that is, to be witnesses of the Father's love and faithfulness"³⁶.

2.3. *Lord, teach us to pray*

a. *The prayer of the Our Father*

Reading the third gospel, it seems that Luke wants to answer the question explicitly posed by a disciple to Jesus: Lord, teach us to pray. The *Our Father* prayer is a first answer, the best known although not the only one; we know that it is not a formula, but "the compendium of the whole Gospel"³⁷ because it expresses its essential contents. Luke's version (11:2-4) is less well known than that of Matthew's Gospel, prayed in the Eucharistic celebration.

³⁶ R. Fabris, *Il Vangelo di Luca*, Traduzione e commento, Cittadella, 2003, p. 113

³⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church (Compendium). "What is the place of the *Our Father* in the Scriptures? The *Our Father* is the "summary of the whole Gospel" (Tertullian), "the perfect prayer" (Saint Thomas Aquinas). Found in the

"When you pray say:
Father,
hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come.
Give us every day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we also forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation."

Some commentary notes:

- *Father*: one must pray in a filial spirit, recognising God as Father. The entire Gospel is a proclamation of God as Father of all, mercy and providence for all his children; consequently, if it is true that we recognise God's paternity, we also recognise the universal brotherhood with all humanity: salvation is God's gift for every man of good will.

- *Hallowed be thy name*: it is asked that God may be manifested to every man, or rather that he may be recognised as God by every man. Name indicates the person: therefore, that every man recognise the holiness of the person of God as Father and source of life.

- *Thy kingdom come*: one asks for the coming of that kingdom of love, justice and peace announced by the prophets, for which the Son of God came into the world and in view of which every child who recognises God as Father works. In this invocation we can discern the root of the missionary commitment and apostolic passion of every Christian, working to build a new humanity.

- *Give us every day our daily bread*: the consciousness of being beloved children and always present in the providential heart of God, urges us to ask for bread, essential and not superfluous food for the life of children, with the confidence that He will still give it "every day". In the use of goods, we are invited to make a journey from the superfluous to the essential with this invocation.

- *Forgive us our trespasses, as we also forgive*: every time we say this prayer, we are invited to become aware of our condition as sinners, of our capacity to do evil and to offend God with sin, but also to be mindful of the divine action par excellence, the forgiveness of sins: only he can do this because only he is God, the Holy of Holies, who gives us the 'grace' of his mercy. *Perficium donum*: forgiveness is the perfect gift, the greatest that can be received and given. Therefore, the fruit of sincerely received forgiveness is forgiveness given to our brothers: if God who is Holy forgives us, how can we, pardoned sinners, deny forgiveness to any of our debtors, whether friend or foe?

- *Lead us not into temptation*: In the spiritual life, the time of trial is certain! All the great teachers of the spirit and of prayer recall this and not infrequently also speak of a 'spiritual battle'³⁸ that takes place between the good and the evil that dwell within us and outside us, between light and darkness, between pride and the humility of our true being. The Lord does not exempt us from the struggle, which we will certainly face because of sin and evil, but He assures us of His presence and the gift of His Spirit. It is necessary to ask for strength in the temptation that, according to the evangelist Luke, takes on the guise of power and success, of rejection of the cross, of unfaithfulness in following Jesus in the moment of persecution and discouragement. These are

middle of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), it presents in the form of prayer the essential content of the Gospel." (n. 579).

³⁸ I highly recommend to read: F. Rosini, *L'arte della buona battaglia*, San Paolo, Torino, 2023.

themes that the third Gospel repeatedly addresses a community - that of Antioch - which sees the return of Christ delayed, already knows the first persecutions and consequently also the first defections, as well as experiencing the temptation of worldliness.

b. The believer's trust

The theme on which the evangelist Luke insists in his catechesis is the trust that one must have when praying, in the certainty that the heavenly Father will grant him every good thing because he is a son. This is clearly expressed in the parable of commentary on the teaching of the Our Father, in which one is invited to pray with insistence, perseverance and trust. It is Luke's parable of the importunate friend (11:5-8) who insists until he gets what he asks for. Friend! This is how Jesus calls his disciples in the Fourth Gospel to indicate the quality of the relationship with which we should address God: as a friend.

In the name of friendship, or even just because of the duty of hospitality that is particularly valued in the East, this fellow knows that his request will be granted despite the annoyance he causes. Moreover, the parable clearly states that even if the friend does not really show himself to be such and does not want to give him the loaves in the name of friendship, he will 'at least' give them to him because of his insistence. In summary: God does not listen to prayer to get an importunate person out of his way, but because He is a true friend of man.

As a commentary on the parable (Lk 11:9-13) we find three verbs typical of the praying person: ask, seek, knock, to which correspond the three verbs of the divine answer: give, find, open - the latter repeated twice to reiterate the certainty of the answer to prayer. The exhortation is first addressed to the single disciple (ask, seek, knock) and then it is addressed in general to all: whoever asks, whoever seeks, whoever knocks, that is, whoever begs, gets an answer.

The behaviour of the father mentioned in the parable is taken to absurdity: a small child cannot yet distinguish, at first sight, between one thing and another. The snake instead of the fish and the scorpion instead of the egg are symbols of demonic powers and this underlines the contrast between what is offered by the enemy and the gift given by the Father: the Holy Spirit. No father deceives his own son by giving him things that can harm him. Thus in the answer to our prayer God does not deceive and what we receive will be for our true good, even if at times it will come to us in mysterious ways. The invitation is to stand before the Father as weak and defenceless children, knowing that our cry will be heard and that he will stretch out his hand and come to our aid.

Prayer, made with the trust of a child, is the key that opens to the revelation of the Father and the Son and to participation in the relationship of intimacy that exists between the two: "If therefore you who are bad know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!

c. Persistent and persevering prayer

In Lk 18:1-8 we read another parable, that of the importunate widow in which the evangelist once again reminds us that we must pray with perseverance. It is a teaching "on the necessity of praying always and never growing weary" (18:1). The parable is told in a different context, immediately after Jesus' eschatological discourse on "the day of the son of man", that is, on his glorious return. This theme of time, of waiting for the parousia, occupies an important place in the Third Gospel. The Antiochian Church, addressed by Luke, becomes increasingly aware of the delay of the return of the Lord, thought to be imminent, and, disappointed, it grows weary, with

the grave risk of re-tasting the seduction of a worldly and pagan life. Time passes, and it is not easy to remain vigilant and faithful in daily life. This is why the evangelist insists on "today", as the place of faithfulness to Christ: "give us *every day* our daily bread" (11:3); "take up your cross *every day* and follow me" (9:22). Probably the reason Luke includes this parable is precisely to encourage his Church and those who read the gospel to remain faithful and vigilant through prayer. God hears the prayer and will not be slow to 'do justice' to the widow. Again, the figure of the judge "who feared not God and had no regard for anyone" is useful to highlight, by contrast, the figure of the Father.

The judge fulfills the poor widow in order not to be bothered again; with God, on the other hand, the opposite happens: the Father wishes to be bothered by his children in order to manifest his paternal goodness. The verb used to indicate prayer is βοᾶω (to cry out): "he will do justice to his elect who cry out to him day and night" (18:7). Only Luke uses this verb in reference to prayer, while the other evangelists, Matthew and Mark, use it to indicate the cry of Jesus who, on the cross, experiences abandonment. Prayer is also a cry insofar as it is a struggle, or rather, it helps one to struggle, as is clear from the account of Jesus in the Garden of Olives.

d. Sincere and humble prayer

Finally, a third important attitude in prayer is highlighted by Luke in the account of the publican and the Pharisee going up to the temple in Jerusalem: the truthfulness and humility of our praying relationship with God (18:9-14). It is a parable told "for some who presumed to be righteous and despised others" (18:9). The publican, who identifies himself as a sinner, returns home justified, that is, made righteous by God. He stands at a distance, does not even dare to raise his eyes to heaven; he recognises himself for what he is, a sinner, and is delivered from his infirmity, returns home justified, straightened up because "he who humbles himself will be exalted" (18:14). The Pharisee, on the other hand, who stands upright, must first be bowed down, "he who exalts himself will be humbled" so that, recognising himself a sinner, he too will be delivered from his infirmity. Then God will readily do justice to his elect who cry out to him day and night, provided they recognise themselves for what they are, sinners.

In this account, Jesus highlights the fundamental attitude of the praying person and the disciple: humility. It would be appropriate to elaborate on this theme in order not to diminish its importance.

e. Valuable suggestions

I conclude this part on prayer in the light of the Gospel of Luke by inviting you to read the 45 catecheses that Pope Benedict XVI gave on prayer (from 4 May 2011 to 3 October 2013), an extraordinary compendium of wisdom on the subject. I quote only a few expressions in the hope of arousing the desire to read.

- "We must have the heart of the little ones, of the 'poor in spirit' (Mt 5:3), to recognise that we are not self-sufficient, that we cannot build our lives alone, but we need God, we need to meet him, to listen to him, to speak to him. Prayer opens us up to receive God's gift, his wisdom, which is Jesus himself, in order to fulfil the Father's will for our lives and thus find refreshment in the hardships of our journey".

- "The Giver is more precious than the gift granted; he is the 'Treasure', and the heart of his Son is in him; the gift is granted "in addition" (cf. Mt 6:21 and 6:33). This seems very important to me: before the gift is granted, adhere to the One who gives. For us too, therefore, beyond what

God gives us when we invoke him, the greatest gift he can give us is his friendship, his presence, his love. He is the precious treasure to always ask for and guard”.

- "Looking at Jesus' prayer, a question must arise in us: how do I pray? How do we pray? What time do I dedicate to my relationship with God? Is there sufficient education and training in prayer today? And who can teach it? In the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* I spoke of the importance of prayerful reading of the Sacred Scriptures. Gathering what emerged from the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, I placed particular emphasis on the specific form of *lectio divina*. Listening, meditating, keeping silent before the Lord who speaks is an art that one learns by practising it with constancy. Certainly prayer is a gift, which nevertheless asks to be accepted; it is God's work, but it demands commitment and continuity on our part; especially continuity and perseverance are important.”

- "When do I truly call God by the name of Father? In deep friendship with Jesus and living in Him and with Him the filial relationship with the Father, through our faithful and constant prayer, we can open windows to the Heaven of God. Indeed, in walking the path of prayer, without human regard, we can help others to walk through it”.

- "Dear brothers and sisters, let us educate ourselves to an intense relationship with God, to a prayer that is not occasional, but constant, full of trust, capable of illuminating our lives, as Jesus teaches us. And let us ask Him to be able to communicate to those close to us, to those we meet on our way, the joy of the encounter with the Lord, light for our existence”.

- "In Jesus, true God and true man, care for others, especially those in need and suffering, being moved by the pain of a family friend, lead him to turn to the Father, in that fundamental relationship that guides his whole life. But also vice versa: the communion with the Father, the constant dialogue with Him, drives Jesus to be uniquely attentive to the concrete situations of man in order to bring to them the consolation and love of God. Our relationship with man leads us to our relationship with God, and our relationship with God leads us back to our neighbour. Dear brothers and sisters, our prayer opens the door to God, who teaches us to constantly go out of ourselves to be able to be close to others, especially in times of trial, to bring them consolation, hope and light”.

3. Prayer in Cottolengo spirituality

So much could be said about Cottolengo as a 'man of prayer'³⁹ and so much has also been written⁴⁰. There are countless testimonies at the canonisation processes where his passion for prayer is recounted, his example and various of his recommendations are mentioned, several of which were then reported in the well-known booklet "*Fiori e Profumi*", re-edited with a critical apparatus under the title "*Detti e Pensieri*"⁴¹. In this year, it may be useful to meditate on these pearls of wisdom of our Saint, as well as to take up some texts and catecheses on the subject. In these Orientations I propose just a few simple considerations based on what our Founder taught and what the Cottolengo tradition has handed down.

As we have already mentioned with regard to the Cottolengo spirituality, our Saint lived a profound communion with God, always living in His presence, contemplated in all its

³⁹ Suor C. Della Valle, P. Virt., Summ., n. VIII, 364, p. 305.

⁴⁰ V. Di Meo, *La spiritualità di san Giuseppe Cottolengo*, Pinerolo, 1957; *Atti del Convegno sulla Spiritualità Cottolenghina* del 5-6 ottobre 2002; E. Mo e L. Piano, *La spiritualità di san Giuseppe Cottolengo*, Edilibri, 2006.

⁴¹ G. Cottolengo, *Detti e Pensieri*, a cura di Lino Piano, Torino, 2005.

manifestations, in continuous prayer "the first and most important work of the Little House", especially in the form of the "Laus perennis", in daily attendance at the Eucharist and in filial devotion to the Virgin Mary our good Mother.

Proof of this can be seen in the five monasteries that Cottolengo founded in the last two years of his life. At a time when he certainly needed Sisters and Brothers to serve the poor, who had grown in number over the years, Cottolengo did not hesitate to direct several Sisters and even some Brothers into monasteries with the aim of devoting themselves totally to prayer, praise and the cloistered life, and to offer their lives for humanity, the Church and in particular for the Little House so that it would not lose its supernatural dimension⁴².

Another element that tells us how much value prayer had in Cottolengo's mind and heart is seen in the initiation of the Laus perennis, so that in turn, all the religious families of the Little House would go before the Lord to raise an everlasting praise for his providential and merciful love.

Before recalling some expressions on the theme that have been handed down by the Cottolengo tradition, I think it useful to say a few more words about our Founder, starting from an extraordinary testimony of one of the first Sisters of the Little House where she describes the fruit of his path of prayer and of his existence lived in constant union with God, seeing everything in God and with God's eyes. From this very special union was born the Cottolengo's ardent charity towards the poor. Sister Pia Collomb, from Valle d'Aosta who entered the Little House in 1837 attracted by Joseph Cottolengo's reputation for holiness, witnesses:

"The servant of God was one of those uniquely unique souls who not only loved God above all things, but loved nothing but God in all things; that is, he did not love many things, but only one thing, which is God; and yet God alone he loved; he loved him and sought to make him loved in all things according as the holy divine pleasure required of him. Other saints attach themselves to every means in order to ascend upwards, and the Venerable One almost as if he were already up there was looking at things in their true being, that is, in God. He was not one of those souls who rise from the creature to the Creator, but in the Creator he saw the creature, because his first and only thought was God; and he was in this charity"⁴³.

Di Meo writes: "We can call Cottolengo's prayer a continuous contemplation. In it we discover the secret of his serene stability of mind, attentive to the constant calls of a not indifferent activism and the many anxieties of a material and spiritual order, occasioned by the direction of the Little House. Only from a mind dedicated to God can total and carefree abandonment in Divine Providence and the desire to sacrifice oneself for one's brothers and sisters be born"⁴⁴.

Let us try, then, to read and comment briefly - by subject and from a spiritual point of view - Cottolengo's teachings on prayer as recorded in the collection *Detti e Pensieri* with the perspective that seems truer to me: the sharing of a lived experience rather than a doctrinal teaching. Here I do not mention the historical-critical analysis of each thought, an analysis you can find in the aforementioned booklet, but I accept the sayings as they have been handed down. However, I do note that the historical-critical analysis shows that the sayings on prayer reported are practically all quoted from the testimonies at the canonisation processes.

⁴² "If your commitment were to lack this supernatural dimension, the 'Cottolengo' would cease to exist," recalled St John Paul II when he visited the Little House on 13 April 1980.

⁴³ Suor Pia Collomb, PA, XCII Sessione, 13 maggio del 1880.

⁴⁴ V. Di Meo, *op. cit.*, p.243.

a. *"Prayer makes you dear to God, pray therefore, always pray; make yourself dear to God, and when you are dear to him, he knows very well, and better than you know yourself, what is useful to you, do not doubt, for he will give you in large measure everything that may be worthwhile to make you holy"* (128).

Cottolengo teaches that prayer is what makes us familiar with God and this is necessary to know and therefore love him. While it is true that God knows our lives and our needs - and perhaps for this reason we are exhorted not to linger on mentioning them during prayer - it is equally true that we know Him, His heart, His thoughts and His will. When we pray, then, rather than being preoccupied with asking God questions, Cottolengo invites us to become dear to God, that is, to welcome his love and his Spirit that sheds light on our lives. The invitation is to be dear to God, that is, to be familiar with Him, affectively attached. Also mentioned in this saying is the purpose of God's work on our behalf: holiness, that is, a life lived to the fullness of being fully conformed in Christ. He will give us everything we need for holiness: reading in this perspective even the crosses that we encounter in our life acquire a whole new meaning.

b. *"Prayer is the first and most important work of the Little House"* (24); *"What holds the Little House up are prayer and Communion"* (89); *"The Little House is founded and sustains itself solely on prayer!"* (265).

Authentic prayer must be the first commitment of the Little House in order to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and with it the light to see things from above, as God sees them, and to have the strength to work through charity. If the Little House were only a work of philanthropy, there would be no need to consider prayer as the first commitment. But the Little House is a Work of God, it lives for His glory, as Cottolengo recalls in his petition to King Charles Albert for the juridical recognition of the Little House⁴⁵, and its mission is to proclaim the Gospel in the witness of charity. We understand, then, the importance of prayer so as not to lose the sense of the mission of the Little House and to have the spiritual strength to implement it.

c. *"The great anger that some creditors have against me, I know to be the work of the devil; just as I know that it would be enough to put an end to this sorrow if some of the prayers introduced in the Little House were removed, but this is not appropriate; one must suffer and God will provide"* (60); *"Prayers do not disturb the sisters, but help them: They take comfort from prayer, and if they diminish it their strength is immediately diminished, and they no longer fulfil their duty well: no, no, prayer does not weaken, but gives strength to the spirit"* (85).

The fruit of prayer is also the knowledge of God's will and receiving the strength to do it. God is unchangeable in His will and His plans are always for good; the prayer of His children is not directed towards changing the order established by Him, but towards knowing and fulfilling His plans, sometimes learning to substitute His will to ours, experiencing that in it is truly indicated a fullness of life. Only in a spiritual gaze that we learn in prayer can we interpret events in the light of His plan of salvation, tune in to His wavelength and allow Him to intervene to save us. Prayer, therefore, allows us to enter fully into His salvific plan, gives us the power of the Spirit to have a supernatural gaze on human events, even when they reserve tribulation and fatigue.

⁴⁵ *"The supplicant intends during his whole life everything already, by Divine mercy, begun, or to be enlarged, or to be extended into other branches, only and irrevocably consecrate it to the glory of that great God alone, whose will he merely seeks to follow"* (C, vol. I, p. 337).

d. *"In the Little House one must never pray for material bread. Our Lord taught us to seek first the kingdom of God, and that everything else would come later, and it is for us to pray in this way. I do not condemn anyone, but as for me on the path God wants me on, I feel I should rather pray like this, and leave everything in His hands by praying: Quaerite primum regnum Dei, and that is enough for us. He knows our needs. Scit Pater vester quia his omnibus indigetis; let us only think of pleasing him: let us pray to him, yes, but in general" (47) ⁴⁶.*

All the testimonies at the canonical processes show Cottolengo to us as a man of faith before being a witness of charity. His trust in Divine Providence, understood as God's action on our behalf, is proverbial. Praying in general, i.e. without expressing particular requests, is an act of faith that, recognising God as the source of every gift, testifies to the certainty that the heavenly Father takes care of his children by giving them everything they need, especially when they seek 'only' the Kingdom of God and his justice above all else. This insistence on prayer 'in general' is particularly significant when we think of the schools of spirituality contemporary to Cottolengo, where vocal prayer and prayer of request was held in particular esteem.

e. *"In time of sickness, the briefest prayers, and the "I adore you" towards mother Mary are enough. Moreover, to be in the presence of God as much as one can, to bear infirmity with patience, to suffer in union with the afflictions of the Divine Saviour, and to keep silence, are excellent things that do good to body and soul, and moreover are excellent prayers" (94).*

This saying indicates the distinction between the state of prayer, understood as a permanent life of union with God, and the exercise of prayer, where a special time is dedicated to prayer. Cottolengo invites us to keep ourselves in the presence of God who is always at work on our behalf even when the situation is painful and complex. When in the time of illness we do not have enough physical strength to say the prayers, Cottolengo invites us to pray more with the prayer of offering than with words, spiritually uniting ourselves to Christ crucified who gave all of himself for the salvation of humanity (cf. Col 1:24). Once again, an extraordinary testimony of faith in God's Love seems evident in the Saint's attitude.

f. *"Prayer uninterrupted by day and by night: laus perennis, daily communion for many, frequent for all are two great treasures of the Little House" (162). "One of the main wheels that make the Little House move forward is prayer to which, if we can, we must always add, but not diminish it by even one Hail Mary" (99).*

In the path of prayer it is important to be persevering, to have an established method and time for prayer, meditation on the Word of God and the encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist. All masters of prayer exhort one to have method and persevering fidelity, so as not to give in to improvisation or the emotional feeling of those who pray when they 'feel'. Equally important, for Cottolengo, is daily communion, as a privileged moment of encounter with Christ that must not be renounced for any reason. Let us bear in mind that the exhortation to frequent communion was not a customary and shared doctrine in Cottolengo's time. Moreover, as we have already mentioned, Cottolengo wanted prayer to be continuous, day and night, and for this reason he initiated the Laus perennis as a time of praise to God for his benefits, but also so that a high, supernatural spiritual climate would be maintained in the Little House, which would help to live in the Presence of God.

⁴⁶ On the same topic, see also n. 180.

g. *"There is no prayer more acceptable to the Lord than the one called Sunday prayer (Our Father) and the angelic salutation to which, by adding the Gloria Patri and the meditation on the mystery, one has an excellent pasture of devotion, and the best means of preparing oneself to receive and, after receiving, give thanks to the blessed Jesus. Then stop your thoughts on the magnificent words: Panem nostrum quotidianum which remind you of the Most Holy Eucharist"* (122).

For many years, the prayer of the "Our Fathers", that is, the recitation of an important number of "Our Father" was the main prayer with which the various religious families of the Little House prayed before the tabernacle. If the Our Father is the compendium of the entire Gospel and the Hail Mary is the memory of Jesus' Incarnation and Mary's 'Here I am', we understand that truly in these prayers there is everything essential to nourish prayer and to grow in the journey of faith, to be united to Him, to His intentions and to His spirit. These intentions are well expressed in the rules given for the Suffrage Monastery he founded (125). It is true that the indications given by Cottolengo respond to a time when community prayer was above all vocal prayer and the Bible, on the contrary, was certainly not in everyone's hands, but it is also true that our Saint also gave the example of a more contemplative prayer, of silent adoration, spending a long time before the Blessed Sacrament, and exhorted us to do the same, as the numerous testimonies at the canonisation processes tell us. So I think I can conclude that each one nourishes his relationship with the Lord by following the paths most suited to him without absolutizing any form.

h. *"Sanctify all your works by doing them for God's sake, let them be prayers, let them be the exercises of charity, let them be other things, rest, food"* (266).

Doing everything for God's sake means unifying our spiritual life with the sole intention of pleasing God and doing what is pleasing to Him, but it also means growing in the dimension of gratuitousness. We should not seek God just because He can solve our problems, but because He deserves to be sought, praised and loved for Himself; only in deep friendship with Him is it possible to walk paths of holiness.

To conclude this third part, let us listen once again to what Pope Benedict XVI said in his first Encyclical "Deus Caritas est" in 2006. It seems to me that it is important for us Cottolengo sons and daughters, engaged in the ministry of charity, *to find the right relationship between prayer and service*, so that the former becomes a source of fruitfulness for the latter. These seem to be words written precisely for realities like ours where commitment to service to the most fragile people takes a lot of time.

"Prayer as a means of drawing strength from Christ again and again is a concrete urgency. The one who prays does not waste his time, even if the situation has all the characteristics of an emergency and seems to push only for action. Piety does not weaken the struggle against poverty or even against the misery of one's neighbor. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta is a very obvious example of the fact that time devoted Blessed Teresa of Calcutta is a very clear example of the fact that time devoted to God in prayer not only does not detract from the efficacy and industriousness of love for one's neighbour, but is actually its inexhaustible source... The time has come to reaffirm the importance of prayer in the face of the activism and looming secularism of many Christians engaged in charitable work. Obviously, the Christian who prays does not claim to change God's plans or correct what God has planned. Rather, he seeks an encounter with the Father of Jesus Christ, asking that He be present with the comfort of His Spirit in him and in his work. Familiarity

with the personal God and surrender to his will prevent man's degradation, save him from the captivity of fanatical and terrorist doctrines' (36-37).

Concluding

This year's pastoral theme is as important as it is broad to explore in its various facets, and these Guidelines have only suggested some food for thought.

The wish is that in a time as complex as ours, we learn to set some priorities in our daily choices, and among these is certainly to take care of the spiritual dimension in order to be able to heal from dispersion and lack of meaning, especially in difficult times. One does not live by bread alone; material wealth is not enough and neither is social prestige. The innermost desire of each of us is to be happy, and the searching for a meaning in our life is the main way to reach this goal. But this will not be possible unless we give our lives the necessary tools to discern good from evil, truth from falsehood. Let care for spirituality and prayer, then, truly be the first commitment of the Little House as it was for St. Joseph Cottolengo and Blessed Francis, Blessed Louis and Blessed Mary Carola to whom we entrust our journey.

"Virgin Mary Mother of Jesus, make us holy" (48). Learned from St. Philip Neri but modified precisely to emphasize man's vocation to holiness, Cottolengo exhorts us to pray this "ejaculatory" to make memory of the deepest desire of every friend of God; for this goal one loves, suffers, works, offers, prays and performs every other action. Holiness is the high measure of the Christian life, it is a life lived in fullness, and it is possible only if one does not distract his gaze from the goal: Heaven. This is the most sincere wish I leave to all of you, members of the Cottolengo Charismatic Family.

United with Mary who in the Upper Room prayed with the Apostles
invoking the gift of the Holy Spirit, I bless you from my heart!

p. Carmine Arice