

IN THE SAME CHARISM....

with responsibility



**COMPANY OF ST. URSULA
SECULAR INSTITUTE OF ST. ANGELA MERICI
FEDERATION**

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CONSECRATED SECULARITY

The Merician style of life



**COMPANY OF ST. URSULA
SECULAR INSTITUTE OF ST. ANGELA MERICI
FEDERATION**

INTERNATIONAL MEETING

Paolo VI

Brescia 13-18 july 2010

ACTS

CONTENTS

To the readers	page 5
Welcoming the participants	page 6
Reports by His Excellency Mons. Adriano Tessarollo	page 9
Reports by Paola Bignardi	page 23
A testimony by Mirella Turri	page 55
A testimony by Maria Dravecka	page 64
A few points from the homilies by His Excellency Mons. Adriano Tessarollo	page 70
A few points from the homely by His Excellency Mons. Luciano Monari	page 77

TO THE READERS

*... in order to be able to live and relive the
475th Anniversary of the foundation of the Federation*

Our International Meeting took place during a torrid week in mid-July, but the warmth that surrounded us was the result of the peaceful, fraternal atmosphere that reigned in the Paul VI Centre in the streets of the city of Brescia and nearby towns...

We met on the 475th anniversary of the foundation of the Company in order to discuss the theme: **consecrated secularity based on the Merician way of life.**

In her welcoming speech, the President, **Maria Razza**, mentioned the anniversary and asked us to live the present. She told us: *Now it is our turn: our time has come! As always, the time given to us has its limitations, wealth, doubt and extraordinary possibilities...*

We were enriched by the learned reports of **Mons. Adriano Tessarollo**, who, by means of his articles on **consecrated secularity**, helped us to build a better **relationship with God.**

We appreciated the reports by **Paola Bignardi** who helped us understand better current but specific themes like: **God in the world today; How to live the Gospel in the world; Being witnesses of the original Way of Life and The Spirituality of simple ordinary things.**

We felt proud to be members of The Company, thanks to our sisters **Mirella Turri e Maria Dravecka** who showed us the real meaning of being **mothers, daughters and sisters** in the Company.

In this issue we tried to collect and print all the reports, the testimonies and the homilies... Now it is our turn to scrutinize and exchange our views... so that we can help each other faithfully and innovatively live today the Merician way.

Caterina Dalmasso

WELCOMING THE PARTICIPANTS

Maria Razza President of The Federation

I am very pleased to be able to welcome you here in the “Paul VI Centre”, a hall where we longed to hold our annual international meeting, to be close, even physically, to the remains of Our Holy Mother and Foundress, on the 475th anniversary of the Foundation of The Company!

The vocation for secular consecration, of which Saint Angela was the “forerunner”, is 475 years old. This charism is a gift which God gave our Holy Mother.

How much has been achieved since then!

What a wealth of goodness has been experienced; let us thank the Lord for this treasure!

Since then, many generations of women have lived according to the Gospels and, as far as the customs and the times they lived in allowed them to, their lives reflected the Merician

characteristics whose roots are deeply embedded in Evangelic and maternal spirituality

Now it is our turn: our time has come!

As always, the time given to us has its limitations, wealth, doubts and extraordinary possibilities.....

It is important to keep looking incessantly for new ways to remain faithful to the original charism; our Constitutions tell us to “*constantly refer to the Rule, the Memoirs and the Testament of Saint Angela Merici, because referring to one’s origins preserve and nourishes the*



spiritual energies capable of always paving the way for an authentic renewal”... (Constitutions 7; 37,1)

Today we are called to question one another and to discuss if necessary; however, this is not an easy task because, without wanting, we think that discussions automatically imply that we were wrong in the first place!

We find it difficult to believe that change is agreeable and necessary; in reality, it forms an integral part of our being able to totally embody the charism which was given to us.

At times we remain attached to our past and to practices which have developed over the years; these, although correct, have become outdated and fail to convey the original meaning of the charism, particularly to the younger generations.

During the following days, we will have the opportunity to listen to, go into detail and reflect together; we can question each other and evaluate our answers.

The General Meeting is, in reality, a continuation of the one held last year; even the title is the same: “CONSECRATED SECULARITY”. It is a secularity based on the Merician charism and on a style of life according to the original intuition of Saint Angela; which in the Decree of approval found in our Constitutions is described as the “forerunner of the Secular vocation”.





A “Style of life” is an expression which takes its name from real, daily relationships and acquaintances:

- » with God
- » in the World
- » in The Company

In this general meeting we are lucky to have with us teachers and witnesses who will help

us reflect on and scrutinise these topics, each one of us according to her ability and intelligence.

We are grateful to God and to each one of them. A special mention goes, first and foremost, to our Assistant, Mons Adriano, whose qualified contributions are precise and carefully prepared yet, at the same time, his testimony is fraternal, simple and real.



RELATIONSHIPS

by His Excellence Mons. Adriano Tessarollo

First Report: “CONSECRATED SECULARITY ACCORDING TO THE MERICIAN STYLE”

I will start off by quoting what John Paul II said about secularity.

Secularity means that *"members of secular institutes worldwide will still live in the world with other people, with whom they share the same conditions, needs, professions ... fully aware that they must change the world from within"*.

Therefore secularity means an in-depth relationship with the world based on sound humane concepts as well as an of evangelisation culture.



In the first chapter of the Constitutions we read: *«Participants through faith and baptism in the paschal mystery of Christ.... we are called to be “true and unsullied spouses” of the Son of God, to be separated from the “shadows” of the world.... to “serve” the reign of God as seculars».* (No. 3.1)

The strongest points of reference are faith and baptism, through which the consecrated person shares in the mystery of Christ and adapts herself to serve His Kingdom by her secularity. She is therefore “sent into the world”, but does not “belong to the world”, quoting Christ Himself according to the gospel of St. John. (Jn. 17,12-19).

The same can be said with reference to Saint Angela when she wrote *“to the beloved Daughters and Sisters of The Company of Saint Ursula... God has granted you the grace of setting you apart from the darkness of this miserable world and of uniting you together to serve His Divine Majesty”* (Rule, Prologue).

Secularity also means that, while leading an ordinary life in the world with no particular form of recognition or organisation, they become acquainted with the signs of God’s kingdom through their individual consecration as part of the graces given to them at their baptism.

Furthermore we read in the Constitutions **3.4**: *«Walking faithfully in this form of life (“...our life as consecrated seculars will have its centre of unity in Jesus*

Christ ... who has revealed His unreserved love for every human being che ha ”, ref. 3.3), we will participate actively in the coming of the reign, giving our contribution by carrying the renewing strength of the Gospel into the environments where God has called us..... workers for peace and harmony everywhere».

Finally, secularity also means belonging to the diocese, that is, to be strongly united to the church and culture of the particular place one finds herself in, this will give each Company a particular outward appearance, because it is characterised by the cultural influence of the local church, as we find written in **4.3**: *«With a filial spirit we will share in the missionary dynamism of the Church, wholly bent on evangelization, we will commit ourselves to making our contribution as consecrated lay*



women in the life of the diocese...».

Obviously these basic elements, based on the Merician charism of secularity, determine the Merician way of life led by the consecrated person.

I would like to draw your attention to the various aspects of your consecration which rise out from Saint Angela's spirituality, a spirituality which was brought forth because she took heed of and understood the evangelic Counsels and which gave a true meaning to the secular Merician Charism.

1. Obedience in the Merician Secularity

Constitutions no 19.1. *“With the gift of our will to God, we participate in the church and with the church in the mystery of the obedience of Christ, who came into the world, not to do His own will but the will of the One who sent Him”.* The reference made by Saint Angela with regards to obedience in Chapter VIII of The Rule is very clear.

With regards to obedience, Christ is our model and point of reference. *“He who sent me is with me, and has not left me to myself, for I always do what pleases Him”* (Jn: 8,29). Jesus

teaches us the spirituality of obedience. *“Here I am, I am coming to do Your will”* (Heb. 10,9). This is the spirituality in Christ's mission and it must also become ours.

We offer ourselves to do the will of God through prayer and by means of our offering we gradually become more mature spiritually. This is why we must act freely in obedience. This means that the most important thing in our life is to do *‘what pleases Him’*, *‘His will’* (and



with reference to Saint Angela: ‘One has to obey first of all the commands of God’).

Before acting, it is important to properly understand the real meaning of ‘*what pleases Him*’, and ‘*His will*’. This means that we have spiritual women, who listen to what the Holy Spirit has to say (ref: Saint Angela: to obey the Counsels and inspirations which the Holy Spirit unceasingly sends into our hearts), and with reference to the ‘Church ’ to obey one’s own Bishop and Pastor....), we must be willing to give our consent freely to a project which originated from the ‘Father’, from which we will not

gain wealth or personal interest, success or stability, because this project is His plan of salvation.

Christ’s act of obedience, cannot be considered only as making Him become equal with the Father, He acts



in perfect harmony with His Father’s will, this is a total submission of ‘will’ and ‘feeling’. In the Gospel of Saint John, we find a perfect balance of Christ’s life and His mission: “*I have glorified You on earth by finishing the work that You gave me to do*”. (Jn. 17,4).

By obedience we understand that the mission of the Church is God’s plan of salvation which is manifested in Jesus Christ: **obey and adhere whole heartedly to this plan.**

Our entire life and personal mission is obedience in as far as it is consistent with this project.

One has to be careful not to give in to conflicting ideas regarding obedience when it comes to also obeying social norms and civil laws (Saint Angela herself says : to obey also the laws and statues of the rulers and the governors of the states) .

Our choices or attitudes cannot go against that which is not closely related to God's plan and manifested in Jesus Christ. Not even the least important, everyday gesture is trivial. Every moment is significant and important since it contributes to edifying God's kingdom on earth and fulfilling His plan.

If we have faith we are bound to obey; faith is strengthened by the Word of God and the examples of Jesus Christ are a determining factor in all our choices.

2. Virginity in the Merician Secularity.

In the Gospel, virginity is intended to *"those to whom it is granted"* (Mt 19,11). Saint

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians writes: *"everyone has his own gift from God, one this kind and the next something different"* (1Cor. 7,7).

One can fully understand its meaning if one lives a 'nuptial' relationship with the

Lord (virginity for the Kingdom) and is kind and loving towards one's neighbour.

What Saint Angela wrote with regards to virginity in the 9th Chapter of The Rule is still valid today: *"Each one should also preserve sacred*



virginity, not making a vow on account of any human persuasion, but voluntarily making to God the sacrifice of her own heart”.

It is a relationship of love that is born out of giving oneself freely and that is capable of sacrificing oneself in order to give oneself wholly to the other.

It is also interesting to note how virginity is also seen as a means of building a relationship with one's neighbour. As a matter of fact, after pointing out the bad points which virginity helps to overcome, (“let her keep her hear pure and her conscience clear of any evil thought, of any shadow of envy and ill will, of any discord and evil suspicion and of any other wicked desire and purpose..... not answering haughtily, not doing anything grudgingly, not staying

angry, not grumbling, not repeating any malicious gossip”). Saint Angela finishes off on a positive note: *“But let all our words, actions and behaviour always be for the instruction and edification of those who have dealings with us, always having charity burning in our hearts”.*

Unless we look at virginity as an nuptial relationship with the Lord and love towards our neighbour, it can only have the meaning of deprivation and not expediency and often can bring about outbursts of negative attitudes in us which compromise our testimonies: authority, egoism, materialism, hedonism, an exaggerated attachment to earthly goods, a tendency to dominate rather than to serve, constant in sati-



sfaction and solitude.

In The Constitutions no. **20.1.2** we also read: *“Embracing chastity for the Kingdom of Heaven, we participate in the Church and with the Church in the mystery of the Virginity of Christ, who loved men and women so much that He gave Himself for their salvation. In union with Christ and in imitation of Him, we will respond to the love of The Father with a continuous act of love keeping alive in ourselves the expectation of the ultimate encounter with Our Lover”*.

We can lead this kind of life if we promote our spiritual life, good friendships, if we are charitable towards others, if we train ourselves to sacrifice, if we learn to control our emotions, if we wisely evaluate the situations which might lead us to infidelity, without expecting anything in return.



2nd report: “CULTIVATING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD”

God revealed Himself to men not only so that they would come to know Him, but to invite them to build a relationship with Him.

So, even according to Saint Angela, when we are called, it is also an invitation to build a strong relationship with God.

It is by means of a beautiful relationship that I can experience why God has called me. Regarding this relationship, Saint Angela writes: *“you have to thank Him infinitely, that to you especially, He has granted such a singular gift.....you will be willing first of all to recognize what such a thing implies and what a new and astonishing dignity it is”*. (Rule Prologue).

The Merician spirituality suggests prayer and poverty; these are two privileged aspects by which we can cultivate and develop our relationship with God.

1. The relationship of the consecrated secular person with God through prayer.

Let me recall two instances from The Constitution regarding prayer: *“Persevering prayer will make us participants in the filial colloqui of Jesus with His Father and will dispose us to welcome the gifts of the Holy Spirit”* (n° 11).

Here, prayer is seen as **a participation in a filial dialogue between Jesus and the Father**. Through prayer, Jesus built such a deep



relationship with the Father that He accepted and adopted God's wishes and projects as His own.

His prayer is a means of praising and blessing the Father, through the Holy Spirit: *"Just at that time, filled with joy by the Holy Spirit, He said: «I bless you, Father, Lord of Heaven and earth..... Yes, Father, for that is what it has pleased you to do ».* (Lk. 10,21).

Jesus is seeing what is happening in Him and around Him; the 72 disciples have announced the Gospel, but it was revealed mainly to the "little children"! Christ does not discern this as an unsuccessful mission but as a free gift from the Father.

Prayer becomes a means of interpreting what is actually happening not according to what man understands but according to God's unpredictable actions.

We know however that the filial dialogue between Jesus and the Father covers many aspects, as can be seen from the 'Our Father' and other prayers found in the Gospel. This can also be seen in Saint Angela's prayer in chapter V of The Rule.

For the consecrated person, the second aspect of prayer remembered in The Constitutions, has a deeper meaning: *"Enlightened and transformed by the Word, we will be able to look at persons, at the world and at history, through the eyes of God".*(Costitutions 12). Prayer has the power to change us.



This is the experience we find in Luke's Gospel regarding Jesus on Mount Tabor: Jesus is praying and *"as He was praying, the aspect of His face was changed ..."* (Lk 9,29).

That prayer, that dialogue with the Father, changed Him in an obedient servant of The Father, accepting His imminent journey to Jerusalem. After that prayer, Jesus is ready to give His courageous testimony in front of all the Jewish people, even if it leads to His passion and death.

The two other biblical figures that appear behind Him are Moses and Elijah, two other renowned men who, by means of prayer to the Lord, were changed into courageous witnesses.

It is enough to read the description in The Exodus. 34,27-38, "the skin of his face was radiant because he had been talking to the Lord" (34,29). The prayer, the dialogue with the Lord, changed him into the Lord's witness and turned him into a guide for His people.



The same thing is said about Elijah in 1Kings 19,11: *"Then he was told: «Go out and stand on the mountain before Yahweh». For at that moment Yahweh was going by"*. After that meeting, the disillusioned and frightened prophet who was running away, became once more the courageous witness of God and His word among His chosen people.

I want to conclude this theme on prayer by quoting n° 14.1 from The Constitutions: *"Aware that it is necessary to recollect ourselves in God, in order to be in the world*

in truth, we will daily find times of silent adoration and contemplation, also in our houses, in order: to voice our praise and thanksgiving together with all creatures, to ask for pardon for sin in the world, for ourselves and for all our sisters and brothers; to be amazed by the marvels that God works in and around us”.

2. The testimony of consecrated secularity through poverty.

Saint Angela’s vision of things is striking; she invites *“each one to embrace poverty, not only affective poverty of temporal things, but above all the true poverty of spirit by which man strips his heart of all affection and of his very self. In God he has all His wealth and apart from God sees himself to be completely poor and a total nothing and with God to have everything.... and to place all her wealth and love and delight not in herself.....but in God alone and in His gentle and ineffable Providence alone.”* (Rule Ch. X). In this perspective, Saint Angela’s invitation to poverty may be seen as the predominant factor of our relationship with God.

Men work harder and dedicate more time to obtain worldly goods than to achieve spiritual and eternal ones which, in comparison, are by far more important.

The poor in the Bible are those who trust completely in the Lord, to whom they have offered up their cause, because they know He is trustworthy.



Evangelic poverty can only be achieved if we discover that God is the only 'good' in our life, the priceless pearl. Poverty in the Bible is always compared to wealth which is described as an evil we must 'guard against'.

Wealth, besides being an evil, may also be an opportunity of doing good deeds:

- we can help the poor, sharing our wealth with them, we can help the needy in our community;
- wealth can become that 'mammon of wickedness' to which we cling wholeheartedly and which we treasure in a hidden safe place, always striving to increase it and sharing only with those with whom we maintain close relations.



It is only by God's spiritual grace that the correct attitude towards wealth can be instilled; through Him we learn that all is worthless in comparison to God's supreme significance.

It is love that gives meaning to poverty; if we honour God, then we are ready to share our wealth with others. Thus, if we are willing to give away all we own, this in itself is a spiritual action which confirms that nothing can be compared to the supreme goodness that is God.

There is no evangelic alternative in being rich or poor, but in choosing between loving God or wealth and choosing wealth instead of God or even still putting them on the same level.

Gospel poverty comes from freedom of choice; this frees the person from greed and from the illusion that affluence gives security and

happiness. It also brings about a balanced reasoning, even if one is reasoning by himself: “give me neither poverty nor riches, grant me only my share of food” (Pr. 30,8).

Even the Constitutions invite us to be::

“In union with Christ and in imitation of Him we will practice gospel poverty, in total dependence on God, who wants our good and our joy; we will experience the freedom of children, living from our work and using the things of the world with a serene abandonment to the Father and His ‘benevolent and indescribable Providence’” (Constitutions 21.2).

Conclusion.

The Evangelic Counsels which Saint Angela suggests and which are found in the Constitutions of The Company give a real meaning to the Merician charism; they help the consecrated persons’ life to be a simple but powerful testimony in our present lifestyles.

We are living in times where secularity and laity have been replaced by secularism and an attitude which promotes the autonomy of the state where the church is concerned. Therefore we are not able to understand God’s plan in which the spirituality of human life is raised to a higher level.

Naturally we look at life and the world as individuals who depend on their own understanding of how things work and are free to choose their own behaviour.

Today there is the need to bring back the importance of spiritua-



lity through simple testimonies, which show that the Christian faith is most significant for humanity and offers a personal relationship with the God who saves us, who consoles us but also a God in whom man finds fulfilment because God is real.

I believe that this secular outlook found in the Merician text (Saint Angela and The Constitutions) foresees both the personal relationship with God and the factual ethic involvement which this reaction brings forth in the world.



CONFERENCES PAOLA BIGNARDI

First Report:

God in the world *Witnesses of Christian originality*

1. The experience of Angela Merici

Angela Merici decided to found a Company of women consecrated in virginity who remained in their own families and lived the evangelical



counsels, did not embrace a common life, made their own living, and faced the risks accompanying their situation in an age when women were supposed to be protected by either a husband or a convent wall. And she did this after many hesitations, second thoughts, and doubts. Her

inner intuition was clear, but the experience was too new and counter-cultural not to raise perplexities, temptations, objections, and the need for constant checking, for at least two reasons:

- A widespread concept in the world then – and not only then! – was that reality constituted an obstacle to a high-quality Christian life. We could be saved only in spite of the world.
- A second difficulty was the condition of woman. Unmarried women almost always found a refuge in the convent. The idea of living as Christian lay women, consecrated in the world, was absolutely outside the thinking of that time. The intuition that came from the Spirit finally prevailed over widespread opinions in the society and Church of the time.

Angela gave life to the Company in 1535, some time after having dictated the Rule to Cozzano. The Rule places women like you *in the world*, which is, in the Gospel, the theological place of the encounter with God and of fidelity to him.

The institute founded by Angela Merici bore the sign of her understanding of and familiarity with the common people and the life of her city. It was very different from the kind of life of women who were forced to live outside the house or convent at that time.

2. The present sense of a Christian laity

Angela Merici's choice leads us to reflect on the value of the world in a Christian vision of life.

In other terms, the question of the laity is a demanding one in today's culture and sensibility, whether civil or ecclesial.

The term *laity* and the more familiar term *lay* have a vast range of meaning in reference to two large spheres: the ecclesial and the social/cultural.

In today's prevailing opinion, the term *lay* appears in a discussion that shows a great interest in the question of *laity*, understood as emancipation, as autonomy from any form of dogmatism. In this sense, the term in the present debate has assumed a meaning opposite to a Catholic attitude.

In the context of the relativism characterizing today's culture, *laity* is understood as neutrality, especially in regard to strong values or to what touches the religious sphere. The only way to understand *laity* seems to have become removed from making choices with any cultural or, especially, religious values: thus, *laity* is no-man's land, a gray space of indifference and relativism.

But the idea of *laity* proper to the Christian tradition is a very different matter and has nothing in common with the landscape of neu-

trality just described.

The witness of Angela Merici leads us to praise the laity, understood as full and mature humanity, universal and open. Today it is our way of probing and enriching the thoughts of a woman of the 1500s, who did not have today's tools for explaining it but understood its substance.

I would like, then to continue our reflection with four descriptions or definitions of *laity*.

Laity is to value things...

Christians through the centuries have been at risk of considering the created world and the things that make up the texture of ordinary people's daily existence as insignificant for Christian life, even a danger or hindrance. A spiritual tradition that has taken monks and nuns out of the world to live their experience of faith has devalued commitment in the world. To recover a lay spirit means for Christians to reappropriate, in a new way, the value of their experience in the world as a place where they live their fidelity to a God who has entered human history and has taken on the dust and the beauty of that history.

"The Christian is one for whom things exist," wrote Yves Congar, one of the theologians who have elaborated conclusive thoughts on Christian lay people.

In this view, things, life in all its dimensions, human history... are for the Christian the place of one's encounter with God: work is not simply the place of necessity, but the noble experience with which a person collaborates in God's creation continuing in our time; political involvement is the contribution that each one gives, on the basis of one's competence and knowledge, to construct the human city; the family is the experience through which love of man and woman continue to speak of God's love



and to show its fecundity; education helps to enable new generations to discover and develop the gift of being human....

...is universality...

The laity is a category that expresses the universality of the values and characteristics that make up each one's humanity; it goes beyond details and separateness, in gratitude, in search and in responsibility toward what is shared in common.

Laity refers to what is universal, what belongs to every woman and every man, what is undeniably much more than the differences among them. Liberty is universal as a possession, as a destiny and as a responsibility; the aspiration for justice is universal; the drive to transcend oneself and to reach out to what is beyond is universal, constitutive of our personhood: beyond time, beyond the present, beyond what is known, beyond what is fragmented...

...is limit...

Creation, in all its grandeur, is also limited. Locating us in time, it locates us in the framework of history, and therefore in what is fallen, partial, fragile. A mature laity accepts the limitation implied in human life, without at the same time diminishing its value.

Therefore *laity* involves consciousness of not being everything.

Laity involves accepting that absolute values are encountered with the relativity of historical experience which cannot hold them in perfection and completeness, and which therefore requires the hard work of bridge-building, the courage of liberty and risk, the capacity to recognize the value of concrete choices and at the same time to direct one's gaze ever beyond.

... is search and dialogue

In this view, it is clear that the laity needs search and dialogue; it needs

everyone's contribution, because no one is sufficient alone.

There are so many questions that catch us unprepared, in life, in the faith and in the Church. *Laity* means resisting every facile solution and short cut, travelling more demanding paths and twists of thought, of investigation, of dialogue. *Laity* therefore is the capacity to put demands on oneself without running away, and not to censor the anxieties and uneasiness connected with this search, rather staying ready to catch the

signs of God's presence in life, signs that at the same time both conceal and reveal him.

The search makes one available to search together with others, to give credit to that portion of truth that is in the other's position, and to search along with that other person. It is clear that the person in dialogue is never allowed to be arrogant, not even when this stance exposes her to discomfort.

Contrary to the idea of a laity that walks the road of indifference to all values,

almost as though that were a guarantee for safeguarding each one's liberty, we believe in a laity that recognizes created reality as a gift intended for all, a reality which is intended for to each one of us, like every other woman and man.

Laity as humanity, a universal value in which we can (and must seek to) recognize ourselves with all men and women of good will.

Our humanity, in all its forms: existential and cultural, individual and social, institutional or personal... is a good to recognize, to appreciate and for which to feel oneself responsible.

Laity as an experience that embraces all the expressions of our humanity: family, politics, culture, economy, profession....



3. As Christians in the world

» *The world is reality created and redeemed*

What elements unfold this way of understanding Christian laity?

The first pages of the Bible, in the poetic language typical of the biblical era, recount that the world is God's work, and that this world is pleasing to God. *And God saw that it was good....*

Wishing to give voice to the beauty of Creation, Brother Francis expressed it lyrically in a lay style: *Praised be my Lord through Brother Fire, through Brother Wind, through the waters and through the sun; through the stars and through the clouds....*

Let us recognize a way of thinking that insinuated itself into the hearts of our first parents, a seductive thought like deceptive phantasms: Why submit to the limits set by God? Why can't we ourselves become like God? And do without Him?

Sin, this envy of God, fractured the harmony of everything. Then there was the shame of being naked, that is the fear of being ourselves before God. And the broken communion between man and woman, and hatred of a brother. Violence, war, abuse, injustice, the desire to dominate others, fear of a God who is felt to be a competitor; brothers and sisters as enemies...all are the fruits of this disaster.

But God does not give up. He wishes to restore to humanity the beauty of the first day, and he does it choosing the road of the heart, which saves by wiping out distances, renouncing power and force, taking on others' pain and bearing it as his own, in place of humanity. God is made a creature with his own creatures, in the body of a woman, blending in with us, to live in our midst.

» *The mystery of Nazareth*

Jesus lived thirty years of his short earthly existence in the normal life common to all the boys and youth of Palestine in his time: blended into their midst, yet so different from them. Son of God and Son of Man.

A baby and a child as we were; a young man who worked, loved, thought...as we do. He had a family and friends, he knew how to see the beauty in the lilies of the field and in the grass of the meadow.... The time in Nazareth contains an important dimension of the life of Jesus, the most mysterious and the most difficult to recount. We cannot think that



Jesus saved the world in just the three years when he preached, performed miracles, and was manifested in his extraordinary Messianic nature. Jesus was also the Messiah Saviour in the years when his existence had nothing to recount: a life wrapped in silence, because it was too common, too ordinary, too much like that of each of us. His life was even so common as to be a stumbling block. After the multiplication of the loaves and the discourse with which Jesus unrolled his message in the synagogue of Capernaum, the people said, "Isn't he Jesus, the son of Joseph? We know his father and his mother. How then can he say: 'I came down from heaven'?" (John 6:42).

In the years of Nazareth, our salvation was passing through his life as a son; through the silence in which Jesus made his own the Father's love for humanity and decision to save it; through the prayer that nourished his relationship with God and provided the "place" of encounter, heart to heart, to embrace ever more fully the truth that He one day would reveal to Nicodemus: "God has so loved the world as to give his only Son for it."

Finally, Nazareth enters the mystery of human history, because Naza-

reth has filled human history with divine sharing and silent love; Nazareth has planted in it, like the seed of new life, the decisive dedication to sacrifice life so that human beings might encounter the love that is stronger than death.

The icon of Nazareth, that is of the time in which Jesus was so like us as to be completely blended with each one of us, is the paradigm of an ordinary Christian life.

Perhaps the thirty years of silence, of anonymity, of hiddenness signify precisely the will to share human experience and its value. Thus Augustine's statement is understandable, calling Adam's sin a *felix culpa*, which has won for us the ability to know God through the humanity of Jesus.

To live as women and men bearing the imprint of God's breath means to obey the command of the Creator God who has invited us to collaborate with Him in "subjecting the world," that is infusing laws with thought, directing the earth's resources to the use of humanity, for whom they are intended; and sharing with the Lord Jesus the mission to restore beauty and their original harmony to the world, to life, to all things.

4 The teaching of the Council

The Second Vatican Council's reflection emphasized this perspective: even before expressing respect for the presence of lay Christians for the mission of the Church in the world, the Council spoke about the solidarity of the Church with the "joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties" of all humanity (Gaudium et Spes 1), inviting lay Christians to "learn the



deepest meaning and the value of all creation, as well as its role in the harmonious praise of God” (Lumen Gentium 36) and to be immersed in it like yeast, to make its beauty shine and to bring into full bloom all the goodness it contains. These reflections are also the fruit of a laity that has sought to live with ever-maturing decisiveness its conviction of being responsible to contribute to building the world as God’s creature, developing this characteristic belief in the midst of a laicism hostile, then no less than now, to the contribution of Christians to the life of society.

Today, even though there may be within lay Christians—especially those who grew up in a certain climate and exemplify the Conciliar generation—a keen sensibility of the value of the Christian laity, yet a prejudice also remains against the secular dimension of life: a belief that a commitment seemingly squandered in this sphere may be less noble than the dimension traditionally considered spiritual: prayer, parish involvement, pastoral responsibility.... There remains the prejudice that to live a full Christian life one has to leave the world and to abandon the dust of history.... As long as this prejudice remains, our cities and the society we belong to will lack the salt and the yeast of the Gospel.

A Church whose pastoral action is to be the soul of the world is committed to reconsider the spirit of the Council’s Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* in which the Church searches to live its spirituality as translated into attitudes, into choices, into dialogue and into openness.

This attention to the world must mature in a true love for the world. If Jesus had not loved the world, He would not have given His life for it; and He gave it to the extent of being consumed, to the extent of giving His life.

This has value for each one of us; but it has value first for the Church, for the community in which we live.

Nevertheless it is not easy to find believers who know how to grasp in the world the beauty that leads one back to its Creator; disciples of the

Lord who know how to imitate their Teacher with a love that saves, disposed not to be stopped by evil, willing to let themselves be overcome by evil rather than to abandon the world to the darkness of death. The believer's attitude toward the world can be considered the proof of a Christian form of love.

Dialogue with the world has had many significant phases in these last years, a new interest, a new openness to people's lives, a new and wider attention to the problems of the human community, especially of the poor. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that the journey still needs to advance further. Certainly the community has made progress in heart-felt sharing in the problems of society and of the poorest persons. Less growth has occurred in the spirit of encounter which the Council asked us to develop, e.g., the sense that as Christians, as a Church in the world, we participate deeply in the events, tensions, sufferings... of the world in which we live and that we are not interlocutors with it instead, like someone standing before it rather than like a brother or sister or a travelling companion who shares the fatigue and the beauty of the journey. For this reason dialogue with the world has produced more mistrust than richness, from the moment that our community faces the human community and is not very open to admitting that we can receive riches and positive clues in the quest for God from its experience, from the search of humanity and of today's generation.

Lay people, or rather those Christians living in the world, are in a privileged position to experience and share the joys and the sufferings, the griefs and the anxieties of today's men and women; these are also ours. It is necessary to learn how to live a faith tightly interwoven with everyday life and the experience of the world, and to realize that the capacity to translate faith into words of intense humanity can be significant to our brothers and sisters who are searching for meaning in their lives. A Church that is the soul of the world is a Church disposed **to be con-**

verted to humanity, *the humanity of the Lord*, which is very little considered, appreciated, contemplated... as a path to meeting him in his existence; as the mystery of his sharing of our own humanity; our humanity, to be educated, formed, developed. Our Christianity is not outside of us, of our history, of our humanity, all of which make up the most ordinary and common language to express the Gospel and demonstrate it: this is the humanity



of the *people who live side by side with us*. We have the same roots, the same dignity and communal values. *The humanity of the word* we proclaim cannot be cut off from life or—worse still—against life: so that there may be no doctrine lacking the substance of existence; so that our voice may reveal the grandeur of our vocation as men and women and indicate a route toward the fullness of that vocation; so that law may not confine but love may free; so that there may be no dull repetition of thoughts but a revelation that lets us glimpse the significance of each moment and the humanity of *relationships among us and with all*; so that we may possess that warmth, that cordiality, that welcome, that mercy and that absence of judgement which characterized the relationships of Jesus with the persons he met.

To dwell in the world with the heart of God

For a Christian, dwelling in the world is not generic, as if the world were simply a territory to inhabit. Rather this dwelling is a presence which reflects the transforming power of an encounter with the Lord, a life-changing encounter.

Holy Scripture is full of episodes which relate the overwhelming power of an encounter with God. Zaccheus stopped being a thief and distributed what he had accumulated through theft; those who were called set out to follow Jesus; Paul became an apostle after experiencing the Risen Christ on his way to Damascus to persecute the disciples of the Lord. Hosts of people after them changed the direction of their lives after realizing that life has more profound and diverse dimensions than are found on the surface. Often the changes that faith has introduced into their lives are less dramatic than those mentioned above. These people have simply acquired another way of looking at existence, noticing in it all that is invisible to a superficial or greedy or selfish gaze.

But how is one to return to daily activities after meeting the Lord? How can one link Gospel faith and ordinary, everyday existence? How combine the absolutely extraordinary relationship with the Risen Lord and daily responsibilities, daily commitments, former relationships? What value does everyday life have after one has discovered in it other, unknown dimensions? What change does one make in life if one believes that the Crucified Christ is the Risen One?

The ancient writer of the “Letter to Diogneto” answers these questions with a famous description of Christian life in the world. It is worth repeating: “Christians don't differ from others, not in territory or language or dress. They don't live in their own city, nor speak an unusual language. Their way of life has nothing strange about it. They live in Greek or foreign cities, wherever they happen to be, and conform to the local customs in dress, food and the rest of everyday life, by all accounts demonstrating the marvellous and extraordinary character of their way of life. They live in their own country but as strangers. Every foreign country is theirs and every country is a foreign land. They are made of flesh but they don't live according to the flesh. They live on the earth but they are citizens of heaven. They obey established laws, and by their life they

surpass laws....”

Anyone familiar with the Gospel realizes that one cannot sustain the sad and grim Christianity so often encountered in people who have lost contact with the founts of Christian life. Christianity is the experience of women and men who love life; who take joy in their familial and social experiences, their relationships with friends and neighbours, politics and their professions; who know how to appreciate humanity in all its dimensions: emotions, responsibilities, tasks, love; who know how to make sense of the difficult experiences which mark everyone’s existence: illness, pain, limitations, solitude, death; who do not relinquish their humanity and its expression in today's culture.

They are persons who have discovered how the Gospel fulfils humanity: “they are human beings like everyone else, fully participating in the life of the city and of society, in the human successes and failures; but they are also hearers of the Word, called to pass on the evangelical difference in history, to give a soul to the world, so that humanity can journey towards that Kingdom for which it was created.”¹

Because of this stance, Christians do not try to withdraw from everyday living and the responsibilities that they share with everyone. Precisely because of this responsibility, they feel that they participate with interest, with cordiality, wishing to be real citizens while knowing that they also have to be a bit "strangers": strangers who look at the world and love it with God's heart; strangers to every minimalist



¹ Italian Episcopal Conference, *Comunicare il Vangelo in un mondo che cambia*, 2001, n. 35.

interpretation of existence, to all that is worldly, to every exaltation of the individual and of individual interests without consideration of others; strangers to cravings for success and power; strangers who do not focus on differences or distance, but offer an original interpretation of life, one that is not obvious, that is unusual.

Often it is difficult to sustain this position, between the need to inhabit the ordinary conditions of everybody's life and the necessity of not conforming oneself to it. The widespread tendency in today's society is toward approved behaviour, habits, and evaluations of facts and situations. The pressure of the mass media, the fashion of paying attention only to the "successful", widespread superficiality—together with so many other factors—influence everybody, especially the very young, and induce them to adopt the behaviour of the majority, to have what everybody has, to dress the same way.

One might say that there is a need to adapt to the rules of popular custom to feel part of a society which confers identity and the feeling of belonging through these indicators. These tendencies, which apply not only to faith but to many behaviours, make the alternative character of Christian living difficult. The Gospel mandate "It

should not be so among you" appears to be a law that places Christians in a singular situation, often hard put to develop, to support, to motivate. Nevertheless, as Christians and as a community, we will have something to say to the people with whom we share each day, only if we know how to demonstrate that there is another way of living the com-



mon experiences of everyday life. Now is the time to discover the extraordinary beauty of life lived as Christians, according to the Gospel, exactly as an alternative to the current ideas and behaviours. *Alternative* is not synonymous with eccentric or strange. The alternative does not come from some pleasure in being different, but from the impulse to express an original vision of life that can regenerate ordinary existence in different cultures. *Alternative*: not to indulge in stressing one's identity and pointing out differences, but to show another understanding of life.

5. Lexicon of the daily life of lay Christians

I would like to try synthesizing the concrete characteristics of the lay person through key words which describe what it means to live as lay Christians in the world.

Each one of these words has a double facet: dimensions of toil and of greatness. It depends upon each person's choices whether one can take hold only of the toil or also of the possibility, the greatness, the prospects that open up for our life.

a) Solitude

This is a word that normally brings fear. However, if one thinks about the daily experience of lay people, one comes to realize that it is their ordinary condition. Each one gives witness in a context where others do not have a Christian viewpoint on life. In respect to these others we can sometimes feel very close, sometimes distant and even very alone. This solitude, though, makes it possible to look deep inside and to see that there is a treasure in everyone's life that no one can violate, but which is precisely inside and constitutes the secret of existence.

To know how to live one's own experience as lay *inside* this dimension of solitude means knowing how to reach this treasure in the depth of our life. This is the mystery of communion with the Lord.

So solitude is not a negative experience, but a precious one, even if at times it has dramatic aspects. Someone in solitude before God, profoundly aware of the mystery of this communion, experiences that there are decisions that pertain to him, and him alone. Here one experiences the drama of freedom, but also the greatness of life. There are moments when we would like to have someone tell us what to do, but instead we find ourselves at a fork in the road, facing routes that are equally daunting and difficult. An intrinsic part of lay experience is this dimension of solitude as the greatness of an awareness in which God dwells; as God's trust in our freedom.

b) Risk

The second word is "risk". This is not a part of the language learned in the catechism—likewise with solitude---instead it is the experience of the laity. It is said that, in our concrete experiences, the greatness of the vision of life we believe and the absoluteness of values cannot remain completely as we would like them to be. Each day brings the responsibility of making concrete choices between good and bad, but more often choices between an evil and a lesser evil; between confusing hypotheses; between partial goods. We are not always sure that we are making the right choices. We must risk trusting in God when we do not have other certainties, and also because the choices are always partial. At times they are made because something has to be done, not be-



cause everything is clear. However, it is necessary to choose because there are moments in which we have to take a position.

Therefore, there exists a dimension of risk, which links the experience of solitude with the need to take a gamble; to gamble on the concrete and the partial.

It is necessary to choose so as not to be in danger of proclaiming values merely with words, of limiting ourselves to affirming a “*should*” to which there is no corresponding lived reality nor the courage to make partial choices. Standing inside historical reality means having a sense of the partial, which certain concrete choices impose, with all the dramatic outcome that sometimes entails.

c) Originality

The third word is “*originality*”. There are times when either we know how to preserve the originality of being Christians or Christianity becomes a proclamation of theoretical principles.

There is a paschal originality that is belief in the paradoxical value of the cross and therefore of all the frail and losing choices. In family life or in work, the proof of being Christians lies in the capacity to be ourselves, in the originality of certain countercultural choices regarding family life or the choice of work, not only on criteria of career or earnings. For example, it is not enough to say that money is not the most important thing in life. It is necessary to prove this affirmation of principle in the actual choices one makes regarding the family, the use of resources, time, energy, house....

d) Sharing

Sharing the common good is very typical of lay Christians. They share the experience of everybody else, of the women and men with whom they live, with that originality which I have mentioned. It is an aspect which has to be emphasized with regard to the capacity for sharing life

with others: all that one is and all that one has.

But there is another dimension of sharing: availability to stand with the poorest people, in tune with those who have scarce resources.

Then their poverty becomes a little bit ours too, reflected in us, and continues in time the choice of the Lord Jesus who, being God, became man. It is not enough to be generous, dedicated. It is also necessary to be ready to change something in our own way of life on the basis of these encounters. A different way of using money, house, and time do not depend on a theoretical choice but on allowing this change, so that others may be the word that the Lord sends to each one so as to give to all a mark that belongs to Him more than to human beings.

2nd Report:

To live the Gospel in the world. The Spirituality of Ordinary things

1. Some features of Angela Merici's spirituality

How can one live the Gospel while living in the world?

Certainly Angela Merici must have been faced with this difficult problem, seeing that she had chosen and suggested an unusual way of living. One had to find a new way of life which was different to the correct one and which was expected of those living inside the



walls of the convent, with one that was measured or laid down by an unfamiliar authority.

Angela Merici gave a few examples of this way of life in her Rule, which emphasised the necessity that a Christian life could neither be measured nor enclosed in an organisation where personal conscience was not the most important factor. It was based on all that was spiritual, could act freely and had some points of reference which mattered, like prayer, the sacraments, fasting, poverty or spiritual detachments rather

than absence of worldly possessions. Then there was obedience which freed us from “that dark hell”, our self will and made us conform to the will of God; obedience came from the counsels and inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

With regards to prayer, what strikes us most in The Rule is the recommendation not to linger too long in church in prayer after mass.

A meaningful Christian life does not mean not binding oneself or lightly doing one’s duty. On the contrary, it means leading a life that will be entrusted to the Holy Spirit, obeying the inward counsels and inspirations which He conveys to clean and purify our conscience. This will help us to be faithful to the Gospels when faced with real situations.

This is a spirituality which asks nothing extraordinary of us except the responsibility of leading a Christian life, based on solid values and generosity.

2. To joyfully live day by day (Cozzano)

The greatest test for leading a good Christian life is to learn to live day by day.

Our daily life is made up of little everyday things; our work, our house, the family and simple actions which repeat themselves; our relationship with others, at times peaceful and serene, at times very conflicting and tense, full of mishaps and worries, the persons we meet with, problems which arise; in short, various situations .. We all live through this; a life that seems to be meaningless or full of anxiety. These situations are not dependent on external circumstances but on the attitude with which we address circumstances in our day to day life.

We can look at life in many ways and on different levels; we can live the day doing all that has to be done. Not being idle, we are full of life.

We also have to consider the quality of our lives (e.g. our status; are we young, adults or old? Healthy or sick? Rich or poor?) Our lives fol-

low patterns which are bound by our conditions or by the life we lead according to the culture of the place we live in.

Our life is modelled by our choices, with the norms that gave it shape and, over time, defined it further and allowed it to mature... However it is often difficult to retain at a conscious and mature level, the choices of any one particular day. Routine tends to blur everything, to take away the originality, to make us doubt what previously seemed beautiful and significant. Ultimately, our daily actions will become the testing ground for the correctness of our earlier choices.

Besides, we have to take into consideration a more serious factor; our awareness of our experience with God and with ourselves. Our daily experience of God makes our daily life worth living. Such profoundness encourages stability and self realization; it also reflects the extent of maturity in our choices, in our behaviour and in our attitude, concepts which are all dependent on our conscience.

This also influences the serene and tranquil way with

which we face life. In the writings of Saint Angela, we can feel a sense of spiritual joy and happiness, (According to the witness of Cozzano, counsellor of The Company, she joyfully lived day by day). These pages are compared to bright morning freshness. Angela is a clear example of a light gentle way of life. (M. Marcocchi, in



Vita Cattolica, 21 -1 - 2010, pp.34-35)

We can have all this in our daily life without doing anything extraordinary, exceptional or heroic.

Today, society does not give much importance to ordinary events: the daily life, work, intimate relationships. These risk fading away in our daily routine; to live day by day to the full is not a fresh challenge any more, it becomes a form of escapism. Preference is given to stronger experiences, which leave an intense emotional impact. One may even resort to the obscure, to contraventions, to thrills and whatever causes excitement to be aroused from lethargy. We are passing through such superficial experiences and we struggle to rediscover our identity.

Considering all this, how can we live as Christians? How and what can we do to avoid living a mediocre Christian life?

3. Some features of the ordinary Christian life in the world

The nuptial union of Angela Merici with Christ is characteristic of her spirituality. Since “they were chosen to be the true and virginal spouses of the Son of God” “true virginal spouse of the Most High”, virginity “a voluntary sacrifice of one’s own heart”, becomes an expression of an only and indivisible love and is described as “... sister of all angels, victory over the appetites, queen of the virtues and she possess all good”.

Here is an experience of love beyond measure that may still be experienced today. I believe that today we have to rediscover that our faith grows stronger through our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a free and liberating relationship which prepares us for the future because we know that we form part of a loving plan which is difficult for us to recognize and understand.

I believe that, at the centre of our faith, there is the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Like any other true relationship, even that with the Lord will liberate us from ourselves

I believe that today it is necessary to emphasise that faith is love and love keeps us alive in our day to day existence; it also gives meaning to our life. The strength of a total and deeply rooted love increases our faith. It is not a love to be given away freely or the choice to live for others, but love, a gift we have received, not because we deserve it, but because we are the Daughters of a merciful God.

To live, therefore, means to receive from God our life as a gift of love, as a loving word; and to believe that God is faithful, because He continues to walk besides us even when our path becomes dark, threatening and full of pain...

Let us look for the Word which tells us about this love

The Lord has left us a Word which tells us about this love. The Word is the Lord who speaks to us in person, who accompanies us and shows us the way. Who listens frequently to the Word, grows closer to the Lord and experiences a gradual change.

If we listen to the Word, we are in close contact with the mystery, without expecting to understand or possess it; it is like looking for the key to God's heart in order to penetrate the mystery of life. Listening to the Word enkindles in our heart a greater desire for His Word. It is a regimented exercise; a continuous refining of our heart, enabling us to understand deeply. Listening to the Word in the Gospels compliments our needs because the Risen Christ lives today in all that happens in our lives;



not only in extraordinary events but in the humble, ordinary, simple, everyday events which, at times, seem so meaningless.

The Word relates to us the numerous events which occur in our life, beautiful, dramatic events; a quasi “sacramental” situation in which God makes Himself seen and is hidden from us at the same time.

Life is one whole mystery; life which begins in a woman’s womb is a mystery; the carefree life of a growing child is a mystery; forgiveness, which enables inter-personal relationships to grow again, is a mystery; to reveal an important fact after long years of study and research is a mystery...

God has given us a light which forms our path and enlightens our questions about life. His Word explains, gives meaning, reveals the least thought of aspects in life and offers us a point of reference on human life.

God has spoken to man; that is, He has taken care of him, answered his questions and addressed his need to have a reason for living. How can we walk towards Him unless we are given a sense of direction and shown the way? How can we make our meeting with Him the whole existence of our life? How can we understand the truth about ourselves? That we were created by Him and made for Him and that we are troubled until we remain away from Him? (Ref. St. Augustine)

In Psalm 119 we read: “Your Word is a lamp for my feet...” (ps.119; 105) God does not leave us in darkness; He does not abandon us where we might get lost. The Word He offers us is like a soft glowing light not for certain as bright as that of the sun which fills the horizon. The lamp lights only a few steps; the rest remains in darkness.

Yet, how can we live without this lamp, which allows us to make out the outline of things so that we may not stumble against them; how can we become aware of the beauty that is around us and which is hidden from us?

God entrusts the revelation of the infinite greatness of His mystery to the weakness of the word. But we know that if we trust in His word, our life will open new horizons to us, and besides the apparent trivial occurrences, we will also discover an immeasurable intensity in our daily life.

Receiving and celebrating love

The Lord gives us the gift of love that we need and long for; the love we would like to receive and that which we would like to be able to return; this love is the Holy Eucharist, particularly that which we celebrate every Sunday as a community.

The gift of the Holy Eucharist has the power to change us and make us love. We are accustomed to two particular aspects of the Eucharist, that of changing bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ: but even our life can be changed when we take part in the Eucharist. It is also a new experience because it makes us aware of the love that is given to us freely. The Eucharist is the sign and the strength of God's love. If we have faith in a love that believes that our life is worth living for and a gift in itself, we are transformed.

We know from experience that, when facing a difficult situation, having a person who loves us, who has faith in us and who is ever-present in our lives, makes all the difference. That is the time when we discover an unexpected inner force that urges us on, it is an extraordinary strength



which is given to us when we need to face the hardest and most difficult situations, like resisting the evil there is in us and to admit our weaknesses and sins.

Every Eucharistic celebration is a living experience of meeting with the mystery of the only Person who is interested in accompanying us on our path so that we will be able to recognize ourselves, attain freedom, happiness and love. By the strength given to us from the Holy Eucharist we can acknowledge our deviations and find the strength to return. We cannot leave the Eucharist celebration without feeling the responsibility to live in continuous harmony with the gift that was received and celebrated. I believe that the first fruit of the Eucharist is a new way of looking at life: to find the same Lord of the Holy Eucharist in our life, in others, in different situations, in the poor people, in everything He hides from us and yet is present. In every situation we can make out the mysterious presence of Our Lord Jesus Christ; in every situation we have the responsibility to live like Him because this is the only way we can really be grateful for the gift we have received. Living like Him means only one thing; love.

To lead a life that is full of love

There is one fundamental law for the Christian; to act like Christ and give oneself for the love of others, to love without measure as though one has nothing to lose not even one's life: "he who loses his life will keep it safe" (Mt. 17, 34) said Jesus to His disciples. "Unless the wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it will not yield a rich harvest" (Jn. 12, 24). To lose one's life does not necessarily mean to die but to live for others, to make a gift of one's self with no reserve and no compromise: if necessary, *to the very end*. It is the Easter celebration which is prolonged in time and given meaning in daily living.

The lay Christian person *loses his life* every day, at work, in the family circle, in his social and political responsibilities, in business and in sim-

ple relationships. We can recall many instances from a lay person's life but we must keep in mind one fact:

Since "it is not we who love God, but He loved us first" (1 Jn. 4, 10), love now is not only a *commandment*, but an answer to the gift of love by which God comes to meet us. With these words God's love delineates the life of the Christian; a life which is surrounded by love that was received and that was given like two expressions of the same meaning. The love which we offer in return to the love offered which is found in the Gospels, is given as a commandment, but deep down we are drawn to it out of gratitude for the gift we have received.

To love God and to love man are two aspects of the same love; two indivisible forms of the same love which dares turn to God out of filial confidence and tenderness; brotherly love is drawn from the love of God, it is a need which comes to us only if we love God. In his first letter, Saint John writes with authority: "Whoever does not love the brother whom he can see, cannot love God whom he has not seen!" (1 Jn 4, 20).

Love therefore becomes the very air the Christian breathes and which is expressed in simple every day trivial actions which create an aura of serenity around us, filling our lives with love and hope.

A word left unsaid because it could hurt or a harsh word expressed for the good of others, the will to help when we ourselves are tired, giving up a treasured object if someone else needs it. It is enough to recall any



day to become aware of how often these occasions crop up in our relationship with family members, colleagues at work, acquaintances and friends. And these are simple incidents. At times, at the end of the day during which we feel we have done very little, trying not to think about ourselves rather than thinking about what we have done makes us feel more tired. If we feel that we are tired because we have really loved, this is the sign that it was a day of love. And if perhaps when we were younger we might have thought that love, charity, and being of service, were important because they helped us to be consistent in other acts that were just as important, little by little we realize that nothing is easier than loving and being charitable and what gives them importance and value is our attitude and whole heartedness. So on the days when we feel we have done very little but we have shown kindness, solidarity and care to all, in reality these days are worth living because they fill our conscience with peace and give us an inner sense of achievement.

The Gospels recall another important responsibility; that of showing love above all towards the needy. No real disciple of the Lord, no lay person can forget this. The needy person is he who knocks on our door, the colleague at work who has family problems; our neighbour who suffers from solitude; grandparents who need to be cared for. Everyone knows who the needy one meets during the day are and which choices and attitudes show our submission to God's love. In his letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul bursts forth in praise of love and charity found in little every day gestures: "Love is always patient and kind, love is never jealous, love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, and it does not take offence or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice at wrong doings but finds its joy in truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes." (1Cor 13, 4-7).

Who has given everything, already knows that one is receiving a hundredfold in return; the knowledge to act freely, compassion towards the

needy, the ability to live knowing that the Lord is the only treasured possession of one's being. The secret of the Gospels, in truth is that he who gives away his life really owns it because in this way one truly owns what he gives as a gift.

By his actions, the Christian contributes towards a "resurrected life", by means of his choices, thoughts and a way of life which he obtained from the resurrection of the Lord and which has the power to change him. The resurrection is even now, present in the world and in humanity. Certainly our resurrection has to wait until our judgement day, but even now, we can see the signs which we were promised in anticipation.

Even the most mundane events in our lives have a new meaning; that which originally God had in His plan. In this way, work is not only a place where one earns one's living, but becomes a noble experience, where man can collaborate with God's creation and show solidarity with the needs of all. The love shown by human beings rediscovers the beauty of giving one's self to others.

The family is a place where the love between a man and a woman expresses the love of God and is a sign of fertility. Education helps the new generations to discover and develop the gift of being man and woman. Politics is the person's contribution, according to ability and knowledge, towards building and forming a city where ideas are valued and one can live in dignity.



In a written document to Diogneto we read that the Christians “*show their wonderful and extraordinary character, according to what is said of them, by the life they lead*”. We can imagine how the people wondered at this way of life and how astonished they were at the gentleness the Christians showed. How they were always being of service, the way they offered themselves as a gift, their quest for justice and their solidarity in refusing the blessings of a normal daily life, claiming that their Lord and Master was crucified and risen. This way of life ensures that there is hope that life is worth living; that it is worthwhile to take things seriously, that one can start afresh every day. Whoever sees the way of life we lead, will understand that within us there is a hidden secret which sustains and enlightens us.

Perhaps, gradually, by means of our testimony and our way of talking, they will be able to understand that Jesus Christ died and was resurrected so that we could live happily and find meaning in our existence. They will be able to understand that our blessings give us happiness if they see us living with no worldly possessions, loving peace, ready to forgive others, show mercy and love for justice, our freedom and transparency of our life is.

In this way the wisdom of those who live their lives faithfully and according to His Gospel, takes shape. It can be found in their many actions, attitudes, choices and the way they tone down their existence. It is shown in the gentle way with which they face life and the compassion which moves them in times of sorrow; how they suffer for those who are ill; and the solidarity they show through simple trivial actions. There is one phrase which explains all this wisdom and the ability to render the frailty of our lives less serious. Let us live our life as though it were an earthenware jar with a hidden treasure inside. This wisdom gives strength to the weaknesses in our life, like illness, poverty, failure, death itself; and while the world interprets the meaning of these aspects as a curse, this wisdom accepts them as part of life itself; not as a sign of sub-

mission and weakness but with a far sighted attitude and obedience to a mystery which one cannot understand.

Faith changes our expectations of what life offers and the Christian can enjoy the healing perfume of the Gospel, which can be described as an overflowing love and can be compared to the woman from Bethany, who, out of love for Christ, did not hesitate to break a precious alabaster vase. Our humanity lies in our daily interpretation of the Gospel. All other languages need translation; this language does not. All we have to do is to make others feel welcome, to give everyone their full value, to meet them half way, and to give ourselves wholeheartedly for the sake of showing solidarity and dedication. All this is proof of a deep human strength behind which we find God's plan. The lives of the holy lay persons from Verona reflect their human characteristics but these are changed by the power of God who lives in them. To live this kind of life, each one of them allowing being lead down the spiritual paths suggested by the church where they could find their own path to follow. This helped to give meaning to the mystery hidden in their hearts and which they interpreted as their call, that which urged them on; that gift found in various episodes bound to their daily real life. Nobody was asked not to lead a normal life in order to follow his Christian vocation. With this thought in mind, we can understand how our vocation can lead us to sanctity, irrespective of our situation, the times we live in and every real situation we find ourselves in.

These saints are different not for the lives they lead and the clothes they wear but because they have an inner driving force which changes them into citizens belonging to another city. This is something valuable which can be seen and leaves people wondering in awe.

To bring to the Christian community the aspects of everyday life

We must help the Christian community in its missionary aspect, by means of a deep understanding of existence and the ability to translate

this message to others, keeping in mind today's culture.

How can we live, think like and being part of the church? We must consider the li-

turgy, the initiative and

projects of the Church. While many are involved in the functions of the church, and this in itself is an invaluable testimony, unfortunately very often their work does not bring out the spiritual reasons of belonging to it and neither gives them a true sense of belonging.

I think that today it is very important to emphasise the spiritual situation of the Church; it is necessary for a lay person to be of a testimony to others, not only in the community one lives in, but in the entire world, simply because one belongs to the Church. Therefore it is only if one can experience an inner spiritual belonging, that the Church can be universal; it is only if one is aware of this mysterious belonging that one can understand why faith, (a faith lived in solitude, in one's day to day existence), is precious for the Church and important for one's life.

I think it is important to reflect on the mystery of the spiritual situation of the Church, because it has to help lay people feel drawn closer by its faith; let the many different vocations manifest it and to accept and live the original ideas of the community to which they belong.



MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS AND SISTERS IN THE MERICIAN CHARISM

Testimony of Mirella Turri

I belong to the Company of Trent. Since 1998 I have been the directress; my term ends this coming September. When I was asked to present a testimony, I felt unable to refuse, because it seemed to me good and just to return, in this case to you, what the Lord has given me, the gift of life. I return it because it does not belong to me. Thank you for this opportunity and for your attention.

The word of St. Angela that suddenly resounded in me,



and has always in the course of these years, was how many times she says to us in the Counsels: *I remind you to strive, with the help of God, to take hold of and plant within you this right conviction and humble sentiment: do not consider yourselves worthy to be superiors and leaders. Rather, regard yourselves as ministers and servants, reflecting that you have more need to serve them than they have to be served by you...that God could very well provide for them by other means even better than you, but in his mercy he has wanted to use you as his means for your greater good.*

I recall that in the first years I experienced a continual interior

struggle, although I appeared serene, because I felt myself profoundly inferior to the task that I was called to carry out, even incapable; how many times I would have wished to escape. I would have crawled under the table instead of leading a Council meeting. With the passage of the years the Lord has granted me the grace of conversion, of knowing how to accept this commitment.

The commitment, the desire and the greater dream was that of promoting, with everything in me, with all my strength, but above all with the strength and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, unity in the Company, being a united family where peace and harmony reign, where everyone can feel at home. It is through faith that I accepted this duty, and again through faith that the sisters of the Company of Trent accepted me as Directress.

Any time I shifted away from this vision of faith, I did not understand anything, everything seemed absurd, I went into crisis. Through discovering and understanding that I needed to perform my duty of leadership in the Company, with the passage of time it became truly liberating and helped me to have an accurate sense and awareness of myself; of my role, gained by carrying it out; and of being useful but not indispensable.

At times it is quite difficult to keep track of what is essential, what is most important, what is worthwhile, because we are attracted or distracted by something else; because at times we are misled, mistaken. However, insofar as I was able, I have sought to put at the center of my heart, of projects, of every duty, the sister, every sister. I wanted good for each sister individually, not en masse. It seems to me a matter of knowing something about each one, what I managed to understand, to perceive, what it was given to me to know. I recognize that at times I have found difficulty in maintaining a balance between my mission and affirming the liberty of each one. I know only that if at

times I have not understood all or have misunderstood some sister, nonetheless I have wanted good for each one with a very particular love. Growing into my role, I have matured in coming to venerate and profoundly respect the liberty of each one. Every sister has touched my heart; I feel a tenderness for each one and in particular for the ones I see as distant or indifferent, in difficulty, or ill, alone, suffering in any way.



Reading the words of the Madre is always a special experience. as in these years certain expressions have had a particular impact, have struck me deeply. I feel that *these words have a special power when they tell me, in the Second Legacy, have engraved on your mind and heart all your dear daughters, one by one. And at the end she insists again, It will be impossible for you not to have them all depicted individually in your memory and in your heart.* For me these are the loveliest images that express how great the love for every sister should be, so great that I identify myself with them. The artist is the Holy Spirit, who continues his work in the measure that they are open to it. Every event is precious and significant, but the fundamental ones are the meetings and dialogues with every sister, the sharing that happens, the depth and the sincerity of the review. From these encounters I can testify that I have always drawn great benefit and edification, I have learned to be a *true and virginal spouse of the Son of God.* Often I have felt inadequate, incapable, wordless, etc... and even then

I remained faithful to my mission, acknowledged my limitation, listened even more intensely and prayed. Being the directress has meant persisting, in meeting the sisters, in caring to *be seen as dear sisters*, promoting and profiting from all the occasions, encouraging these meetings, constant dialogue. It means rejoicing when encountering the sisters, finding out that they have gone to visit a certain sister, perhaps one who is troubled or anxious and sick. That was always a great joy; I was with them, I felt myself represented, as I represented the whole Company.

St. Angela tells us, *I am leaving you in my place as my heirs*. Every time that I am about to meet with a sister I prepare myself by praying to St. Angela that she may warm my heart, inspire my words, my listening, my silences, my entire attitude. I experience these encounters as something “sacred,” which belongs uniquely to God, I am his humble servant, open to his gaze. I am in the Company precisely to serve, the Company is not mine. I am there to promote a more true and authentic life, to promote *our spiritual journey is expressed in a continuous stretching toward Christ. United to Him, in our being united together to “serve” the Kingdom of God in secularity*, in fidelity. So say our Constitutions.

My constant commitment all these years was: to continue to be deeply myself and at the same time to renounce being myself. To clarify: I have sought and allowed that my gifts, my talents, the nature given to me by God



be at the service of my duty. But at the same time I have sought to let go of and to renounce some involvements, for example in the parish or in the missionary world, in order to be more available for the Company. I refer not only to availability of time and means, but in particular to an availability of heart, of desires, of aspirations and even of dreams. Certainly I cherish some dreams and cultivate them in the depth of my heart, and perhaps one day they will still be able to be realized, always if it please God.

Even my prayer has changed, perhaps my situation has changed, in fact my first commitment is that of presenting to God in the privacy of my relationship with Him all my sisters and daughters and to seek for each one that *she remain in consolation and have a lively faith and hope and further that she may always be blessed by the blessed and indivisible Trinity.*

So as not to forget anyone, before beginning to pray, I have sometimes looked over the list of all the sisters. It was truly beautiful, interesting and touching to make this quick tour of Trent in a few minutes. Yet I must confess that time after time, shaking my head, I have turned to God saying, O God, what a poor directress this Company of Trent has! You see that I don't know how to act, I don't know how to speak, I don't know how..., I don't know how..., I am so afraid, etc.... As each one can testify, I too can say, the Lord has been good to me, and is always at my side.



Further, I want to share with you my experience with my Council, emphasizing “my” as the Constitutions always say, truly I have experienced the Council as a reality indistinguishable from my own service. The governance of the Company has been moved forward by us together. Every choice, every decision was born and grew in the womb of the Council, in the diversity among us, the sharing, listening, research, mutual assistance, challenge, patience, support, etc.... In all frankness I can say that without the Council I would not be the directress, instead I would be like a body lacking its vital parts. Together we have had a meaningful experience, because every councillor was “put in charge”

as we called it, has as it were adopted some sisters, so all had the opportunity to feel attended to and to experience closeness, sisterhood, attention, help when it was needed. Being on the slope of sisterhood is to be always on a journey, and this is also beautiful and attractive; it is important to travel and to



welcome the challenges, the needs that reality continually presents. Experience suggests to me that often all the needs and exigencies of everyone are not successfully addressed, that misunderstandings are part of the journey; however, nothing and no one goes unappreciated or undervalued, all at the end combines for the greater good, all becomes a sign that speaks to me; even adversities have always helped me to take hold of reality more truly and really.

In these years we have dealt with different realities, such as the goods of the Company, i.e., the houses, and the Company of Trent owns several. Together we have read and analyzed our reality, paid attention to the signs of the times that the Lord always places on our road; my duty was to move forward and to say: Let us face this reality, let us look it in the face and then let us act accordingly. To act together is truly consoling and liberating.

Personally I understood clearly and concretely that the goods of the Company are not the Company. You may tell me that this affirmation is more than obvious. Certainly the works are excellent assets, have developed a valuable service in our diocese, but they are not the

Company. They made history, they responded at that time to urgent, compelling needs. But now the reality is different in many ways, not least in how the concept of a secular institute has evolved. In having chosen together a different use for these houses I feel profoundly free. We have not denied the past, but we are faithful to the present, as in another time, our sisters who preceded us were faithful to the commitments of *their* present.

When occasionally I was tempted to think that everything was going to ruin, luckily I also felt echoing in me like a great light the gems of



the Madre that we find in several parts of her writings: *strive to act solely out of the sole love of God and out of the sole zeal for souls*. For me that “sole” has a formidable power, meaning God alone, and this is enough for me, enough for us.



Also, if this change was not always easy and simple, I bless the Lord because he has granted us an experience of being a Company. In fact all of us, more or less, were attached to these goods: together we had the occasion to be generous, to become more stripped down, lighter for the sake of walking the road more quickly to realize the Father’s plans for us, for the Company, for the Church, and for humanity in our time.

My commitment was not to invent for myself a road, a project, but to understand, listen, support the needs of the membership, to take charge of them, to try to carry them, to feel them on my skin. At the same time to continue to feel myself one of the members, not to separate myself, not to believe myself different, and still to continue to listen to myself too.

To be in harmony, united together in renewal, to grow together, not apart, I wanted to continue to be one of them, and therefore with my term finished I continue to be and remain one of the Company of

Trent, but surely with the great wealth of experience as a Madre, experience sculpted and painted in my heart and in my memory, that nothing and no one can wipe out. It will still be my duty, assisted by the wisdom of the Spirit, to know how to keep and to cherish in my heart all these things, with respect and obedience to the one who will continue to guide the Company.

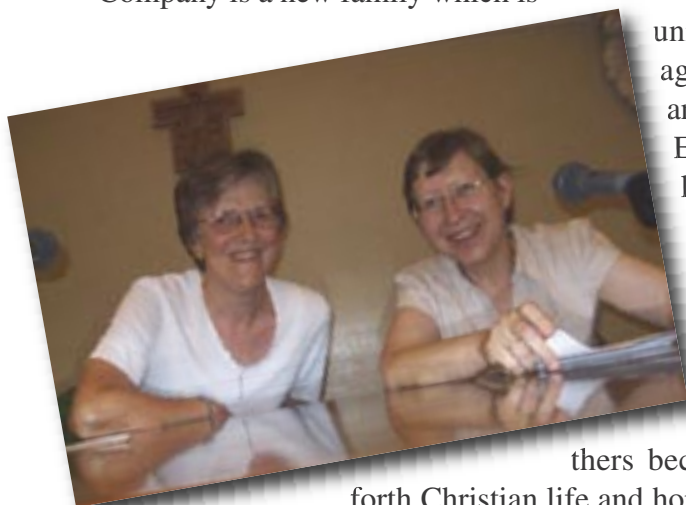
St. Angela invites me to *open the eye of my mind to consider the great grace and good fortune*, of having been *entrusted with government*. It is truly good fortune because, among so many positive things, I have learned to know and to love better St. Angela, the Company and in these last times also the worldwide dimension of the Company.

Thanks to all.

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS AND SISTERS IN THE MERICIAN CHARISM

Maria Dravecka's Testimony

In the Merician charism family life is given much importance. The Company is a new family which is



unified through charity, agreeableness, humility and hope.

Even in the family, just like in the Church, everything comes from God; we are brothers and sisters not only to save ourselves, but for the salvation of the whole world. We are mo-

thers because we have to bring

forth Christian life and hope to the world and, like

Mary, bring Christ to our times. We are not only the Daughters of the Lord, but bear the special name of Daughters of Saint Angela: *“Jesus Christ, who in His immense goodness has chosen me to be Mother, both alive and dead, of such a noble Company....”* (Third Precept 3, 4).

In my testimony I would like to emphasise the aspect of being *“sisters”*.

For the past months, we Sisters of the Slovak Company have been discussing and meditating about our relationships and our humble individual experiences of leading a joyful life being the Spouses of Jesus Christ in the family of the Company. These points have also urged me to write this article.

First of all, let us take into consideration **our situation**. We are a small inter-diocesan Company; there are about 20 of us and we differ in age, education and profession, some of us come from very a difficult home background or are sick. These circumstances hamper our chances to build friendly relationships. The one thing that unites us is the fact that we are consecrated to God and are sisters because we have the same Mother and Foundress and strive to follow her way of life. The Merician charism helps each and every one of us to be a witness to our faith by the way of life we lead in all the situations we find ourselves in. Without any doubt, our testimony is important not only for us individually, but for the local church and for our country.

Two years ago I was asked: why is it necessary to be a member of The Company; is it not enough to be an active member in the parish? Some persons lead an individual consecrated life to the Lord..... So why is there the need for me to belong to The Company of Saint Ursula? What am I contributing as a Sister in “*so noble a family*”? (Testament prologue 11) and what is the real value “*of uniting together to serve His Divine Majesty*”? (Rule, prologue, 4)

In the past years when I was trying to find out where I fitted exactly in this life this question was of the utmost importance to me. The unstable situation of the 70’s and 80’s and of the twentieth century were very difficult for the faithful in my country. Officially, it was not possible to lead a consecrated life. I therefore understood that to remain faithful to my faith I could not live on my own. I needed a real spiritual “community”, but even more I needed a spiritual “family”



from which I could draw the strength and energy to face adversities.

At present the situation is still the same. Today, after 20 years of freedom in the Slovak Republic, we still live in a spiritual and economic crisis (48% of the marriages end in divorce and the evangelic values are not accepted). Like most of the population, each one of us lives as best she can in the situation she finds herself in. We are on our own but not isolated; very often we fail but find the help to start afresh. It is the love of God which we experience in The Company that urges us on and gives us strength on our earthly pilgrimage..

What is the most important thing for us as Sisters? The Company is the school where we learn the very important virtues which help us to improve our relationships at work, in the family, with friends, in church. I did say that we are different. Very often it is not easy to respect one another. We learn to trust, be humble, forgiving and patient. We can help each other even if we come from different environments. It is extraordinary that in all our difficulties we are strengthened not only by the grace of God but even by the writings of Saint Angela. Very often we are inspired by the Rule because we find that the guidance on obedience, virginity and poverty are so important and suitable for us today.

They still apply for us today, is it not so? Let us read:

“So, in conclusion: to obey God and every creature for love of God, provided that nothing is commanded us contrary to the honour of



God and our own integrity”, (Rule 8, 17- 18) “and so above all, let her keep her heart pure and her conscience clear of any evil thought, of any shadow of envy and ill will of any discord and even suspicion and of any other wicked desire

and purpose". (Rule 9, 7- 10).

"Not answering haughtily, not doing anything grudgingly, not staying angry, not grumbling, not repeating any malicious gossip. (Rule 9; 15-19).

"And so let each one strive to strip herself of everything, and to place all her wealth and love and delight not in goods, not in food and gluttony, not in relatives in friends, not in herself and in her own resources and knowledge, but in God alone and in His gentle and ineffable Providence alone. ". (Rule 10, 8 – 13).

Effectively, we are still distant from this ideal but if we allow ourselves to be spiritually led along the path of our effective and humane charism, we can be a guiding light and an inspiration to those who are close to us.

This can be achieved not with words but, as Saint Angela tells us, with joy, charity, faith and hope: *"Let her be joyful and always full of charity and faith and hope in God. And let her behaviour towards others be reasonable and modest... But let all our words, actions and behaviour always be for the instruction and edification for those who have dealings with us."* (Rule 9, 11 – 12, 21 – 22).

A few days ago I met a woman who told me that, for her, it was important to have a friend; not one who simply says: "do this, and don't do that" but a friend who was always there in times of need, whose way of life was edifying and their meetings always bring fresh hope into her life.

I was overjoyed because this friend happened to be a Secular Ursuline. This is what the world



probably needs today; to be able to understand, through the example of good Christians that, despite the many difficulties, life can still be beautiful and full of hope.

This is the reason why I need my Sisters and The Company. I am a Sister to others, always ready to listen, to help, not to pass judgement and allow my actions to help others understand what is good and pleasing to God.

I am a Sister to all: first in the Company, then in the school where I work, in the parish, at home, to my relatives and to all the persons I meet.

But I feel I am a Sister, even thanks to my Sisters in The Company: even I need their help. Often I do not have the strength to carry out my duties as I should. Quite often, I do not know what to do and what God wants from me at that particular moment. I can seek their advice, but most of all, we can pray together.

To me, even the “secular” world is fraternal. All I do everyday in my ordinary secular life, invites me to increase my faith in God, to be patient and courageous, to become aware of my limitations. And so I learn *the importance of Saint Angela’s words: “Be bound to one another by the bond of charity, esteeming each other, helping each other, bearing with each other in Jesus Christ”.* (Last Counsel 2).

Let us thank God for our beautiful charism. We face many difficulties



in The Company in our country, difficulties because of the weather and distance; at times, we do not find the occasion to meet, but

we know that our greatest treasures lie in the old writings of Saint Angela, which are always relevant for the modern times and in The Constitutions of The Company. We should be familiar with them and live according to what they tell us. Now, on the 475th anniversary of the Foundation of



The Company, is the right time to take action. Then, gradually, I also long to better my relationships in order to be consecrated to God, in love with Jesus Christ, our only Love, but fully aware and embodied in the events that take place in the world around me, sincere and neighbourly towards all those who cross my path.

With all the gifts we have been blessed with, we can bravely carry on by simply living our life as Daughters, Sisters and Mothers. I believe that this is our contribution of the great Christian project which is mentioned in Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "*to act upon when the times had run their course: that he would bring everything together under Christ as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth.*" (Ep.1, 10).



**A FEW POINTS.... FROM THE HOMILIES
BY MONS ADRIANO TESSAROLLO
ECCLESIASTICAL ASSISTANT
OF THE COUNCIL OF THE FEDERATION**

**Tuesday 13th July - Paolo VI Pastoral Centre
Opening Ceremony of the International Meeting**

The text from the book by the prophet Isaiah (Is 7,1-9) which we have just read, invites us to have faith in the Lord: *“If you will not take your stand on Me, you will not stay firm... believe in Yahweh your God and you will be secure”*. (2 Ch. 20; 20).



In this text, the word faith is presented to us as a guarantee of steadfastness and stability stemming from our relationship with the Lord. Through faith, we learn to trust the Lord, believe in His Word and His promises; indeed, understand that these are worthy of trust.

Isaiah depicts God as a strong rock on Whom we can lean and in Whom we find shelter. The text we have read shows us that if we rely on The Lord, His Word and His promises, we will also be relying on His teaching and advice.

On the other hand he, who only trusts in himself is described as a *“trembling leaf”*, this is the attitude of the person, who, in times of difficulty has nobody to lean on and is overcome by fear, trembling and fits of panic. The prophet invites King Acaz to trust in The Lord and in His Word, instead of relying on his capabilities, but being proud and lacking faith, he cannot obey.

This is our first point of reflection; we are asked to hand ourselves over to the Lord, to His Word, to His promises. To live a consecrated life in the world, to belong to Christ, means to put our hope in God; if we have faith in Him, we will have stability. We will build our future on solid rock and we will not be overcome by adversity.

The Gospel of Saint Matthew (Mt 11, 20-24) highlights that God's gifts are not privileges; they are a responsibility! Christ spent most of His missionary life in the cities around the Lake of Galilee where He worked many miracles; yet hardly any acknowledged His teaching. They all heard Jesus invite them to renew their faith and their way of life, but only a few paid attention to His call. One is not saved because he is blessed with a special gift, but because he accepts the gift and the donor. Jesus scolded the people of the cities where He had worked most of His miracles because they failed to change.

The same can be said for a consecrated way of life: the Lord offers us His gifts so that we can genuinely answer His call and fully participate in His mission. The mission, bestowed through our meeting with the Lord, is the same mission that was conferred on the disciples. As we start this General Meeting, let us ask The Lord to give us the grace, not only to hear His Word and benefit from it, but to rekindle our desire to answer with joy to our call for a consecrated life, a call which today sends us out into the world as missionaries, in the Company to which we belong and in the places where we live.

Wednesday 14th July - Sanctuary of Saint Angela Merici

Today's Gospel (Mt 11, 25-27) recalls Jesus' prayer blessing the Father for revealing the message to the little children. Jesus is sure that the Father will accomplish His plan and His ministry through the little children. Jesus realizes that it is not the clever and learned people who are sure of themselves, who will follow Him, but the humble ones, "the little children" and exclaims: "*I bless you Father... yes Father for that*

is what it pleases You to do.” Jesus publicly makes known that the Father’s kindness is not based on the success which everyone expected, but on the consoling faith which was offered and accepted by the “little children”.

The strong Father to Son relationship enables Christ to trust His Father completely and to abandon Himself to His will. This relationship with the Father is an example to us, His disciples, so that we can also experience the joy of being God’s children through our unity with Christ. Who can experience this relationship with the Father? It is only those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him “as a Father”. It is only through our relationship with Christ that we can discover the Father and, in uniting ourselves to Christ in prayer, experience the joy of being God’s children.

In the first reading the prophet Isaiah (Is 10, 5-7.13-16) invites us to pluck up courage and trust in the Lord. The people of Israel prided themselves for their success saying: “I have done all this, I am wise, I am intelligent”. Pride is when we attribute to ourselves the successful events in our lives. The prophet reminds the people of Israel that they are carrying out a mission given to them by God and, since God is the very source of their actions, they need not be boastful. When a nation becomes proud and boasts of accomplishing vain and haughty projects, it is soon faced with failure. If we look back at the events that happened in the past century, we find that people who believed themselves to be superior and imposed their authority on others were faced with the bitter experience of their own failure.

This is the message in today’s reading. God exists and He acts through simple actions. The public ministry of Christ is an example; His public ministry took place in a very small geographic area and lasted only for a few years. Yet, through this short and restricted ministry, God accomplished His plan of Salvation.

Let us pray to Saint Angela, a simple and humble person whose ex-

perience originated in the small towns, close to where she lived, but which spread to all parts of the world over the centuries. In the same way, let us, who are worthless tools, allow the Lord to use us according to His will without questioning His actions.

So, at a moment when the Church is going through difficult times and seems to be heading towards decline, let us have faith in the Lord, like those little children of the Gospel who tried to understand, discover, feel and follow the Lord and His word.

Thursday 15th July - Sanctuary of Saint Angela Merici

In this sanctuary dedicated to Saint Angela Merici, together with the Church, today we remember Saint Bonaventure, one of the founders of the Franciscan spirituality. Saint Angela was a member of the Order of the Secular Franciscans, so she understood the Franciscan spirituality and was drawn to it. This spiritual formation helped Saint Angela to make God the centre of her life and detach herself from worldly things. She loved – beyond measure – the Crucified Christ and regarded worldly goods as a means of doing acts of charity; because she was sure that her strength lay not in the possession of earthly goods but in the Lord.



In the Gospel of Saint Matthew (Mt 11, 28-30) we find one of the most beautiful statements Christ addressed to the people of His times: “*Come to Me, become My disciples*”. Who are those who were invited by Christ and what were they invited for? “*Come to Me, all you who labour and are overburdened*”, that is, oppressed by the hard prescrip-

tions of the Law, overburdened by the crushing religious rules imposed by the Jewish teachers, in order to make a person worthy of the Lord. Jesus, the teacher, leads His disciples to a new and liberating relationship with the Lord: “Come to Me and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart”. What was the meaning of the word yoke? Yoke meant the total submission to the Jewish law in order to become a pious Jew. Christ gave the word yoke a different meaning, it was still a yoke, but “*my yoke is easy and my burden light*”.

He is not a severe, cruel, inhuman master; He does not act violently and proudly, but promises support, gentleness and humility. “*I will give you rest, yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light, you will find rest for your souls.*” The new yoke is Christ’s only law, the law of Love.

The first reading from **the prophet Isaiah** (Is 26, 7-9.12.16-19) was a hymn of thanksgiving, because the people understood that punishment did not mean total destruction, trials and ordeals in life were not a punishment but a fatherly reproach to help them back to the right path. “*Wake up and sing you dwellers in the dust, for your dew will be a radiant dew*”. Let us approach this due with trust, let us allow ourselves to act according to God’s will. We know that we must follow our master Jesus Christ and through Him we can see the love of God for men, because when He reprimands us, He does it for our own good.

Friday 16th July

Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, S. Felice del Benaco

Today, being the **liturgical feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel**, we are in the sanctuary dedicated to Her and which was built between the 15th and 16th century. The dates coincide with the times when Saint Angela was still alive and we are walking along the streets and visiting place which were familiar to her, these are the places in which Saint

Angela most probably walked and perhaps even prayed.

Mount Carmel is the place where together with the prophet Elijah, we go through an experience which puts faith to the test. (1 K. 18, 42-45). The story of Mount Carmel is about the struggle to safeguard the faith. During that time, there was a great drought and the people of Israel were losing their faith in God, a faith that had been given to them when God revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai. The drought helped the people

to regain their faith in the Lord. The prophet Elijah appeared suddenly and invited his people to be faithful once more to the God their fathers had worshipped. On Mount Carmel, he assembled the people, the king and the prophets of Baal, the god worshipped by the Canaanites and some Jews. Elijah earnestly prayed that God would reveal Himself to the people as the true God of Israel and give the Israelites a sign that would make them follow Him and abandon Baal. In the Bible, we read *“Now go up”*, *Elijah* told his servant *“and look out to sea”*. Seven times Elijah told him to go back; the seventh time, the servant said: *“Now there is a cloud, small as a man’s hand, rising from the sea.”* Elijah said: *“Go and say to Ahab: harness the chariot and go down before the rain stops you!”* And with that, the sky grew dark with clouds and storm and rain fell in torrents. And the people believed in Yahweh as their true God indeed!

The rain that fell on the people gathered on Mount Carmel symbolises the grace that are showered upon us by Our Lady of Graces. During the 13th century, that is many years after this event, the cave of the prophet Elijah became a hermitage; there, one could pay homage to the Lord, under the patronage of Our Lady, the Mother of God, but also our mother and sister. The scapular is the symbol used by Carmelites when





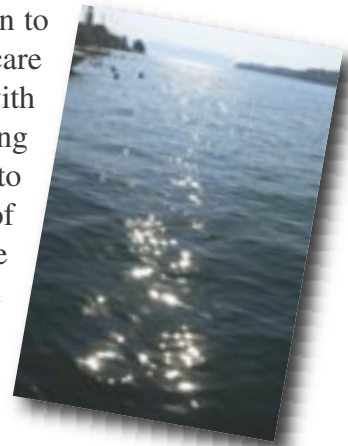
consecrating their lives to God. Mary is the person who leads “the sacred mountain” to Christ. This is also our aim and Mary our sister, helps us on our way to meet the Lord.

The **gospel** we read today, on the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Jn. 19, 25-27) is the part where Saint John himself describes the crucified Christ with Mary and himself standing at the foot of the cross. “*Woman, this is your son,*

this is your mother”.

John symbolizes the Word of God in the Gospels which Christ has given to the Church. Mary symbolizes the Church.

When we read this text carefully we realize how beautiful it is. Christ entrusts Mary and John to each other’s care so that they can live and care for one another as a mother and son whilst, with the same words, He is entrusting the teaching of the Gospels to the Church and the Church to the teaching of the Gospels. It is the duty of the Church to preserve the Word, but at the same time the Word helps to closely guard the Church on its way. After entrusting Mary and John to each other, Christ offers the Church the gift of the Holy Spirit as a result of His expiatory death.



Let us pray that, through the intercession of Mary Mother of Graces, our sister and mother, we will be able to continue on our journey strengthened by the Word and by the Spirit; to be able to understand that it is only through Her that we are called to discover Her Son Jesus Christ. This is Mary’s ministry, that of bringing Christ to the world. It is only Mary who can give Christ to the world and the world to Christ.

18th July 2010

EXCERPTS FROM THE HOMELY BY MONS.

LUCIANO MONARI BISHOP OF BRESCIA

On the Saturday after having cured the man with the withered hand, Jesus knew that the Pharisees were plotting against Him, discussing how to destroy Him (Mt 12; 12 - 21).

So He withdrew from the synagogue and many followed Him and He cured them all but warned them not to make Him known. This was to fulfil what had been said by the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus was moved and felt pity for all their ailment and suffering.

Jesus felt that He was called by Someone; this call was in fact His mission, that of rebuilding and changing the human body - de-

formed by sin - and giving it a new form of salvation. Jesus willingly accepted this mission and although He did it with discretion, He continues to burden Himself with our suffering as though it were His own. It was this disposition that led Christ to offer up His life for us.

This is how the prophet Isaiah describes the servant of the Lord: *Look! My servant, whom I have chosen, My beloved Son in whom my soul delights, I will send my spirit upon Him, and He will present judgement to the nations, He will not brawl or cry out, His voice is not heard in the street, He will not break the crushed reed, or snuff the faltering wick, until He has made judgement victorious, in Him the nations will put their hope.*

It was the duty of the servant of the Lord to announce and fulfil justice, not only economic justice but that justice which was God's plan for the salvation of mankind, the world and history.



This is what God hopes for: when He created man to His likeness and image, He envisaged a community where it was possible to live in harmony with others and live for others. This is God's dream and the servant of the Lord offered up His life for this dream.

The servant was called for and entrusted with a mission which originated from the Lord and He will be faithful to this mission. The Lord found pleasure and satisfaction in His servant.

The thoughts and actions of the servant are those of the Holy Spirit, those of the Lord: *I will send my spirit upon Him.*

And, since in answer to His call, the Servant was fulfilling the will of God..... *He will not brawl or cry out, nor snuff the faltering wick.....*

The Servant is confident of His true mission, so He need not impose His authority with violence. When a person raises his voice this means that he is not sure of himself.

The Servant is not afraid because He knows that the justice and plan of the Lord will be fulfilled, so He can act with gentleness: *Learn from Me, I am gentle and humble of heart. Come to Me and you will find rest. (Mt. 11: 28 – 30).*

It is only the person who is not afraid, the person who is sure of himself, who can afford to be so gentle and humble.

The Servant acts in this way, He is always gentle and does not make Himself known, but He is strong willed and courageous.

Even you were called, even you have a mission to accomplish; your mission is the vocation the Lord has entrusted you with. You have to accomplish this mission fearlessly because it is God's will. If it were your mission, you might be afraid of failure but since it is His, you need not fear.

You need not strive hard or be very successful, all you have to do is to





act gently and with humility.

If you do this, you will be a great gift to the church and to the world.

I heartily wish that God may grant this to each and every one of you that you.

(text not reviewed by the author)

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