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In addressing the subject that was proposed to me, I chose a literary genre that makes the participation of the listeners more active and as a consequence makes their listening to this paper less burdensome. When entrusting myself to my imagination, it was spontaneous for me to think of a meeting of a group of religious and lay people connected with the Order of Camillians, but without attributing to them special personal characteristics. Through their contributions, I have sought to give expression to the many voices that circulate as regards the subject that was entrusted to me.

The animator of the group, Fr. Girolamo, rapidly introduced the meeting, pointing to the subject that was to be discussed – ‘Creative Faithfulness to the Camillian Charism’. Referring to the methodology of Scholastic teachers, he dwelt for a while on the *explicatio terminorum*, the explanation of terms.

At a lexical level, he said, the first official document of the Church that used the phrase ‘creative faithfulness’, when referring to charisms, was the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* of John Paul II (n. 37). ‘Creative faithfulness’ translates in a new form the word ‘updating’ which goes back to the middle of the last century. Indeed, this term was coined on 27 June 1949 during the preparatory session of the international congress of the ‘States of Perfection’ that was celebrated in Rome in December 1950. John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council then adopted it. ‘Creative Faithfulness’, therefore, indicates the dynamic of a charism which is called to express itself in always new forms, ones that are required by socio-cultural, ethical and religious changes, and which makes us think of the Spirit, in a dynamic movement that is always new. This is not only a matter of retrieving the early form of a charism – it is also question of projecting it into the present with an outlook on the future; the continuity of a charism in the discontinuity of historical situations.

After a short pause Fr. Girolamo added: “Like all the other Orders and Congregations, ours is also called, to put it as one sociologist has done, to connect together our *roots* and our *wings*, that is to say to conjoin tradition and innovation harmoniously. In the view of this author, the roots symbolise tradition and the wings refer to innovation and to the making of projects. Roots without

wings lead to conservatism and to the maintenance of the status quo; wings without roots lead to utopia, that is to say to no place”.¹

“As regards the term ‘charism’”, he said, looking at the little group, “I believe that special explanations are not required”. “Really”, observed Beatrice, a young woman of the Lay Camillian Family, “I would like to have another look at the meaning of this term because in our meetings there is not always a uniformity of views about this word”.

Fr. Girolamo referred the matter to Fr. Elpidio who did not hesitate to speak and spelt out his words in a careful way: “Theologians’, he said, “agree in seeing a charism as ‘a presence and gratuitous, free and victorious manifestation of the Holy Spirit, seen as the living principle of unity and at the same time plurality in the concrete and historical existence of the individual and the community, with a view to the building up of the Church, understood as the spiritual communion of the faithful in their diversity of communion’”.² After this precise but also rather complex statement, Fr. Elpidio went on as follows: “Amongst the charisms by which the Spirit animates and guides the Church, *consecrated life* has a special place. This is a gift of the Lord, directed towards igniting and sustaining in the ecclesial community the fervour of charity and a dynamic towards holiness. The explicit recognition of religious life as a charism occurred only after the Second Vatican Council. The application of the term ‘charism’ to religious life, however, took place in an explicit way only in the literature that followed the Second Vatican Council. Paul VI was the first to speak about this and he did so in the year 1971.”³

The *charism of consecrated life* is expressed through very diversified practical forms. Indeed, the ways of embodying the common charism of the evangelical counsels are numerous. This variety of charisms allows a more complete expression of the riches of persons and the action of Jesus Christ as well as a more effective cooperation in the mission of the Church. This is the goal towards which the variety of religious Institutes tend. Their Founders, therefore, were the bearers of a special gift or charism that they then transmitted to their Congregations. This is a gift that was described in the document *Mutuae Relationes* as an “*experience of the Spirit,*” transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and *constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth*’ (n. 11). The charism of the Founder is a gift that is ‘personal because it *transforms* the person of the Founder, preparing him for a special vocation and mission in the Church that is collective-communitarian because of the fact that it

¹ Cf. S. Zamagni, ‘La situazione socio-culturale e sanitaria attuale e le sfide per la chiesa’, in AA.VV., *La Chiesa italiana nel mondo della salute. Identità e nuovi percorsi*, proceedings of the national conference organised by the National Office for Pastoral Care in Health (Fiuggi, 10-12 May 2001), p. 27.

² Cf A. Romano, ‘Carisma’, in: *Dizionario enciclopedico di spiritualità* (Borla, Rome), vol. I, 1975, pp. 422-430; F. Ciardi, *I fondatori uomini dello Spirito* (Città Nuova, Rome, 1982).

³ *Evangelica Testificatio*, n. 11.

involves a number of people to implement, in a historical sense, the same divine project; and, lastly, that is ecclesial because through the Founder and his community it is offered to the Church for her dynamic edification’.

The charism that Camillus received from God is referred to in the Constitution of the Order of Camillians. In this text it is said that this is a gift that our Institute received from God through the mediation of St. Camillus to bear witness to the world to the ever-present love of God for the sick (Constitution, n. 1). The words of the Constitution appropriately capture what this saint experienced and achieved during the journey of his existence”.

When Fr. Elpidio seemed to have finished what he wanted to say, Fr. Alfonso began to speak. “Usually”, he said, “when one speaks about creative faithfulness to the Camillian charism one refers to the ways to which our ministry is called to respond to the new needs of people. Does this tendency not run the risk of reducing the influence of our charism solely to one aspect of the life of a Camillian religious, that is to say to his ministerial activity, as though it was not called to influence the rest of his person?”

A moment of silence then followed. “Your question is an appropriate and demanding one”, observed Fr. Girolamo, “because it brings out a danger into which one can easily fall, namely giving more importance to *doing* than to *being*”. “The literature on this aspect of our charism is rather limited”, he went on. “It is indeed poor, but it is not absent”, commented Fr. Cristiano. “Indeed, I have read some important articles in which what Father Alfonso spoke about is focused on. In the articles it is strongly emphasised that before shining forth in works and services, the strength of the Camillian charism must shine forth in an authentic joyous experience of the merciful Christ, translated into a newness of life, in which the characteristic features of the Good Samaritan, the physician of souls and bodies, are reproduced and mediated through the example and the teachings of the Founder and the religious who have imitated him with greatest perfection”.

“Does it follow from this that the effects of the charism on a Camillian religious flow into the whole of his person?”, asked Beatrice, who then also asked: “Could you clarify this concept with some examples?” “Most willingly”, answered Fr. Cristiano, who then prepared to give a list of such examples.

- “The charism cooperates in the formation of the identity of a Camillian religious, presenting the ideal image to which he is called to conform himself. Indeed, in recognising, accepting and integrating the charism, a Camillian achieves a further unification of his own being. This self-image, which he has gradually formed during his life by putting together in a more or less harmonious way the various ‘pieces of himself’, receives a new colouring from the charism, this

special and specific way of implementing following Christ in the choice of the radicality of Christian life.⁴

- It fosters the harmonisation of the personal identity of a Camillian religious and his identity as a consecrated person, for in living as a Camillian, a religious also fulfils himself as a man.

- It points to the goal to which his human and spiritual maturation must be directed, that is to say total dedication to God, who is served in the persons of sick people and the promotion of health.

- It impresses a special colouration and purpose to the practice of the evangelical counsels.

- It demonstrates how his relationship with the Lord must be lived, both in prayer and in the exercise of the apostolate.

- It infuses into fraternal life in community a special tonality by developing a happy sense of belonging and by infusing a joyous awareness of belonging to a group of people who are united by the same ideal.

- It helps to discern the most suitable ways for practising asceticism and organising his life and work”.

The group listened attentively to this exposition of examples by Fr. Cristiano who ended by saying: “It is starting with the joyous experience – and I stress joyous experience – of the charism of merciful charity that was received from God that Camillus and the first Camillian community organised their own lives and progressively established their ministry, whose essential features can be summarised in the following way:⁵

- The sick person is placed at the centre of attention; it is in service to the sick that the spirituality of a Camillian – that is to say his life in the spirit – finds its foundation, and it is from this service that this spirituality draws vitality and development, as, indeed, number 13 of the current Constitution observes: ‘In this presence of Christ in the sick and in those who serve them in his name, we find the source of our spirituality’. The sick person should be served in the totality of

⁴ Cf. A. Cencini, *Amerai il Signore Dio tuo* (EDB, Bologna, 1982), pp. 30-32. In the view of Cencini, the charism of the religious family to which an individual belongs is the definitive revelation of his self; it is that specific likeness to God that he is called to express. In it, he finds his self and his vocation in a complete and even more precise way because the charism is not, and cannot be, a generic indication of a way of living or a vague ascetic-spiritual appeal but, rather, it is a detailed and precise proposal that embraces all the aspects of his existing, giving him an unmistakable colour. The person who chooses an institute discovers, in reality, by a gift of the Holy Spirit, a harmony between his deepest self and this specific following of Christ. It is though a mysterious attraction made him recognise in that particular attraction to Christ his new identity, that self that he is called to be, hidden with Christ in God (cf. Col 3:3). Starting with that moment his life’s commitment is to achieve this identification. His living, from a psychological and not only spiritual point of view, is Christ (cf. Phil 1:21), read with a special approach. His identity, therefore, has by now a precise point of reference. Cf. also F. Alvarez, ‘Sequela di Cristo misericordioso oggi’, in A. Brusco and F. Alvarez (eds.), *La spiritualità camillina. Itinerari e prospettive* (Camilliane, Turin, 2001), pp. 235-255; and G. Terenghi, ‘Spiritualità cristiana e spiritualità della vita consacrata’, in A. Brusco and F. Alvarez, (eds.), *La spiritualità camillina. Itinerari e prospettive*, pp. 43-45.

⁵ See on this point E. Spogli, ‘La prima comunità camilliana’ in A. Brusco and F. Alvarez, *La spiritualità camilliana. Itinerari e prospettive*, pp. 153-154.

his or her needs and involves everyone, both fathers and brothers, in the totality of service, albeit with different roles.

- The settings where the Camillian ministry should be exercised are above all hospitals and then private homes and prisons. The community, however, is open to all the needs of sick people, and the religious, because of their fourth vow, are ready to sacrifice their own lives for those who suffer.

- Since service to the sick 'requires perfect men to do the will of God and to reach perfection and holiness', the religious are involved in making themselves suited to such service through the observance of their vows, with special attention paid to poverty, an intense prayer life and a healthy practice of asceticism. All of this should be lived in a fraternal community".

After this interesting contribution by Fr. Cristiano, who had evidently prepared himself in a scrupulous way for the meeting, Fr. Girolamo with satisfaction then said: "We have drawn up good premisses for our discussion and so now we can speak about creative faithfulness to our charism starting with the platform built by St. Camillus and his first companions".

Brother Ireneo immediately began to speak. He called the group's attention to corporal service for the sick and asked himself to what extent the Order had remained faithful to this aspect, which, indeed, was held to be indispensable by St. Camillus. "We know", Br. Ireneo said, "how much our Founder was demanding on this point. He aimed at the salvation of the sick, passing, however, by way of corporal service, imitating in this way the Lord Jesus. As Bruno Maggioni observes, in order to redirect man in his relationship with God, 'Jesus passed by way of the body, he healed, but he did not confine himself to helping bodies, he liberated man from sin and not only from illness, from loneliness and from non-meaning and not only from need'. He knew that in the requests for health that were made to him by many sick people a request for salvation was also made".⁶

"This is a *punctum dolens* of our Camillian history", said Fr. Elpidio. "As early as the end of the sixteenth century one can observe a weakening of corporal service in favour of spiritual service". In the seventeenth century, with the reduction in the tasks of the brothers to services in the house and/or sacristy, this dimension of the Camillian charism disappeared almost completely, except during periods of plague when the Camillian spirit re-emerged in all of its vigour. This situation lasted until the reforms enacted by Fr. Camillo Bresciani in the middle of the nineteenth century, reforms that contemplated a renewed appreciation of the figure of the brothers and of hospitals as principal settings for the practice of the ministry. According to the reformist project of Bresciani, service in a hospital was accepted on the condition that fathers and brothers could take

⁶ B. Maggioni, 'Sofferenza – approccio biblico', in *Dizionario di teologia pastorale sanitaria* (Camilliane, Turin, 1992), p. 1174.

part in it, with these last providing corporal service. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the masonic government prevented the brothers from working in public hospitals, ‘the General Consulta asked the question: what should be said about the hospitals of men or ones that are mixed that we have and are offered to us without the full exercise of the dual ministry? The reply will accept the situation as imposed by civil laws as being provisional and exceptional. This has been a determining and historical provisional situation that has been accepted hitherto’.⁷ It should not be forgotten, added Br. Ireneo, that corporal service was kept alive by the brothers by providing care to sick people in their homes; this was a tradition that lasted until a few years ago.

Everyone agreed and then Fr. Girolamo addressed the subject again: “The historical situation that led brothers to be impeded from access to hospitals” was an opportunity that led to the birth of what are called ‘our works’. We know that until the beginning of the twentieth century it was forbidden in our Order to build and manage our own care-providing works. This prohibition corresponded to an explicit wish of St. Camillus. At the end of the nineteenth century, first in Lyons and then in Cremona, two socio/health-care institutions arose. The cause of this initiative in Italy was specifically the inability of the brothers to exercise their ministry in public hospitals because of the prohibition of the government. A circumstantial reason opened up a new window in the edifice of the practice of our charism. A new ‘wing’ to use the image that was used previously.

At the General Chapter of 1910 a question was posed: do these works really correspond to the Camillian charism? After a lively discussion, a positive answer was arrived at whereby such ‘houses of health’, where our ministry could be fully exercised, were declared to be suitable. With a good spirit of *discernment*, the then Superior General, Fr. Vido, perceived in them a sign of the times when he uttered the following words: ‘After examining well the new ministries, we say once again: we can certainly address new roads as long as the old roads are not abandoned. For this reason, the new ministries must be added to the old so that our Institute is extended further and not changed’.⁸ In these statements of Fr. Vido the thinking is present that had been expressed a few decades earlier by Fr. Artini: ‘From St. Camillus we can, and we must, deduce charity, but the means by which it is exercised in our circumstances should be learnt from the special spirit that the Lord may want to infuse in our hearts in order to help with present needs’.⁹

⁷ P. Fedrizzi, ‘La Provincia Lombardo-Veneta dei ministri degli infermi nel periodo della soppressione (1866-1874), *Vita Nostra*, 1(1967), p. 41. However, there was no absence of further discussion about this subject, as is indicated by a letter of Fr. A. Bernardi in which the opinion was condemned of those who argued that spiritual care for the sick should not be accepted in those hospitals where there were no brothers to exercise the corporal ministry (cf. A. Brusco, *La provincia Lombardo-Veneta dei Camilliani. 150 anni di vita e di attività* (Gabrielli Editori, Verona, 2012), p. 220.

⁸ Cf. the general archives of the Ministers of the Sick, Rome, 1900, fol. 94. The same General Chapter in its revision of the Constitution inserted an article which emphasised the value of such works, seeing them as an excellent opportunity to care for the sick corporally and spiritually (*ibid.*, fol. 94).

⁹ ‘Lettera al P. Generale Vido del 20 ottobre 1856’ (‘Letter to the Father General Vido of 20 October 1856’), Provincial archives of the Province of Lombardy and Veneto, 280/754.

While Fr. Girolamo allowed himself a sip of water, Antonio, a medical doctor who works in one of the institutions of the Order, made his contribution: “Does the creative faithfulness that led to the rise of what you call ‘our works’ *still stand*? I ask this question because I have observed the almost total disappearance of religious who are brothers working in Camillian health-care and socio/health-care institutions and I have noted the great changes that have taken place in recent decades in the world of health care”. These words of this medical doctor attracted the attention above all else of Fr. Elpidio who answered that such creativity could, and should, continue today, although evidently in a different way. “How?”, asked the curious Beatrice. “Through cooperation with lay people”, answered Fr. Elpidio, without hesitation and with a smile. “The ancient and modern history of the Order”, he went on, “bears witness to the fact that little has been done, too little, to infuse in our lay co-workers the spirit of St. Camillus so as to make our institutions instruments of evangelisation and channels for the merciful love of the Lord. If this does not take place the *wings* made up of *our works* will become increasingly detached from the *roots*, thereby *neutralising* our charism”. “This is certainly a great challenge for you”, commented the medical doctor. “But I ask what is the opinion that is held in the world of consecrated life”. The group turned to the well documented Fr. Elpidio who did not make its members wait. “There are various points of view in the religious literature of the last few decades. Therefore, I will confine myself to making a few references. One author wrote: ‘It is a shared impression (perhaps a proven fact as well) that many of our presences express our charism with less immediacy and vivacity not only compared to the time of our Founder but also to a more recent age when the value of religious life had greater relevance in society and when the services of men and women religious had an evident social function. Some needs to which various services of charity responded appear today to be less pressing or are provided with professionalism and correctness by other kinds of people. The usual mentality does not easily connect such services with the message that we intend to give. Our work, therefore, does not immediately bring out the meaning of the vocation to consecrated life’.¹⁰ This opinion is shared by many authoritative people in the world of consecrated life who observe that health-care and socio/health-care institutions of Christian inspiration encounter difficulty in bringing out the motivations that are the reason for their existence. Indeed, a rather widespread phenomenon is for people to appreciate the services offered by the Church without understanding the roots from which they come”.

After listening to Fr. Elpidio, Fr. Alfonso observed as follows: “When going through the documents about health-care institutions I noticed that bishops and religious express themselves with different emphases. The first appear to be decidedly directed towards keeping such institutions

¹⁰ Cf. also G. Ferrari, ‘La fede senza le opere o... le opere senza la fede? Una riflessione e una provocazione sulla chiusura di certe opere dei religiosi/e’ in *Vita consacrata*, 2(2016), pp. 101-107.

whereas religious are rather critical. A demonstration of this, which is a very fine one, is the recent message of the bishops of Lombardy”.¹¹

The words that were spoken immediately by Beatrice impeded Fr. Alfonso from dwelling upon the subject: “should these works be kept or should they be transferred to others?”, she asked. This question provoked interest but at the same time discomfort. Fr. Girolamo replied to this question with a wise observation that is shared by many religious. “Making a choice between the two alternatives that you have indicated – to keep such institutions or to transfer them to others – certainly does not have sense, given that all the elements by which we could express our views in a serious way on this subject are absent”. And after a pause Fr. Girolamo went on: “One thing, however, which it seems to me I should stress is *discernment*, which is to be understood as a spiritual process by which a community through the exchange of views, practised in a context of faith and prayer, perceives the active presence of God and His action and becomes aware of what it is advisable to do and how to do it so that its own activity is constantly guided by the Spirit and thus ‘always does what is pleasing to the Lord’”. Father Alfonso could not hold back from grumbling: “It does not seem to me that this kind of discernment takes place in our community meetings and in the Provincial assemblies where these subjects are addressed. What prevails in discussions is the organisational and economic dimension of institutions, the wish not to lose the social prestige that has been created by these works, in other words the *libido possidendi*. Almost never, I say never, is the pastoral dimension of works, the formation of personnel from a spiritual point of view, addressed as a subject. The identity card of our works remains quietly in the cupboard, without ever being used to assess the atmosphere of our institutions”.

Fr. Girolamo did not stop to answer this outburst which made the two lay people open their eyes in amazement, but, instead, he continued by saying: “The right discernment would allow the subject of our works to be addressed with greater wisdom:

- Recognising the value that they have had during their by now long history. Indeed, in addition to assuring a good service for sick people, these institutions have enabled the Province to subsidise the seminaries and promote missionary expansion.

- Knowing how to make a distinction between works. Old people’s homes and the social works that arose later correspond to a dictate of the Constitution which invites us to turn towards our neighbours who are most in need of help (cf. Constitution, n. 51: ‘our Order shows a preference for the poorest and the most forsaken of the sick’). In addition, recently some of our institutions have not failed to open their doors to palliative care, in line with n. 49 of the Constitution, and to

¹¹ «EGLI HA PRESO LE NOSTRE INFIRMITÀ» (Mt 8,17). *Messaggio della Conferenza Episcopale Lombarda a tutti i fedeli sull’impegno della comunità cristiana per tutti coloro che hanno bisogno di cura* (‘HE TOOK UPON HIMSELF OUR INFIRMITIES’ (Mt 8:17). Message of the Bishops’ Conference of Lombardy to all the Faithful on the Commitment of the Christian community to all those who Need Care’), Milan, 2018.

extreme categories of patients. These are all wings that draw nourishment from the early Camillian charism.

- Not forgetting, lastly, the valuable work done with dedication in our works by very many of our religious, above all brothers, who consumed very many years of their lives serving the sick with love and professional skill”.

After these observations, Fr. Girolamo ended by saying: “various reasons of a socio-political and religious kind will lead us, as has already happened, to transfer these works to others. What, however, is needed is to impress on those institutions that continue to exist that spirit that Cardinal C. M. Martini spoke about: ‘The charity of the Church’, he wrote, ‘must demonstrate something that is unique, original, irreducible to all works of charity, something that goes beyond, mystery, something that is not contained in the efforts of the programmes of civil society. And it is precisely because it comes from mystery and preserves a difference, that the charity of the Church is able to confer upon human programmes a horizon, reserves of energy and critical contestation where this is necessary’. If works of charity are not evangelised, that is to say not made authentic by faith, there is the risk of having a ‘busy Church’ in social terms which tends to become in the world of health care ‘a figure that is now parallel, now competitive, now conniving with other forces’.¹²

“Will it be possible to attain such objectives?”, the medical doctor asked himself, without, however, obtaining a reply.

After a break, the group came together again. Fr. Girolamo suggested that perhaps it was advisable to explore other areas in which the charism had added new wings, but ones always connected to the roots.

Fr. Alfonso spoke and illustrated the maturation of the charism in the ministry of animation and formation. “During the first decade of life of our Institute”, he said, “our Founder was convinced that love was enough to do good for the sick, and he was doubtful whether the Order should or should not also embrace studies in philosophy and theology. Indeed, he was afraid that in ‘embarking our religious in these things, with time they would become cold in their love for the poor and the Institute’. But in 1594, as we are told by his biographer Sanzio Cicutelli, Camillus had a new inspiration from God. He understood the advantages that study could have for a Minister of the Sick, amongst which would be a greater capacity to help sick people who were gripped by doubts about faith. The more our religious would be learned, the more they would know the pearl that they had in their hands and the more they would commit themselves to the promotion of their ministry. Truly, love looks for science and technology so as to serve in a better way; so as to illuminate and not in order to shine.

¹² C.M. Martini, ‘Sulle strade di Gerico’, in E. Corradi, *Le ragioni della carità* (Paoline, Milan, 1986), p. 89.

The conversion of the Founder, however, was not sufficient to create within the Institute a tradition favourable to that formation that was needed to be able to make an effective contribution to the culture of the health-care context. Down the centuries there has been no absence of praiseworthy initiatives in this field, above all during the last century. One has to come to the period after the Second Vatican Council to witness the maturing of the belief that Camillian religious are called to combine a necessary and irreplaceable proximity to the sick with the evangelisation of the culture of the world of health through the animation and formation of personnel who work professionally or voluntarily in health-care and socio/health-care institutions, as well as through research and the teaching of disciplines directly or indirectly linked to health, to pastoral care in health, to ethics and to bioethics. In this way, numerous projects involving formation and animation bloomed: courses, lectures, conferences, and institutes for formation. The fact that this activity has legitimately expressed our charism is confirmed by our Constitution and in particular by the General Statutes. We can find further encouragement in the *Synod on Consecrated Life* which was held in 1994. That assembly requested religious to involve themselves, without abandoning their traditional apostolates, in the evangelisation of the ‘culture of society as a whole’, looking for ‘methods to proclaim the Gospel that are suited to the needs of the various professions (in politics, in industry, in social communications, in education, in law, in ecology, etc.)’. Amongst the numerous areopaguses – that is to say settings in which to proclaim the evangelical message – mentioned in the recommendations of the synod there is also the world of suffering and health: ‘Taking into account the great cultural transformations of our time, [consecrated people] should perceive the urgent need to intervene in the sectors of humanisation and of bioethics. They should commit themselves to respect for, and the promotion and defence of, the dignity and the sacredness of the person and human life, from conception until its natural end, in full conformity with the moral teaching of the Church, promoting centres for health-care formation and specialised pastoral care’ (n. 83). For his part, John Paul II, when addressing Camillians taking part in their General Chapter of 1995, expressed himself in the following way: ‘I exhort you to always combine irreplaceable proximity to the sick with the evangelisation of the culture of health care in order to bear witness to the evangelical vision of living, of suffering and of dying. This is the fundamental task that must be actuated by the institutes for formation of your religious families’. We should also remember, lastly, a motion of the General Chapter of 1995 which invited us to ‘develop the *Camillianum* and centres for pastoral care and humanisation as contributions to a culture of life and health inspired by the Gospel’.¹³

¹³ *Operational Guidelines*, 3.3.3.

“The wing of animation”, observed Fr. Alfonso, “helps us to direct our gaze to spiritual assistance in hospitals and nursing homes which has constituted, and still continues to be, the most practised ministry of our Province. Indeed, in this field – which unfortunately is contracting because of the decrease in the number of religious – creative faithfulness to our charism has been expressed above all else in expanding the range of ministry and combining accompanying the sick with the formation of personnel: we may think of the teaching of ethics and assistance for the associations of nurses and groups of volunteers...This openness, which has required formation and updating, encountered difficulty in establishing itself and encountered resistance and generated conflict, as indeed emerges from a letter of Superior General to the Province of Lombardy and Veneto in the 1990s.

Some words remain to be said about the parishes and rectories. Discussions have taken place about them, with them being traditionally seen as extraneous to the purpose of the Order. However, the tones of these discussions has always been moderate, above all because the number of such institutions has remained small. At a meeting organised by the Secretariat for Ministry on 10-11 November 2008, an interesting analysis took place on ‘The New Horizons of Parish Pastoral Care’. At the end of this meeting the group of participants sent a message to the members of the Order in which, *inter alia*, the following was stated: ‘We ask that the exercise of the parish ministry should not be seen as a marginal activity as regards the charism of the Order but, instead, it should be seen as an expression of that charism, on the condition that it is known how to give to the parishes that are offered to us a clear Camillian identity that sees a commitment to the sick and those in need as a priority. We desire to make clear that Camillian parishes provide an opportunity to exercise aspects of the Camillian charism that could not be practised in the chaplaincies of hospitals, such as, for example, caring for people in their homes, the formation of the laity in general and volunteers that help the sick in particular, the Lay Camillian Family, and the promotion of vocations’.¹⁴

Time was passing rapidly and thus Fr. Girolamo addressed the group with the following words: ‘From the *tour d’horizon* that we have engaged in as regards our past and recent history”, he said, “we have seen the efforts made by our Province to allow itself to be guided by the Spirit in order to remain faithful in a creative way in contexts subjected to great transformations to the charism that was received and transmitted by St. Camillus. The brushstrokes that we have made bring out lights and shadows; strong moves forward and then a slowing down”.

Fr. Elpidio then spoke to make a specific point about the subject that had just been addressed: “If being creatively faithful to our charism’, he said, “means paying attention to the signs of the times or, in other words, getting on a train that is launched towards new horizons, I would

¹⁴ ‘Messaggio ai Confratelli da parte dei Partecipanti all’incontro dei Parroci/Rettori Camilliani’, in *Vita Nostra*, 1(2009), p. 79.

like to point out some choices, which have not yet been referred to, where faithfulness to our charism has been conjoined with creativity. I am referring above all else to the opening of missions in the East – this is a wing that enabled the Order, above all thanks to our Province, to reach new horizons, expanding the presence of the Camillians in the world. And then to the birth of the Lay Camillian Family, a phenomenon that to be rightly appreciated should be observed well beyond the frontiers of our Province. My contribution would not be complete if I did not express my regret about the low level of follow-up to the experience of charity of Br. Ettore Boschini. Through his initiatives of charity for the last he gave an admirable response to the dictates of the General Chapter of 1989 which was on the subject ‘Towards the Poor and the Third World’.

After this contribution, Fr. Girolamo posed a question that had been on his mind for some time: “And now, in this time in which God has called us to live and work, how can we keep ourselves faithful to our charism conjoining faithfulness and creativity?” The answers were not slow in coming. “I believe”, said Fr. Elpidio, “that in the hearts of the religious there is no absence of a wish to...*go out*, but this is held back by very many opposing factors”.

“In my view”, he continued, “the situation in which we find ourselves is well illustrated by the metaphor of the first and second sailings, a metaphor that has been already used in our literature.¹⁵ In seafaring language what is done with the wind using open sails is the first sailing. The second sailing is what must be done when the wind drops; the ship remains immobilised by the calm and to get out of it hands must be set to the oars. Probably we are on the second sailing. There are no longer the winds that in the past led to the opening of missions – great wings well united with our charism that made the Province *fly* by opening it to ministries that interpreted the spirit of the Founder with greater efficacy; winds that made seminaries flourish by assuring continuity and a hopeful outlook in the future, winds...” The flow of Fr. Alfonso was interrupted by Fr. Elpidio who declared: “Yes, we could perhaps say that *passion* for the promotion of the Kingdom in the world of health and health care has diminished, with the danger that passion for the Kingdom is replaced by *sad passions*, as they are called by psychiatrists when referring to shutting oneself up in one’s own little interests”. “What are the causes of this alarming phenomenon?”, asked the medical doctor. Fr. Elpidio replied: “In the writings on contemporary consecrated life, the following causes are highlighted: the misting up of the charismatic identity; the weakening of a sense of belonging; interpretations and an observance of vows that are at times inadequate; and individualistic tendencies in managing one’s own life, with deleterious consequences for fraternity and the exercise of the ministry which is quite often diminished in its effectiveness by routine and resistance to ongoing formation. These are limitations that were present in the past as well but which in the

¹⁵ Cf. A. Brusco, ‘Vita consacrata nell’Ex-provincia lombardo-veneta. Dalla prima alla seconda navigazione in *Come Tralci*, 4(2015).

contemporary context have become accentuated. To these factors we should add the decreased number and ageing of religious. The lack of vocations attenuates or eliminates that push towards the future that is necessary for the maintenance of hope.

“It is exaggerated to affirm”, commented Br. Ireneo, “that these factors can cause torpor¹⁶ and above all else a weakening of the capacity to aspire which the author speaks about.¹⁷ According to anthropologists, in fact, aspirations are located between the mechanisms of protension, that is to say the movement towards transcending the state of present things, and the mechanisms of expectations, that is to say the anticipation in the imagination of possible and desirable futures. This is a fundamental human capacity and at the same time an aptitude that is defined and nurtured by the culture that characterises a community. Amongst the factors that contribute to the elimination of aspirations we should list: a low level of attention paid to ongoing formation in all of its dimensions, from the intellectual to the affective and from the social to the spiritual; an inadequate way of living advanced age; and a sense of powerlessness that can often lead to devaluing what is planned to foster growth”.

Leading on from the last words of Br. Ireneo, Fr. Girolamo said: “The last contributions appropriately grasp aspects of the realities but they ignore the positive that is present in the Church, in the Province and in our communities. And amongst the positive I would like to point to all the documents and the proposals that are produced at various levels”.

The words of Fr. Girolamo provoked a barely concealed smile on the face of Fr. Elpidio who then said: “That is true, in recent years as never before our communities have been invaded by books and documents of undoubted value. Although admiring their riches, I am rather sceptical about their efficacy. I am led to think that if they are read their contents flow like rainwater over roofs...” “Although I am not so pessimistic”, observed Fr. Alfonso, “I am of the opinion that one has to find more concrete ways of translating what is suggested by the documents into practice”.

“Do you have some proposals?”, asked Br. Ireneo. “I have no doubts in believing”, Fr. Alfonso answered, “that the forge that can foster the appropriation of the contents proposed, produce innovations in behaviour and creatively maintain faithfulness to our charism, is the community. This is not my discovery, I know. What I want to emphasise, however, is the importance of community animation. It is in this area that, to give just one example, *the triennial plan* must be not only read but also discussed and, above all, made *operational*. Within a community there should take place what happened when John the Baptist or Jesus or Peter spoke to the multitude: at the end of their talks the people asked: what should we do? What must *we do* – individually and as a community – to put into practice what is envisaged in the triennial plan, in

¹⁶ U. Sartorio, ‘Svegliate il mondo! La “via profetica” della vita consacrata’, in *Vita consacrata* 1(2015), p. 5.

¹⁷ Cf. M. Deriu, ‘La capacità di aspirare nell’epoca del precariato’, in *Animazione sociale*, February 2015, p. 15.

which, indeed, the gospel and our Constitution are reflected? It is from the answer to this or other questions that there can be kept alive that process of conversion that is necessary to create *new wineskins* that are able to contain the *new wine* of our charism, in which are reflected the words and the example of Jesus.¹⁸ It is from this answer that new initiatives can bloom that are tailored to individual and community capacities and in which creative faithfulness to the charism is expressed, ‘taking more credible roadways’, as Msgr. Tonino Bello preached, in the fields of the community, the parish and the diocese”. After a short pause Fr. Alfonso went on: “Do you not think that this involvement in the actuation of our charism will contribute to building that fraternity that is very much talked about in the documents, but without pointing to the means by which to achieve it and intensifying the life of relationship with the Lord?”

“From what you say”, observed Br. Ireneo, “comes the responsibility of Superiors who are called to be effective animators”. “Certainly, however they in their turn must be animated”, added Fr. Alfonso, “so as to carry out their mission with love and competence, possibly avoiding”, and he said this in a humorous tone, “being like that shepherd who in his exaggerated drive to correct the flock made all the sheep die in a single day, and by being careful not to break a receptacle when seeking with force to remove the rust (St. Benedict)”. All the members of the group laughed.

When Fr. Girolamo with a look sought to end the meeting, Fr. Elpidio spoke once again: “There is the awareness – which is sometimes acute and often vague – that a specific way of living consecrated life is coming to an end, but one still does not have a clear vision of the changes that consecrated life must, or can, undergo. This statement by an authoritative expert poses questions to me about what we have said to each other so far”.

With an element of intolerance, Fr. Alfonso answered: “What we are asked to do is to live with the greatest commitment where we are and as we are, running our lives not on the basis of a sufficient minimum but, rather, aiming upwards, forwards, a long way ahead, avoiding opportunism and de-responsibility which are attitudes that lead to resignation and dreariness”. “Goodness”, Fr. Girolamo was about to exclaim, but he held himself back and after apologising to the two lay people who had been rather left to one side (“as usual”, murmured Br. Ireneo) he ended with the following anecdote:

‘Once upon a time, in the square of a city, there was a wise man who answered the most varied questions. One day, with the curious people who were listening there was also present a shepherd who had come down from the mountains with the intention of shaming ‘ballad-singers’ in public. The shepherd put a little bird in his fist and after hiding it showed it to the wise man and

¹⁸ Cf. on this point see *Vino nuovo...in otri nuovi, Vangelo/Profezia/Speranza* (‘New wine...in New Wineskins. Gospel/Prophecy/Hope’), proceedings of the meeting on consecrated life organised by the Secretariat for formation in Verona on 29 October 2015, Camilliani.it

said: "in this fist I am holding a little bird: can you tell whether it is alive or dead?". If the wise man had replied

"it is alive", the shepherd would have tightened his grip and killed the little bird. If, on the other hand, he had said "it is dead", the shepherd would have opened his fist and the little bird would have flown away. But the wise man, after thinking for a little while, answered him: "the little bird that you are holding in your hand is as you would wish it to be: if you want it to be alive, it is alive, if you want it to be dead, it is dead!"

Our personal and community happiness and destiny are like that. They are in our hands. A great deal depends on external circumstance, but what is essential depends on us.

Thank you!"