

**MESSAGE OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL
AT THE END OF HIS FRATERNAL VISIT TO THE RELIGIOUS BROTHERS OF THE
PROVINCE OF POLAND**

13-17 May 2015

fr. Leocir Pessini

'We feel the contemporary relevance of this message which exalts with irreplaceable vigour the value of charity and fraternal affection, in the context of the advanced technical development of contemporary health care. St. Camillus teaches us to listen to each sick person with fraternal care, to take part in his anxieties and in the pain that afflicts him, to dry every tear, to be at the side of every dying person with the wish to understand his last feelings and his last breath, even when science has given up hope in its instruments of help'.

H.H. John Paul II

The Church of St. Mary Magdalene – 8 February 1987

***Esteemed Fr. Arkadiusz Nowak– Provincial Superior,
Dear religious brothers of the Provincial Council and the Camillian Province of Poland,
Health and peace in the Lord of our lives!***

For those who do not know to the full the history of our Polish religious brothers, it is important to remember that the first Camillian religious – p. Adams Krystian e p. Kaschny Bernard – arrived in Poland in the year 1904 (the Province would later be erected canonically in 1946) and they came from the Camillian communities of Germany. During the year dedicated to consecrated life we are invited to cultivate feelings of gratitude towards our past and thus in a special way towards our religious brothers who in a pioneering way extended the 'little plant of Camillus' to the land of Poland as well. As we are now celebrating the Year of Consecrated Life, I would like to begin immediately with the thoughts of His Holiness Pope Francis and St. John Paul II to all Consecrated People, which says, *"You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things."* (n. 110). For this year's celebration, we are invited to *"look to the past with gratitude ... to live the present with passion ... to embrace the future with hope."* (Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis *to All Consecrated People*, nos. 1-3).

At the present time the Province of Poland is made up of 86 religious, of whom 75 are perpetually professed, and they make up 13 communities in Poland and 5 abroad, 6 health-care works, and are also involved in the exercise of ministry in various parishes and hospital chaplaincies (25 religious work like a chaplains).

After planning the meeting of the general government with the major Superiors of the Order in Warsaw (18-23 May 2015) well in advance, I thought it was advisable to precede this meeting with a fraternal visit to the Camillian communities of your Province.

On 13-17 May of this year, together with Fr. Gianfranco Lunardon, the General Secretary, I was able to experience your warm welcome; the fine witness to the Camillian charism offered by our religious brothers in various activities involving service to the sick and the poorest and most in need; the intensity of the Catholic faith of the Polish people in the various public celebrations in which I took part; and – last but not least – the soft beauty of the green countryside of the land of Poland.

To tell the truth, I began my visit, a few days beforehand, by meeting a small but significant Polish outpost in Rome: the religious brothers who provide pastoral service at the Hospital of the Holy Spirit in Sassia which is so dear to our Camillian tradition because it is connected with the living memory of St. Camillus. I have to thank Fr. Andrea Tarkowski for introducing me to the historical, architectural and spiritual beauty of that place!

I arrived in Warsaw on 13 May of this year and I immediately perceived the precision of the organisation and the warmth of your welcome which found a pleasant confirmation during the subsequent days of my visit and at the meetings I attended. With joy on 14 May I celebrated my sixtieth birthday three times at table with my religious brothers of three different communities and with a solemn and moving celebration of the Eucharist.

At the residence of the Provincial Superior of Tarnowskie Góry I was able to appreciate the ancient architecture of the beginning of the twentieth century of our institution which has been modernised and the advanced and scientific character of the service provided to sick people in it, in particular at the unit for palliative care. This health-care institution today needs a major reorganisation in order to be suited to the highest modern standards of safety and operational capacity that should belong to any health-care structure of this kind. The Provincial Superior, during the meeting with the Provincial Council, described how this project – which should be completed during the three-year period in 2014-17 according to European directives in the field of health care, needs to obtain adequate financial resources. The total estimate of four million euros certainly constitutes an important challenge for your communities and your Province.

In Zabrze, Pilchowice, Zbrosławic, Hutki and Warsaw (*Ursus*), I met religious brothers who are truly involved in caring for those sick people who are perhaps ‘the poorest of the poor’: elderly people but also young people with physical and mental disabilities, men whom the social crisis or a family crisis have brutally placed not only at the margins of society but also completely outside the dignity of a serene human life in society. The intelligent attention paid to the milieu, the well-organised service, knowing the patients individually as well as their problems, the almost personalised care for the most demanding human and clinical cases, and the commitment to a *critical* reaffirmation in the society and culture of your country of the rights of the sick and the disadvantaged, strengthened my esteem and admiration for these religious brothers of ours and the commitment of the people who work with them.

In the Parish of St. Camillus in Zabrze, with emotion and feeling I celebrated the Eucharist with many Camillian religious brothers from various communities and with the faithful of that Christian community: the massive presence of people, the devotion, the joy and the festiveness of the songs...revealed the high quality of the deposit of faith in the people of Poland. This, also, is a valuable treasure for you and to which you are called to make your contribution in guardianship and growth, with a view to work involving the promotion of vocations and evangelisation in line with the specific Camillian idea of the ‘gospel of health and mercy’.

I had the joyous opportunity to meet the young men who are undergoing their formation: postulants, novices, professed and religious who had recently been consecrated priests and who are living the adventure of their first ministerial undertakings: this is the true wealth of your Province and I will enable you to address present problems and plan the next future decisions with serenity, in the knowledge that the Lord continues to bless your religious Province and your commitment as consecrated men at the service of the sick and those who live on the ‘outskirts of society and humanity’ (Pope Francis). As emerged during the course of the meeting with the Provincial Council, you have before you the need to motivate these young religious through specialisation studies in the various areas of our charism. The specificity of our charism requires increasing further exploration! Today the world of health and health care brings with it this important challenge for the Camillians. This is a matter of actualising in this twenty-first century of ours the cry of our Founder to put ‘more heart in those hands’ – human-ethical-spiritual expertise in synergy with scientific expertise. We can no longer allow ourselves to be *amateur* religious. This approach of improvisation, in the modern context of health care and caring for people, means ‘mediocrity’

and this does not go with the clear *fame* that we Camillians enjoy, in many cases, of being *specialists* in the world of health and health care. If we want to have a positive influence and make the difference in the field of care and health-care animation, we must meet with courage the challenge of formation.

Aware that I have not exhausted my meetings with all the human and ministerial riches of your Province, I reaffirm my commitment to also meeting – as soon as my agenda makes this possible – our religious brothers of the Province of Poland who live the service of the Camillian charism in Germany (Berlin), in Georgia and in Madagascar. During my meeting with the Provincial Council I clearly perceived your approach of confident expectations as regards your mission in Madagascar which is going through a new season of ministerial, and above all, vocational revitalisation after various years of difficulty. May God bless this land and your work with copious fruits of Camillian witness!

The week of 18-23 May was dedicated to the meeting with the major Superiors of the Order. During the middle of this meeting we experienced an intense but also, and above all else, an interior pilgrimage, a spiritual synthesis of great value.

This interior journey (*Wadowice, Auschwitz, Częstochowa, Krakow-Lagiewniki (the Sanctuary of Divine Mercy, Krakow – for a long time, the town of Polish Kings, the faith, science, and culture – cfr. Niccolò Copernico)*) can be physically and symbolically included in two messages which can almost be taken for granted at the level of their formal simplicity but which are overwhelming in their substantial radicality of contents at the level of spiritual renewal for believers and consecrated people – ourselves. These two phrases are also my best wishes for all of you, for your personal and community lives, for your present and your future: **‘Do not be afraid! Open, indeed open wide, your doors to Christ’** and **‘Jezu Ufam Tobie – Jesus, I trust in you!’** (respectively uttered by St. John Paul II 22 October 1978 in his homily for the beginning of his Petrine ministry, and by Sr. Faustina Kowalska).

We visited *Wadowice*, the city where **St. John Paul II** was born, with his baptismal font and an interactive museum which allows one in addition to devotion to immerse oneself in the history of the man and Christian, Karol Wojtyła, and his message; the Nazi concentration camp in the land of Poland of *Auschwitz* where **St. Maximilian Mary Kolbe** shared to the utmost the cross of Christ by sharing in the abysmal suffering and the devastating pain of the Jewish people and many other men and women, the victims of discrimination whose dignity was violated and whose only right was death; the ancient city of Krakow, a city of kings who were saints, of profound culture and faith where in 2016 the next World Youth Day will be celebrated by Pope Francis; and the sanctuary of *Częstochowa* where the **Black Madonna of Jasna Góra** with the *‘two signs of violence’* on her face which do not alter her serene expression continues to reanimate our hope as well and the sanctuary-monastery of Divine Mercy where Jesus through the weakness of **Sr. Faustina Kowalska** continues to irradiate the powerful message of the mercy of God. With the proclamation of the Jubilee Year of Mercy (cf. the Bull of indiction *Misericordiae Vultus*) which Pope Francis will solemnly inaugurate on 8 December of this year and which will come to end with the solemnity of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, of 20 November 2016, certainly thousands of pilgrims will visit this sanctuary. For all of us without any doubt this is a clear invitation to live as persons for whom mercy is an ongoing source of conversion and for our daily lifestyles, which shapes our words, our choices and our relationships.

Our journey during these days was organised ‘within’ three different life histories, three different pathways of saintliness. *St. John Paul II*, a Pope, an intellectual and a theologian. *St Faustina Kowalska*, a simple sister, cook and gardener who passed through only three classes of her elementary school. *St. Maximilian Mary Kolbe*, a Franciscan, for whom love for man rose above even the cynicism of the Nazi regime, offering his life in exchange for the survival of another prisoner who had a wife and children. Lastly, in the afternoon of Saturday 23 May I visited in Warsaw the Parish of *St. Stanislaw Kostka*, which contains his tomb but also and above all else the living memory of the Blessed *Jerzy Popieluszko*, the chaplain of the workers’ movement

Solidarność: he was a good shepherd who in the truth of life and the Gospel at the age of only thirty-three offered his life – which was torn from him with unspoken and barbaric violence – for the return of justice and the dignity of his people. This young priest, this Christian martyr, is a symbol of the resistance of Poland in the face of the malign ideology of Communism! Today, thousands of people go on a pilgrimage as far as the garden of this parish to pray in front of his tomb which has the form of a large cross.

Following in the footsteps of these three saints, we looked for inspiration to implement our human and Christian values in order to understand their saintliness and to draw up an answer to a question of capital importance: is saintliness an aspiration that can also be achieved practically by us? I ask you to commit yourselves, together with all the religious brothers of our Order, to responding in, and with, fraternal, consecrated and Camillian daily life to this request for saintliness!

For me this stay of mine with you and with all those who took part in the meeting of the general government with the major Superiors of the Order of Poland – which was organised by you in an artistic way as regards the organisation and hospitality – was a profound experience of spiritual and human growth. I was truly moved to the depths of my being.

I want to share with you some final observations which I offered during the homily of the celebration of the Eucharist at the end of the meeting.

After this pilgrimage I understood in a deeper way the person and the message of John Paul II when in his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* (1983) – which was written after the assassination attempt of St. Peter's Square: the question about the meaning of suffering. 'Suffering exists in the world to provoke love' and points to the approach of the *Good Samaritan* as a possible pathway of response.

Pope Francis during his recent visit to the Philippines dwelt upon the same question, which had been provoked by Jun, a little girl aged thirteen who had lost everything in life, including her family, and was looked after by a Catholic institution: 'why does the suffering of the innocent exist?'. The Pope answered by taking the girl in his arms and observing: 'I thank you, Jun, for being so brave in talking about your experience...your question, deep down, is almost unanswerable. Only when we are able to weep over the things that you experienced, can we understand and give some kind of response. The great question for everybody is: "Why do children suffer?". Why do children suffer? Only when our hearts can ask this question and weep, can we begin to understand. There is a worldly compassion which is completely useless. You said something about this. A compassion which, at most, makes us reach into our pocket and take out a coin. If Christ had that kind of compassion, he would have passed by, cured three or four people, and then returned to the Father. Only when Christ wept, and he was capable of weeping, did he understand our troubles. Dear young men and women, our world today needs weeping. The marginalized weep, those who are neglected weep, the scorned weep, but those of us who have relatively comfortable life, we don't know how to weep. Certain realities of life are seen only with eyes that are cleansed by tears. I ask each one of you to ask: Can I weep? Can I weep when I see a child who is hungry, on drugs and on the street, homeless, abandoned, mistreated or exploited as a slave by society? Or is my weeping the self-centred whining of those who weep because they want to have something else? This is the first thing I would like to say to you. Let's learn to weep, the way [Jun] taught us today. Let's not forget this witness. She asked the big question – why do children suffer? – by weeping; and the big answer which we can give, all of us, is to learn how to weep'.

Tears should really be the raw material of our Camillian ministry.

Our indescribable visit to the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz was not easy for me – internally speaking! I was struck by the numerous presence of groups of young people with their tense faces and lucid eyes to the point of tears and who had no wish to joke around. Here there once again emerged the omnipresence of suffering inflicted by the project to eliminate millions of people. Pope Benedict XVI on his visit to the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, of 28 May 2006, in his speech, taking psalm 44 as his point of departure, asked himself: 'Where was God on those days?'

Why did He keep quiet? How could He tolerate this excess of destruction, this triumph of evil...?' and we continue to ask ourselves: 'where was man?' I remember a statement of the philosopher T. Adorno who argued that the ultimate objective of education, of all our initiatives in the field of education, is to educate so that Auschwitz is never repeated! All the other objectives and projects lose their meaning and their importance in front of this greater objective. Auschwitz never again!

Faced with suffering, with our condition of vulnerability which is specific to being human beings, we must not only attend to others but also attend to ourselves in order to avoid situations of burn-out which is a phenomenon that is typical of the illness of activism without congruous rest! I remember the Gospel where Jesus defines his disciples not as 'servants but friends'. Here the friend is revealed! The best definition and image of friendship was learnt by me from my supervisor in clinical pastoral education in the United States of America in the 1980s and I keep it like treasure in my heart: 'a friend is that person with whom we have such confidence and freedom that we share the garbage of our lives'. The Bible, in the Book of Sirach (Sir 6:14), states: 'A loyal friend is like a safe shelter, find one and you have found a treasure'. How true that is! However one has very few friends! Robin Dunbar, an English anthropologist and psychologist, observed that the network of our relationships is able to deal at the utmost with 150 people: to obtain a deeper knowledge of the reality of man, at the most with fifteen people, but an authentic relationship of friendship one has at the utmost with 1.5 friends. Not even two people! How important it is to become friends of other people and have friends in life: this is the most powerful antidote there is to burn-out, to isolation, to depression and to the loss of meaning in one's life. I truly pray that all of us can have in our lives at the least one true friend who can take care principally of us, that we are consecrated to caring for others and in many situations we manage to forget about ourselves. I believe that the very much discussed disenchantment with contemporary religious life is connected specifically to this mysterious question: losing oneself in activism, consecrating ourselves as 'saviours' of the situation, forgetting about ourselves, and neglecting to attend to ourselves integrally at a spiritual, human and physical level!

I thank you because this experience of living together with you during those days strengthened in me the meaning of friendship and fraternity.

Thanking you for the warm welcome that you bestowed upon me and Fr. Gianfranco, I invoke upon you the protection of our Saint, Father Camillus, and all the Camillian martyrs. May Our Lady of Health cover us with her mantle and care for our wishes, troubles, feelings, projects and hopes of the present and the future for our Camillian life!

Faternally.

Rome, 25 May 2015

Feast day of the birth of St. Camillus and the martyrs to charity