

Message of the Superior General to the Camillian Religious Brothers of the Province of North Italy

‘I am counting on you “to wake up the world”, since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. As I told the Superiors General: “Radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way.” This is the priority that is needed right now: “to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth... a religious must never abandon prophecy”’.

Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People*

‘We cannot escape the Lord’s words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. *Mt 25:31-45*).... In each of these “little ones,” Christ himself is present. His flesh becomes visible in the flesh of the tortured, the crushed, the scourged, the malnourished, and the exiled ... to be acknowledged, touched, and cared for by us. Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross: “as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love.”’

Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*

Dear Fr. Vittorio Paleari,

Provincial Superior of the Province of North Italy,

Members of the Provincial Council and all our Camillian religious brothers,

Health and peace in the Lord of our lives!

In a panegyric on St. Camillus **Fr. CAMILLO CESARE BRESCIANI** (1783-1871) gave full vent to his devotion to the saint of charity. With inflamed words he addressed his community: ‘my daughter: love the sick person like a father, like a brother, as if he were your Jesus; if he is good, you will come to love him. . .if he is a sinner, follow him. . .Think of him, live for him, burn for him. O fortunate would you be if you died for him, at his side, helping him in his body and his soul!’

FR. LUIGI ARTINI (1808-1872) knew that there can be many misunderstandings in a person’s experience of religious life. There is an authentic faith but there is also a masked faith. Our passions do not always come out into the open. They are hidden beneath devotional appearances. ‘How many times do the seeds of our passions come out unobserved, often masked beneath the flattering appearance of virtue itself! Ambition in the form of decorum, affection of the senses behind the pretext of innocent friendship, slander behind the visor of zeal. . .a grave error seems slight. . .we deceive our very consciences’.

FR. STANISLAO CARCERERI (1840-1899) wrote as follows to Fr. Luigi Artini: ‘We religious are sold flesh, and for us to die today or in forty years’ time, die in the desert or in a royal palace, on a pilgrimage to evangelise peace, or helping a dying man who expires, is always the same thing: it happened while God our good Master and Father was served. We are always soldiers of Christ destined to win by dying on that battlefield to which he leads us. . .For some time I have directed my prayers to this end and I pray to God that he will not let me die unprepared’.

‘If our eye is endowed with that simplicity that is so recommended by the gospel, that sees only good in our religious brothers, then the detestable vice of murmuring will diminish if not completely disappear. . .There will reign that mutual esteem that generates fraternal sympathy from which emerges and is strengthened that mutual delight by which our communities become a delightful antechamber to heaven. . .I would like to recommend if not a crumb of esteem, at least a little indulgence and, even better,

cordial agreeableness...May there reign amongst us that delicate and affectionate care that unites in a dear way all the members of the same family in pain!’ **FR. ANGELO CARAZZO** (1873-1945).

FR. CELESTINO RIZZI (1914-1951), who died in Yunnan, China, shared the following thoughts of his on China: ‘the times are bad...If they persecute us, may it be only ‘for love of justice’. In another letter he observed: ‘storms in the hands of the Lord are used to move fervid souls rapidly towards the port of perfection...the law of redemption is a law of suffering. Pain follows us like a shadow that wants to achieve perfection’. He exhorted his religious brothers to have courage: ‘always, but especially when the struggle becomes harsher, an officer must be near to his soldiers in order to animate them by his example. We implore from the ‘divine Missionary’ the grace to follow him without hesitation to Nazareth, to Bethany and to Calvary’.

‘We have an extreme need to pray to be up to our tasks. We will save the world more certainly the more we know how to be on our knees before God. Our renewal must be rooted in prayer’. This had to be united to penance and mortification in a spirit of solidarity with all suffering people: ‘the austerity of life, a voluntary austerity’. **FR. ALESSANDRO PEDRONI** (1900-1948).

The good storeroom of our history

‘Every scribe who has been instructed in the Kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old’ (Mt 13:52)

The famous composer Ennio Morricone, the recent winner of an Oscar for the best musical sound track, when receiving his prestigious award began his speech with the following words: ‘There is no important music that has not been inspired by a great film!’

Dear **Fr. Vittorio**, Provincial Superior, esteemed religious brothers of the Province of North Italy, you are playing important *music* that is inspired by a *film* that is even more grandiose: the mercy of God towards suffering people who are in need of the humanity and the dignity that was channelled to us by the life and the passion of St. Camillus!

I wanted to introduce this message at the end of my fraternal visit to my religious brothers of your Province which I undertook together with Fr. Gianfranco Lunardon – the Secretary General of the Order and a member of your religious Province – with a brief series of quotations that identify the human, spiritual, religious, apostolic, missionary and ministerial profile of a number of Camillians who not only built on the ‘rock’ of your religious Province but also, and above all else, bore witness with faithfulness and fecundity to their Camillian vocations, transforming their histories into an authentic history of salvation.

This incumbent debt of grateful memory to the history of our community has also been constantly requested of us by Pope Francis: ‘Religious not only have a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished...With respect to the past we must cultivate a relationship of gratitude; with regard to the present, passion for life (and we Camillians add that we should also serve with Samaritan compassion), and as regards the future an increase in hope’ (cf. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, 28.11.2014).

These religious are only a small tip of the iceberg – made up of about 1,015 Camillian religious – who in the approximately 150 years of existence and activity of the Province of Lombardy and Veneto have experienced tensions and hard work, moves forward and the opening of missions, and an expansion of the horizon of the presence of the Camillians in Europe, in America, in the East and in Africa with great personal and communal efforts in order to achieve a constant new understanding of our charism (from so-termed

traditional ministry to *our Works*; from ‘indirect’ ministry with pastoral care and training for personnel of the social/care field to dialogue in cooperation with lay people; from an increasingly strong activation of our missionary DNA to the development and the promotion of the culture of health; and from an increasingly sensitive care for the elderly and the ‘last’ to an increasingly generous and ‘obedient’ cooperation with the needs of the central government of the Order).

Ever since my appointment as Superior General of the Order (in June 2014), interpreting a widespread need felt by our religious brothers and meeting my own personal need to meet communities and our religious brothers themselves ‘in person’, I began to travel the vast geographical world of the Camillians. During this journey of mine I received happy confirmation of what my own personal history had led me to intuit: with your Province, the history of the Camillians and the space of the Camillians have expanded! I have travelled to many countries of the world but I have been followed by ‘Lombardy and Veneto’. My own personal history and the history of my vocation and my consecration as a religious have been intertwined providentially with your Province through the pioneering role of Fr. Innocente Radrizzani and another thirty-nine religious who came to Brazil full of evangelising and apostolic zeal and passion. They generated a lively exchange of cooperation and mutual help with you. The Brazilian Camillians have always, with gratitude, seen your Province as their ‘mother’ Province. Last but not least, the recent celebration of the canonical erection of the new Province of India was further evidence of the creative human and spiritual generosity of many of your religious brothers.

A contemporary building site of work that is always open

“Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch” (Lk 5:4)

During the various weekends that I spent with you – see the final enclosure to this message with the *Chronology of Fraternal Community Meetings* – in the various communities to be found in Piedmont, Lombardy, Liguria, Tuscany, Emilia Romagna, Trentino and Veneto, I was able to listen and to take part in your ‘joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties’ (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1). A past and above all a recent past like yours certainly bears on your present as a reason for healthy community pride but it also runs the risk of generating regrets and frustrations, highlighting, with tones that are at times dark, the frailty of the recent past and the present. In the 1980s the word ‘reorganisation’ began to circulate and it took on the tones of a challenge: all the communities and all the Provincial Superiors have had to address this challenge.

The Provincial Chapter of 1989 had as its title: ‘Beyond Reorganisation. The Province looks to the Future’. This is a title that conserves still today its prophetic charge: the fall in the number of religious (at the present time there are about 136); the exponential increase in their average age; the crisis in vocations to religious life; the cracks highlighted by a certain model for the promotion of vocations and formation and the difficulties encountered in changing it into a more inclusive and integral one; the crisis of a certain cliché of community and ministerial life; the challenge of multicultural integration for we religious who live in a community; and the challenge of cooperation under the banner of a real attribution of trust and responsibility to lay people: all these are objective situations and are made even more evident and no longer avoidable by historical circumstances and cultural and ecclesial contingencies that are increasingly fluid and destabilise us and generate a state of dismay about the present and a certain feeling of anxiety about the future!

The lapidary warning of Fr. Lino Tamanini remains of great contemporary relevance: ‘Reorganisation either means a sprout or it has the colours of a funeral’. This seems to me to be your *north star*: to transform a need into an opportunity; to read historical contingencies not by trying to resist them in a stoic or promethean way but, rather, by making them the subject of wise discernment where one can

perceive a providential move of God, according to which ‘reorganisation’ is not reduced to a mere mechanical operation involving the elimination of some works and/or activities but, rather, involves accompanying these ‘painful cuts’ with a project for the spiritual and apostolic renewal of communities and the entire reality of the Province.

The almost bi-univocal identification of our charism with institutions, and the recent decision taken to transfer or sell some of ‘our Works’, has generated in some religious a form of short circuit at the level of identity and a sort of *silent mourning* which brings with it negative feelings and attitudes. I believe that it is useful to remember that ‘our Works’ appeared only recently on our ministerial panorama if we take into consideration the four centuries of our existence: the first nursing home – that in Cremona – bears the year 1904. The charism of mercy towards the sick now asks us to ‘put out into deep water’ (Lk 5:4) and to broaden our mental and spiritual horizons.

From this point of view, I think that I can value and appreciate some of your recent ‘gains’: the pathway of ‘unification’ with a view to greater ‘unity’ with the Province of Piedmont; a new understanding of the presence of ‘our Works’ marked by increasing difficulty at the level of management – because of an unfavourable economic situation in Italy as well – and the decision to proceed steadily with their disposal after a pathway of discernment which culminated in a consequent decision of the Provincial Chapter which was almost plebiscitary (Provincial Chapter of May 2014) in favour of a renewed commitment through works that are not only more agile at the level of management but which also facilitate and provoke a more pervasive ministerial presence of religious in all of their ‘Camillianness’; the commitment to thinking anew about the pathways of initial formation and the proposing of a certain gamut of suggestions that aim at overcoming a certain ‘exaggerated form of care’ and provoking an increasing taking on of responsibilities as regards their own maturation of your Delegations; a closer dialogue with the local Church and a committed interaction with the social/care needs of the territory in which you live...

Our authentic adherence to Christ ignites hope.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you”. “Follow me” (Jn 21:17-19)

Can the charism of mercy towards the sick which has been given to us as a gift still instruct us about which pathway to take in the future! The – *ancient and always new* – itinerary of charity offers us certain important suggestions which I will now share with you, taking them from the observations that Fr. Forsenio Vezzani formulated specifically at the time of the first centenary of the canonical erection of your Province:

- ***Giving oneself to the sick:*** from Fr. Camillo Cesare Bresciani who ended his days at *Pio Ricovero* in Verona to Fr. Enrico Rebuschini, and from Fr. Luigi Tezza to Fr. Rocco Ferroni, who scented with humanity and holiness the wards of hospitals or the small rooms of nursing homes; from the first brothers working in the hospitals of Cremona, Padua and Mantua or providing care in private homes to Br. Ettore Boschini and his always sharp and ‘excessive’ invocation of the ‘last’ because violence perpetrated against the dignity of the marginalised is always excessive; and on to the many who have invested ‘learning and conscience’, immersed in immanence and transcendence in order to serve the sick Christ according to the industrious and beating programme of St. Camillus: here we encounter serving the sick as serving God!
- ***The secret of love.*** Giving can be easy: giving oneself in charity is sublime! A man consecrated to charity goes down an arduous pathway: casting off himself; committing himself in a totally evangelical effort to performing the gospel through the practice of works of mercy, in order to savour the beauty that following the passion of God for man generates in a man who seeks to offer it again in his life in compassion for those who suffer.

- ***The contemporary relevance of a message.*** Humanity, although it has the advantages of its wonderful progress, cannot ignore the drama that illness represents. Those who are sick require care and treatment, request medicine, ask for hygiene, but above all else they seek love in those who care for them: this is the most impelling urgency, which is always of contemporary relevance, of the message that for over twenty centuries the disciples of Christ have proposed in this programme: ‘To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak; I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it’ (1Cor 9:22-23).
- ***The humility of a mission.*** Good wants modesty and charity appeals for modesty: ‘But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret; And your Father who sees in secret will repay you’ (Mt 6:3-4). What we are called to is a service of mercy and of compassion; it is a regal service, but it is only a ‘service’ to be lived with the imagination, creativity, intelligence and the humility of the ‘setting on fire’ of Christ (Lk 12:49): in the heart of a Camillian first of all!

I would like to thank you with feelings of true gratitude for the fraternity, readiness to help and welcome that I experienced in your religious communities and in the personal meetings that I had the privilege to take part in: listening to your joys and hopes, but also to your difficulties and tensions, for me was an opportunity for humble and fraternal sharing and a possibility to acquire true knowledge about your lives! I renew my esteem for, and my grateful appreciation of, your elderly religious brothers for the good that they have done for sick people and the whole of the Order. I ask them to continue to support our Institute through the increasingly effective intercession of prayer!

May St. Camillus, our Father and Source of perennial inspiration, Mary Our Lady of Health and Salvation, the Blessed Enrico Rebuschini and the Blessed Luigi Tezza, and all our religious brothers who have preceded us in beholding the merciful face of God, continue to intercede for us to obtain the gifts of health so as to be able to love and serve God with passion in His weakest and most suffering flesh!

Rome, 1 March 2016

Fr. Leocir Pessini
Superior General

Fr. Gianfranco Lunardon
Secretary General

Cf. Enclosure – Chronology of Fraternal Meetings

(PASTORAL) FRATERNAL VISIT – THE PROVINCE OF NORTH ITALY

1. **Milan – Capriate San Gervasio – Cremona** (15-16 September 2015)
Meeting with the Provincial Council at Capriate. Visit to the old people's home and community of Cremona.
2. **Verona** (14-16 November 2014)
Visit and meeting with the community of S. Giuliano, the community of S. Maria del Paradiso and the chaplains of the Hospital of Borgo Trento.
3. **Turin** (5-7 December 2014)
Visit and meeting with the community of Madian, the St Camillus Hospital Centre, and the chaplains of Turin (*this visit was made by the Superior General alone*).
4. **Venice and Bologna** (13-15 March 2015)
Visit and meeting with the religious community of Venice-Lido and with the principal health-care staff of the IRCCS and of the hospital. In Bologna, a meeting with the religious brothers of the chaplaincy of the Rizzoli Hospital.
5. **Milan** (18-21 June 2015)
Visit and meeting with the religious community of the *Casa di Cura San Pio X* and the *Casa di Cura San Camillo* and with the chaplains of the L. Sacco Hospital and the Niguarda Hospital. Fr. Leocir celebrated the liturgical feast day of our Founder at the St. Camillus Sanctuary.
6. **Venice** (13-16 July 2015)
Celebration of the liturgical feast day of St. Camillus (14 July) with the religious and the staff of the health-care work.
7. **Padua, Mottinello, Trento and Treviso** (23/26 July 2015)
Visit to the religious communities and the hospital chaplaincies of Padua and Treviso.
8. In **Mottinello**, Fr. Gianfranco Lunardon animated the course of spiritual exercises on 13-18 September 2015 with about 35 religious brothers. The subject was 'Not Perfect but Happy. Towards a Sustainable Prophecy of Consecrated Life'.
9. **Forte dei Marmi, Genoa and Imperia** (20-22 November 2015)
Visit to the religious communities, institutions and hospital chaplaincies..
10. **Predappio** (28-29 November 2015)
Visit to the religious community and the centre for the mentally disabled.
11. **Milan/Seveso and Pavia** (5-7 December 2015)
Participation in the meeting on formation with the Superiors of the Camillian communities of the Province and then a meeting with the religious brothers of the chaplaincy of Pavia.
12. **Cremona, Como, Besana Brianza** (21-22 February 2016)
Visit to the religious communities.
13. **Capriate san Gervasio (BG)** – 23 February 2016: final meeting– general assembly of the Province