

MESSAGE OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL

TO THE CAMILLIAN PROVINCE OF POLAND – THE DELEGATION IN GEORGIA

*Pastoral Visit
 29 September-3 October 2016*

‘Our meeting in the name of evangelical charity is a witness to communion and a means of fostering the way of unity. I encourage you to pursue this demanding yet fruitful path: the poor and weak are the “flesh of Christ” who call upon Christians of every confession, urging them to act without personal interests, following only the prompting of the Holy Spirit... I am happy to be with you for a little while to offer you my encouragement: God never turns away; he is always close to you, ready to listen, to give you his strength in times of difficulty. You are the beloved of Jesus, who wished to identify himself with all who suffer, he himself having suffered in his passion.’

Pope Francis, Meeting with the Church’s charity workers and those they assist outside the Camillian aid centre, Tbilisi, Saturday, 1 October 2016.

The Most Reverend Fr. Arkadiusz Novak

Provincial Superior of the Camillian Province of Poland

Reverend Fr. Pawel Dyl

Delegate of the Camillian Community of Georgia

Members of the Provincial Council and Camillian Religious of Poland

Health and peace in the Lord of our lives and our Camillian witness!

On the occasion of the visit of Pope Francis to Georgia and Azerbaijan (which took place on 30 September-2 October 2016), a visit by him to our Camillian mission in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, was also planned. I and Br. José Ignacio Santaolalla, the member of the General Consulta who is responsible for financial administration and missions, representing the central government of the Order, went there for this happy event.

Representing our fellow religious of the Camillian Province of Poland, the following also took part: the Provincial Superior, Fr. Arkadiusz Novak, and the four members of the Provincial Council: Fr. Mirosław Sz wajnoch, Fr. Ireneusz Sajewicz, Fr. Tomasz Bajda and Br. Tadeusz Biel. They were accompanied by a group of lay people who share the Camillian charism and are linked to the Camillians. Representing the Polish Church, the chairman of the commission for missions of the Bishops’ Conference of Poland, Bishop Jerzy Mazur SVD, also arrived and he shared his visit with us by staying at our community. This bishop was the first Catholic bishop of Siberia (Russia) and was appointed by Pope John Paul II.

From neighbouring Armenia – from the Camillian *Redemptoris Mater* Hospital in Ashotzk – there came Fr. Mario Cuccarollo, who at the present time is the only Camillian in that area (he has been there for twenty-five years), and Sister Noelle, a woman religious of the Congregation of the *Little Sisters of Jesus* – an expression of the spiritual family of Charles de Foucauld.

The Visit of Pope Francis to the Camillian Mission of Tbilisi

The feelings, the image, the words and the meetings that we had during those historic moments are still very much alive in our hearts and impressed in our memories. The visit of the Holy Father Francis constituted an event of grace that we shared with our Camillian community of Tbilisi in Georgia. Saturday

1 October 2016, the liturgical feast day of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, the patron saint of missions, will certainly remain in the annals of history, not only for our Delegation of Georgia but also for the Province of Poland and more in general for the whole of our Camillian Order.

The presence of Pope Francis amongst us was an expression of a great appreciation of the work of the Camillian missionaries who live in the *geographical fringes* of the planet and of the activity of witness that our religious have developed with the poor and the sick in Georgia. The Pope with his charism as a pastor, strengthened us in our faith and encouraged us to continue with our mission. His presence and words were also beneficial for our *self-esteem*, above all in an epoch which many troubled people have defined as a ‘season of crisis’, but which for us is a period when we should commit ourselves to hope and rebirth. Many religious, above all Camillians, followed the event through the mass media (newspapers, reviews), television programmes and Internet.

We welcomed Pope Francis in the courtyard that had been specially prepared and decorated by the Camillian mission, together with charity workers and religious active in the social field, people connected with the local *Caritas*, and disabled people, sick people and elderly people who are welcomed and looked after in the Camillian mission in Tbilisi. About 600 people were present. Fr. Pawel Dyl, a young Polish Camillian priest, who for sixteen years has worked as a missionary in Georgia, described this moment in the following way: ‘the meeting with the Pope was wonderful – a moment charged with peace and joy. I told Pope Francis that we love him very much and he smiled, looking at me with great love’.¹

Fr. Nino Martini, a former Camillian missionary in Armenia and Georgia who at the present time lives in Imperia (Italy), was not able to be present at this event *in loco* but accompanied the visit of the Pope, with comments from the studios, in Rome at the TV channel *TV2000* (of the Bishops’ Conference of Italy).

On Saturday 1 October, Pope Francis had a very demanding day that was thick with meetings and appointments. In the morning, he celebrated Holy Mass in the local stadium for about 10,000 Catholics who live in Georgia – Latins, Armenians and Assyrian-Chaldeans – on the day of the liturgical memorial of St. Therese of Lisieux, a Doctor of the Church and the patron saint of missions. In the afternoon, before visiting our community, he met and engaged in dialogue with priests, seminarians and health-care workers. The Pope clearly had a certain tiredness in his face but he always continued to have a broad smile for those whom he greeted, demonstrating his human and charismatic nearness.

After the joyous welcome with the people who were in the small square and the performance of some popular dances of Georgia prepared and performed by patients from our rehabilitation centre, Pope Francis offered us the following thoughts:

‘Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I greet you warmly and am pleased to meet all of you who are charity workers here in Georgia. Through your care, you express in an eloquent way love of neighbour which is the hallmark of Christ’s disciples. I thank Father Zurab for his words offered on your behalf. You represent a variety of charitable centres in the country: male and female religious institutes, *Caritas*, Church associations and other organizations, and groups of volunteers. To each one I offer my appreciation for your generous commitment to those most in need.

Your work is a journey of fraternal cooperation among the Christians of this country and the faithful of various rites. Our meeting in the name of evangelical charity is a witness to communion and a means of fostering the way of unity. I encourage you to pursue this demanding yet fruitful path: the poor and weak are the “flesh of Christ” who call upon Christians of every confession, urging them to act without personal interests, following only the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Cf. interview with Laura Badaracchi, ‘Indigenti e malati, ha visto la nostra ricchezza’, in *Avvenire*, 5 October 2016, p. 16.

I offer a special greeting to the elderly, the sick, the suffering and those assisting them from various charitable organizations. I am happy to be with you for a little while to offer you my encouragement: God never turns away; he is always close to you, ready to listen, to give you his strength in times of difficulty. You are the beloved of Jesus, who wished to identify himself with all who suffer, he himself having suffered in his passion.

Charitable initiatives are the ripe fruit of a Church that serves, offers hope and shows forth God's mercy. Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, your mission is a great one! Continue to live out charity in the Church and to manifest this charity in all areas of society with the zealous love that comes from God. May the Blessed Virgin Mary, icon of gratuitous love, guide you and protect you! May the blessing of the Lord sustain you, which I now willingly invoke upon all of you.'

The Camillian Mission in the Caucasus: Armenia and Georgia

The region of the Caucasus is dominated by an enormous and massive mountainous range that is situated between Europe and Asia. Powerful empires (Rome and China) have always met each other and clashed in this area. It is inhabited by nomadic peoples. In antiquity, the famous 'silk route' passed through it. This land is beautiful, ancient and mysterious; it is emblematic of a unique and rich culture and has on its boundaries what remains of the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) and Mount Ararat.

Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are three small republics of the Caucasus which obtained their independence from the then powerful Soviet Union twenty-five years ago in the year 1991. The Camillians arrived in the Caucasus in Armenia when Fr. Angelo Brusco was Superior General. They did this in response to a request made by Pope John Paul II who invited the Order to take responsibility for the health care of the population who had been completely abandoned and were in a very bad state after the terrible earthquake which struck Armenia in 1988, causing more than 140,000 deaths. The Holy See had decided to build a hospital, the *Redemptoris Mater* Hospital – which at the present time has 93 beds, an emergency unit, and departments for general medicine, obstetrics, gynecology and paediatrics – in Ashotzk, a village in the Armenian tableland inhabited by very poor people. This place has a very severe climate, above all in winter (temperatures reach minus 40 degrees). This hospital has become a health-care point of reference for the whole of the Armenian nation. The first three Camillians, the pioneers of this mission, were Fr. Mario Cuccarollo, Fr. Mariano Florio and Fr. Nino (Ivan) Martini. Fr. Martini subsequently moved to the nascent mission of Georgia where he stayed for ten years. The Camillian Province of North Italy, which has supported this mission from the outset, continues to support this hospital.

The Armenians who live abroad (above all in the United States of America) number about five million. According to the census that was carried out in the year 2000, the population of the country is about 3.6 million. In Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, there is a monument which commemorates the genocide of over one million Armenians, a genocide perpetrated by the Turks between 1915 and 1923. Pope Francis recently visited Armenia on 24-26 June 2016. By his recent visit to Georgia and Azerbaijan (30 September-2 October 2016), he completed his meetings with the populations of the Caucasus.

From Armenia, with the good health-care contribution offered by the *Redemptor Mater* Hospital, the Camillians were invited to go to Georgia as well, to the outskirts of Tbilisi, the capital city of the country, in order to build a polyclinic, which is now very well equipped and efficient, called the *Redemptor Hominis* Polyclinic. This institution was financed with the help of the Bishops' Conference of Italy (CEI). The construction of this health-care centre was begun in June 1995 and it was officially inaugurated on 15 April 1998. This centre was 'baptised' with the name of *Redemptor Hominis* in homage to the first encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II who strongly wanted the construction of this polyclinic, and was financed by the Holy See and by Italian Caritas, being subsequently entrusted to the management, at the level of organisation, of the Camillians.

In the view of Fr. Pawel, in the near future it could be possible to plan the use of a part of these polyclinics to provide the first services of palliative care, health-care training and care in people's homes, as well as other health-care activities which at the present time do not exist, above all those connected with the terminally ill in Georgia.

As regards this project for health care and formation in Tbilisi, there has been important inter-Congregational cooperation with the Daughters of St. Camillus who were present with a community made up of three women religious almost from the beginning of the mission. They left the country during the first months of 2016 but promised to return in the near future.

Some Social-Historical-Cultural Information on Georgia in order to Understand our Camillian Mission

The population of Georgia at the present time amounts to about four million inhabitants. The capital, Tbilisi, is the largest city of the country, with about 1.5m inhabitants. The predominant religion is Orthodox Christianity. The Catholics are a 'small flock' (cf. Pope Francis) – they number about 40,000 people and make up 1% of the population. Azerbaijan, which the Pope visited after Georgia, is a Muslim nation where the Catholics are a very small community of only 600 people. In the capital, Tbilisi, traces of the Soviet domination are still visible, with enormous buildings for the poorest people. These buildings are square, grey, and uniform when it comes to their dilapidated state (a vertical 'favela' one would say in Brazil): a panorama of habitations without any external aesthetics which is simply horrible (one can well imagine what the inside of these buildings is like), with balconies crammed with underclothes of the most varied colours, hung up to dry in the sun!

One historical curiosity is worthy of mention. The city of Gori is located about forty kilometres from Tbilisi and now has about 47,000 inhabitants. This city is the birthplace of Josif Vissarionovic Dzugasvili, better known as *Stalin*, the cruel and bloodthirsty dictator who ruled the powerful empire of the Soviet Union, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Russians in the period 1927-1953! The city has a museum in memory of Stalin. It is also possible to see the poor house where Stalin was born and where he lived for the first years of his life, and visit, however incredible this may seem, the local seminary where he studied because he had been ordered to do so by his father.

Georgia has a very religious people and is populated by Orthodox Christians, with a history that is rich in conflicts and culture. Pope Francis, when speaking to journalists on the return flight to Rome, after his pastoral visit to Georgia and Azerbaijan, made the following comments: 'I never imagined so much culture, so much faith, so much Christianity. They are a people of believers with a very ancient Christian culture, a people of many martyrs...But Georgia is wonderful, something I did not expect; a Christian nation, to the core! But Orthodox. The Georgian Orthodox Church is very united under the leadership of Patriarch Ilia II – a true man of God, a symbol of the identity of Georgia and historically near to the Russian Orthodox Church. This Church is on the fringes, in the sense that it does not form a part of the Greek or Slav world'.²

Today the Camillian community of Tbilisi in Georgia is made up of four religious of the Province of Poland: Fr. Pawel Dyl (the Delegate Superior); Fr. Zygmunt Niechzisieclz; Fr. Akaki Chelidze (a native of Georgia) who works in Armenia and is resident in the Camillian mission in that country; and Br. Zakroszwili Zakaria (a temporary professed) who is a student of theology, *Lashia*, and is studying in Kazakhstan.

Fr. Akaki Chelidze, who was ordained a priest on 10 June 2006, was the first Camillian vocation in the Caucasus and at the present time is the Vicar General of the Catholic diocese in Armenia. During the Pope's visit to Georgia, he was head of coordination for the whole of the area for communications on behalf of the local Church, with the international mass media being present during the visit of the Supreme Pontiff. In addition, in his normal pastoral work, in cooperation with Fr. Zygmunt, he attends to the pastoral care of two parishes, 250km from Tbilisi, in the villages of Vargavie and Khisabavra.

² Press conference of the Holy Father during his return flight from Azerbaijan, Sunday 2 October 2016. Cf. www.vatican.va

Amongst the Camillian pioneers who gave their lives for this mission, we remember with gratitude, for the gift of his life, Fr. Pawl Szczepanek who died in a tragic road accident on 21 June 1999 near to Tbilisi, at the age of only forty: by his work and his devotion to the Camillian cause, he contributed notably to the growth of the Camillian mission.

The first missionaries arrived in Tbilisi in 1988, having been invited to do so by Pope John Paul II, to attend to the organisation of the *Redemptor Hominis* Polyclinic in Temka, on the outskirts of the capital Tbilisi. Today this health-care institution offers care and treatment to about 10,000 patients every year. In 2003, near to this institution, a new building was constructed as a rehabilitation centre for people with physical, psychological or mental disabilities (a day hospital). It was inaugurated on the feast day of St. Camillus in 2004. This new service opened the eyes of the first missionaries to the reality of a world of abject poverty and abandonment: the Communist regime had gravely undermined the mental health of the population.

Disabled people, for example, for cultural reasons, during the years of the Communist regime had to be invisible. They were hidden in their homes and many were eliminated. These people were shut up in their homes without the possibility of having the treatment they needed and relationships with other people and they did not feel that they were a part of the community. This rehabilitation centre was a response of the Camillians to this situation of evident injustice; a form of social redemption which offers a very fine space where these people receive services involving rehabilitation, in a very empathetic relational atmosphere. This activity is managed with the government of Georgia and is one of the best social-care centres in the country. It has a multiplicity of professional activities: music therapy, ceramic workshops, art therapy, a computer workshop, writing and reading, rehabilitation, game therapy, and individual and group psychological support.

The quality of the services offered in terms of treatment, professional care and Camillian humanism is incontestable. According to the director of this centre, Fr. Pawel Dyil, 'ever since we opened this day centre, the process of inclusion of disabled people in their families has notably increased. Society changes slowly but the disabled people who come to our centre improve and change rapidly: the love that is offered free, liberates them from the slavery of a sense of inferiority and encourages them to develop all the mental and physical capacities that they possess'.³

In addition to the institutional services of these two centres, the polyclinic and the rehabilitation centre for disabled people, the Camillian mission in Tbilisi performs excellent work in home care through Br. Zakroszwili Zakaria who coordinates a multidisciplinary staff of volunteers. These volunteers help about fifty patients for no charge, visiting them three times a week in their homes. In this service, the Daughters of St. Camillus offered great witness and are remembered with great affection by the people.

In addition to the activities in Tbilisi, the capital of the country, our Camillian mission is also present in the village of Arali with the 'Sons of God' Day Centre, in cooperation with the religious Congregation of the Sisters of San Nino, and in the village of Akhaltzikhe, with the '*Talitha Kum*' day centre for rehabilitation which provides care to about forty disabled people.

How are all these beneficial initiatives of the Camillian mission maintained? Sustainability is always a great challenge for the continuity of every kind of mission. This mission keeps going thanks to the generosity of benefactors, with donations that come from various parts of the world and in particular from Italy. From Turin, the Camillian NGO '*Madian Orizzonti*' every year contributes about 200,000 euros. Other contributions come from the Order of Malta, from the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI), from *Caritas Internationalis*, from other benefactors and from services provided to the government of the country in the field of disability. And what about the future? This is a great question, the response to which is entrusted to 'Divine Providence' which will certainly not disappear, as I heard various people say. Certainly, growth will continue to take place and the mission will have a promising future.

³ Cf. interview with Laura Badaracchi, 'Indigenti e malati, ha visto la nostra ricchezza', in *Avvenire*, 5 October 2016, p. 16.

There re-echoes strongly in our hearts the declaration that Pope Francis made in the interview he gave to journalists on his return flight to Rome at the end of his voyage. He said that ‘you know reality much better beginning with the fringes than with the centre’. This visit of his to the countries of the Caucuses made possible a new perspective on reality! Virtual, theoretical or intellectual knowledge is no longer sufficient. Beyond this level, we should have knowledge that reveals a concrete experience of life in order to touch, and allow ourselves to be touched by, other people, moving out of ourselves (*‘personal exodus’*)! For we Camillians this need to encounter the other will always have the profile of the sick and suffering person who is waiting for a Samaritan presence and help!

At the end of this message, which took as a starting point the historic visit of Pope Francis to our Camillian mission of Tbilisi in Georgia, we thank our Polish Camillian religious for their extraordinary hospitality and for the fraternal, joyous and happy being together that they offered us during our presence in Tbilisi.

We hope that everyone will have the paternal and merciful protection of God and of St. Camillus our Father: may they help us always to maintain alive the spirit of service offered in this Camillian mission! May Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, a Doctor of the Church and the patron saint of missions, illuminate us and protect us!

Fraternally,

Rome, 7 October 2016



p. Leocir Pessini
 Superiore generale



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