

CREDIBLE PROPHETS AND BELIEVERS

*"What does a painter do if he wants to faithfully portray a beloved person on canvass? He keeps his eyes constantly fixed on that person so as not to make one stroke of the brush that does not help in depicting some trait of the original. In some way, this is what we have to do. All our thoughts, all our words, all our actions, all our aspirations, all our dispositions, all our suffering must be strokes of the brush that form and depict in us some trait of the life of Jesus Christ."
(Blessed John Baptist Scalabrini)*

Dear Confrères,

After two years since the beginning of my mandate as Superior General of our Religious Family, I feel the desire to share with you some thoughts I've been holding on to all through this time and which have become more consistent as I get more and more acquainted with Scalabrinian reality around the world. The content of this letter follows, and seeks to develop, what has been proposed to us in this "**Year of Consecrated Life**", which Pope Francis has inaugurated on November 29, 2014.

The reason for this letter

This letter wants to be a contribution to personal and community reflections on our being persons consecrated to the Lord in the apostolic service with and for the migrants. Naturally, it is not meant to cover all aspects of religious life and pastoral work.

Looking with the eyes of hope

Faced as we are with challenges, both known and unknown, with ongoing problems, and with the inevitable fragility of our lives, it seems right and proper to outline the horizons within which our religious family is moving. The day-to-day activity in our communities and missions, in our seminaries, and our research and study centers, the quiet and laborious witness of most of the confrères bring me to realize that the good that is being done is far superior to the manifestations of selfishness, laziness and counter witness which are also present. The "demanding actuality" of migration and the exemplarity so many of our intuitions and pastoral initiatives continue to place our Congregation at the heart of the Church and at the center of so many international crossroads where the future of many migrants is decided. The beauty of our Congregation in her multifaceted aspects, the appreciation she enjoys within the Church, who acknowledges and appreciates the labor, the missionary zeal and the goodness of many confrères; the actuality of the Scalabrinian Charism, where we have chosen to risk our lives, cannot and will not be obscured by some incidents of unworthiness and weakness. The testimony of many confrères, who have generously spent their lives at the service of the migrants and are now living their missionary identity while resting from their apostolic labor and praying, assures us a precious and irreplaceable support for our pastoral work. An additional proof of this is seen in the great hope the Spirit has gifted us in the presence of young and new energy from new cultures: these young confrères are both a grace and a resource, but they

also represent a challenge, which will condition the future of our religious family, the authenticity of, and the fidelity to, the Charism and the growth of the intuitions of that extraordinary man of God and of the Church who was our Blessed Founder.

Prophets

As we make our own the prophetic words of blessed Paul VI, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses"¹, all of us, I believe, have been touched, fascinated and engaged by what we have seen and heard when we "have encountered" the person of Scalabrini, in ways and times obviously different for each one of us. The Spirit of God opened his eyes that he could see, his heart that he could feel compassion, his mind to think and take action, his energies to bring about what was slowly becoming clear and evident within him. Passionate for God, close to Him, and inspired by Him, he was able to enjoy and to make use of a higher and wider vision of the world around him. This is why Scalabrini is a "prophet", "God's voice." This is why many of our past and present missionaries can truly be considered "heroes and saints": persons who have given their life for Christ and for the migrants. These are the witnesses and the prophets that have spoken to our hearts and have been believed credible enough to engender in us the desire to follow them, imitate them and walk in the furrow of their missionary zeal and holiness.

The charismatic gift, awakened in Scalabrini by God's Spirit, is the same Charism that has inspired many of our confrères who are now members of the Heavenly Church; it is the same Charism that has challenged and inspired us. We have become part of this "flow" within which the Spirit continues to engage and to call men and women of goodwill to spend their lives for the glory of God and the good of the migrants.

Prophecy and credibility share one common root: faith in the Lord. For both Scalabrini and our missionaries, it was a strong faith, lived and witnessed in fidelity and perseverance; a faith nourished by the Word and by prayer, by coherent choices, even at the cost of great sacrifices and personal self-denial. In fact, faith, as it grows, follows along the way of love. A love consisting only of good intentions and good resolutions cannot be real. Like love, faith thrives through situations, choices, places and priorities that are very concrete. The alternative would be its demise.

Loving what is known

The primary and irreplaceable step to loving is knowledge: St. Augustine reminds us that "only that which is known can be loved." Here we touch an important point: **knowing the Founder**. It would seem of secondary importance; it is, instead, one of the key-points for our Religious Family to continue its mission in fidelity and unity. Maybe someone is still living off of what he's heard or read about the Founder during the novitiate! I, for one, must admit that I feel the need to know better the Founder: his life, his spirituality, his works, his intuitions and his heart. I address to all a heartfelt appeal to make use of the many tools at our disposal to help us know

¹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41

and love more and imitate our Founder: this is what will keep our Congregation united in future years; this will be the central motivation which will assure an authentic transmission of the foundational Charism to the new cultures and ethnic groups who, by God's grace, are injecting new life and energy in our Religious Family.

Believers and credible

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.... Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me... Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing." (Jn 15, 1-5)

Jesus is disarmingly clear: if you do not remain in me, not only you cannot bear fruit, but actually you will not accomplish anything! I believe that all of us, at one time or another, have deceived ourselves into thinking that we could "bear fruit" undermining, or even ignoring, the importance of a relationship with the Lord. As a result we probably ended up "talking about ourselves", albeit unknowingly, with our eyes fixed on ourselves, intent on promoting ourselves and our limited views, ultimately quite insignificant.

The first and primary reason for the so-called vocational, priestly and religious "crisis" is the vanishing of a deep and lasting relationship with the Lord, without which, a person loses sight not just of the direction of one's life, but also of the sense of self-identity. The ground one stands on gives way and, in no time, all is lost. The foundations upon which one's life had been built crumble, along with all relationships and projects, and thus, with the passing of time, one becomes tired of one's life, which seems meaningless, unbearable even to oneself until a decision is made to quit; or one carries it on superficially and becomes a counter-witness, increasingly intolerant and irritable, moving from laziness to manifest hypocrisy. Yes, unfortunately, it is possible to be priests and religious even without faith. But there is also third possibility: a humble and sincere return to the house of the Father. This journey is not an easy one, but is possible and open to all. By the power of His Word - ever new, ever unsettling, always valid, always true, always life bearing, always effective, always sharp, always positive, always attentive and favorable to the human person - even in the desert flowers can grow again.

When we live close to the Lord, and are sustained by Him, then, and only then, can we become credible. Credibility opens doors and makes our words and actions effective. Our credibility becomes real and solid when our words are reflected in our everyday choices. If we are truly aware that God is entrusting to us his Word, his own Body, then the task assigned to us becomes tremendously big and demanding. We must not allow ourselves "to betray" His Word by "preaching well" while "living" in contrast with what we preach. It is not possible to trivialize the Eucharist and go through it superficially, when there is bitterness in our relationships. A confrère told me: "We priests would be the holiest and most credible people on the earth...if only we practice one third of what we tell the faithful in our sermons." Unfortunately, our personal and community credibility is often in open contrast with our "sermons" and our liturgies.

A look at our consecrated life

"We too are children of our own time." The reality of Consecrated Life is fully immersed in the events of our postmodern society. No need here to offer an analysis of the situation. Be it sufficient for us to know that the so-called contemporary "liquid society" is affecting significantly also us as religious: we risk no longer being "salt of the earth and light of the world" and being not just "insignificant" but outright "useless." Thus the peculiar character of Consecrated Life as "a sign anticipating the Kingdom" flounders awkwardly seeking a foothold that never seems to materialize. Pessimism is seeping into our "squares" as well. In the Apostolic Letter written on the occasion of the opening of the Year of the Consecrated Life, Pope Francis invites us strongly "to embrace the future with hope", because "the creativity of charity is boundless; it is able to find countless new ways of bringing the newness of the Gospel to every culture and every corner of society." It is, in fact, the ability of witnessing the joy and the happiness of faith lived in community that makes the Church grow through her capacity of attraction.

Let us then retrieve the original motivations that have led us to embrace religious life, especially the primacy of God in Jesus Christ and, in this and from this, let us rediscover the amazing person of Scalabrini, alive, today more than ever, in the Church and in the dramatic appeals of a migrant world.

Let us then be serious and of goodwill, and cease finding fault, as we build our communities, which can only be the result of what "we put into them"! As Pope Francis reminds us, is not a matter of keeping some utopias alive, but "of creating "alternate spaces" where the "Gospel measure of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences and love of one another can thrive."

A look at the vows

Allow me now a reflection on the meaning of the vows we have professed. Once again, it's not my intention to offer a dissertation, but to simply underscore some aspects, that, in my opinion, we risk undermining.

Obedience, I believe, is the foundation of all consecrated life. This affirmation is backed by the fact that the mystery of our salvation came through Jesus' obedience to the Father. I dare say that Jesus' poverty and chastity were not in themselves the determining aspects of salvation: Jesus redeemed us by becoming obedient. Whatever else may be said, if we do not enter this approach, much of consecrated life ceases to make sense. Obedience to the Lord in choosing to listen to His Word, by which we come to the truth; obedience to the Church, a mother capable of offering both a paternal and maternal ability to regenerate life, Christian Life; obedience to the community in practicing discernment, knowing all along that in the end a superior will take a decision which inevitably will not be welcomed by all, but which will be binding on all. Obedience to life while searching for serenity, laboriousness and truth. "Truth" is more than being honest with oneself, which at times can produce a subjective and partial truth; truth refers to the Criteria with the name and the name is Jesus. This Criteria prevents us from being ambiguous in how

we exercise our freedom; this truth cannot be confused with "what I like" and therefore become self-referential. Freedom, rather, is being trained to achieve what helps each one of us to grow and what is good for us.

Poverty: where your treasure is, there also is your heart. And, when the heart is empty, it pretends strongly to be filled. With what? Usually, we begin with things, "things that are more or less hidden"... we never seem to have enough, until we become enslaved by them, and we justify them by their apparent usefulness to our work. Too often we use this pretext to seek what we do not need, adopting typically worldly lifestyles and attitudes. And thus slowly we become once again insignificant on the outside and unhappy on the inside. History repeats itself and we are reminded that wealth, and never poverty, have been the root of evil in the Church.

Chastity: even persons at times can be useful in "filling up an empty heart." The world of affective relationships is the thermometer that scans the depth of our lives. I repeat, here, what I said last September at the Assembly of the European/African Region: "We are aware that the "heart" dictates the laws by which we live. We know well that when the heart is not rightly "filled", it will go searching on its own for something that will satisfy it. Generally the downward curve - which leads to unwanted, albeit foreseeable, consequences - begins more often with small concessions and "discounts" at the expense of obligations; we blame the inability of our confrères to understand us; and progressively we begin to justify anything in the name of our personal maturity and autonomous self-judgment; sooner or later the moment comes when we let everything go, or we begin paying a heavy price of leading a double life. The vow of chastity entails also the acceptance a kind of "loneliness" (which we must assume serenely in our lives), which means renouncing the sharing of a house, projects and money, and our body, with another person, a concrete physical "you". This doesn't mean having an "aseptic" and "sterilized" heart, incapable of emotions and affections. I believe there is a beautiful, attractive and real manner to build authentic relationships of love and friendship, which are good for the heart. This, obviously, demands prudence, respect, truth, freedom, prayer, "purity of heart", shying from subterfuges, "because there is nothing to hide."

"A truly authentic and contemplative union with God cannot lead to suppression of the human heart, which, even if it gives itself to all, it cannot do so indistinctively; attraction is always at play, the heart will always have its preferences. Affective harmony, thanks to a preferred person, will always make room for more tenderness even when given to less lovable people: dedication to others can be experienced without being squashed by it." (P. Jérôme)

Community life and authentic prayer

True prayer (not equivalent to "reciting prayers") makes community life "authentically human" and more beautiful. It is with our eyes fixed on the Father that we bring light into our daily life and bring our daily life to the Father. Failure to do this means that the categories "of the world" (such as envy, rivalry, rancor, wanting to outshine others, lack of sincerity, deception, thirst for power, selfishness, unwillingness to share, lack of compassion, indifference, refusal to forgive, long-held thirst for vengeance, bad mouthing others, lack of mercy, prejudice, aggressive

anger, lack of respect, inability to feel joy for the good of others, giving in to self-sufficiency, manipulation of situations and persons), will eventually replace the categories of the Gospel. I believe there is need for more honesty between what we live in our prayer and how we live the other aspects of our life.

Consecrated missionary life in him

Our Religious Family "is an apostolic community of religious that shares in the missionary activity Christ continues in the Church ...The world to which we have been called to announce the mystery of salvation is the world of migrants. To fulfill our mission, we share their same life and the very experience of migration, just like Christ, who by his Incarnation bound himself to the particular social and cultural conditions of the people among whom he lived."² According to our Founder's project, the option of consecrated life was chosen "to guarantee the efficacy of our dedication to the service of the migrants and the stability of the Institute. In fact, the mission we have received from the Church takes on meaning and credibility if, in the process of proclaiming the message of Christ, we live in fellowship with him and with our brothers."³ As we embrace the lives of our confrères and those of the migrants, our consecration "becomes the prayer of an entire people, who, while on earth, is journeying in a foreign land away from the Lord and regards itself as an exile and so seeks and experiences those things that are above."⁴ Thus, this missionary longing is united with our consecration and becomes an additional standard by which we must live and, in a special way, the new generations of confrères are to live. The perception we have is that this kind of spirit is slowly slipping away. We've seen it, most of all, in the new generations, where the prevailing tendency is to "play in one's own backyard", close to the "world of one's affections." It is not just a question of "traveling far away", but having at heart the good of those we are called to serve, and, therefore, to cultivate a concrete and sincere desire to go where the need is greater, adopting, if need be, a culture different than one's own. What is becoming ever clearer, is a declining of the missionary interest and of the sense of mission. We have the impression that the young missionary candidates are mostly ill-equipped persons; it would be a challenging new vitality if these young confrères were equipped with the courage to risk more, to be more daring, and to be on the front line in the harsh context of new migrations.⁵

Sense of belonging

When, long ago, we have adhered to a vocational project (which is not restricted to what we call God's project in our life) we have embraced a community project, and have been invited to share a sense of belonging to the same ideals and values of that community of persons "who have received them as a gift." Therefore, the discovery and the assumption of a Charism must eventually become a journey where a person

² RL n. 1

³ RL n. 9

⁴ RL n.10

⁵ Several quotes from the Report to the Assembly of the European/African Region, Brescia, September 2014

is open to all that is received and make it part of one self. All this generates and gives rise to a sense of belonging. Consecrated life is not possible without belonging to the religious family to which we are bound. This is not to be limited to what we pretend "to receive" from the Congregation, but it grows and is nourished by our giving and self giving. Here, too, it is worth restating that the sense of belonging consists in concrete things and gestures. It consists in being interested, being attentive and active at work, in sacrifice, self-denial and courage. In a word it consists in love: love for God, for people, for ideals and for things.

Conclusion

There was an expression in the second letter of Peter, which, since I was better able to grab its meaning, has haunted me and continues to haunt me: "*A person is a slave of what overcomes him.*"⁶ The Apostle Peter states what seems natural: in each person's life - directly or indirectly, aware or unaware, sooner or later - someone or something will take first place in making decisions. And this someone or something will become our "master" and we "his slaves." Whether these words correspond fully with our feelings or we agree with them or not, this is how things stand. In life we all "sell" ourselves. The problem is: "To whom?" I believe it is better for us "to sell ourselves to the one who offers the most": and I believe we can all easily figure out Who that is!

It is my wish that each one of us will be able to live fully what we have undertaken when we chose to consecrate ourselves to the Lord to better serve the migrants. I, then, wish you well and encourage you to look ahead with trust, relying on the good which is already present and active in good measure in our midst, and not allow the small, but indispensable light in each one of us, to be overcome by the darkness.

I urge you to engage with every effort to be credible prophets and believers, so as to taste fully one day the sweet presence of the Lord Jesus.

I entrust these words will echo effectively, albeit in a tiny space of your heart, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of our beloved Founder Bishop Scalabrini.

p. Alessandro Gazzola cs

⁶ 2 Pt 2, 19