



**FORMATION NOTEBOOKS**  
***“ The Guanellian Charism ”***

**Notebook n.1**

## 1) Letter from the General

Dear brothers, sisters and lay Guanellian members,

One of the moral fables collected by Bruno Ferrero in his book *“Forty stories in the desert”* is entitled: *“Surprise among the dunes”*. It tells the story of a man who got lost in the desert and, as time passes, was unable to bear the sun’s scorching heat and his thirst’s indescribable burning sensation. By chance he met up with a tie salesman, who went above and beyond to convince him to buy one. Feeling ridiculed, the man reacted negatively saying: “I am dying of thirst and you relentlessly want to sell me a tie in the middle of the desert?”

The annoyed salesman shrugged his shoulders and continued to walk in the desert. Evening arrived and the disgraced traveler, by now exhausted, looked up to see ahead a village square facing a fancy restaurant, with its parking lot full of cars. The man dragged himself to the front door and began imploring: “Have pity on me, give me something to drink!” The response of the courteous doorman was excruciating: “Wretched man, here you cannot enter without wearing a tie!”

The moral is rather interesting: there are people who go through the desert of this world, with an unrestrained thirst for pleasurable and sensual experiences of every sort, treating those who try to present the Gospel as miserable crazy people. It’s such a foolish message in their desert! But at the end of their life, in the Lord’s Kingdom they will be told: “Wretched man, here you cannot enter without a renewed heart.” Isn’t this also our own Guanellian experience? In the journey of our life someone invited us to get to know and experience the particular lifestyle of Fr. Louis Guanella and to assume his spirit. Who knows to how many this happened, and how many, who we don’t even know, responded like the thirsty man in the desert: “But are you kidding me? What do you have to offer me as I pursue something better? I’m heading in a totally different direction...”

We, instead, believed in the offer, and desired to try that “tie” which initially might have felt uncomfortable, a little tight, and not in sync with our pursuits at that time. Then, afterwards, the moment came when we felt that type of “tie” as our own; we became proud of wearing it, and knew it suited our life, our hopes, and our plans, to the point of asking ourselves why that first encounter hadn’t happened before. Now we are happy to be Guanellians.

This is the goal of our first formation notebook that we would like to offer you as General Council: to rediscover the gift of the Guanellian charism received by the Holy Spirit and deem it suited for us. The charism is evermore part of us, distinguishing and characterizing us. It transforms us into a gift of God for the poorest and least among us, for those who, if we do not help, would remain alone,

abandoned, without parents. It entrusts to us the humanitarian task of caring precisely for those who ardor of thirst in life's desert and don't always have the capability or will to believe that charity will save them.

This first notebook offers a reflection on the theme of the charism, a fundamental theme for every consecrated person because it taps into the consideration that in our given vocation lies the manifestation of the Lord who asks for our personal collaboration to fulfill his plan. The charism is the response that the Holy Spirit knows to give to the church and to the world to an urgent need in a particular region of the earth. Through the incarnation's law, the Holy Spirit entrusts, therefore, to a particular man or woman, the mission of responding to this call for help with their life. Founders are born like this, the Holy Spirit's offering to the Church, as an effective and concrete solution to one of her needs.

I think it's beautiful to picture each of us Guanellians as the hand of the Holy Spirit's work, expression of his desire to help with the needs of the church and of the world. Through the study of the charism, offered in this notebook, we'll undoubtedly find concrete indications to re-read our lives as Guanellians, starting with the charism received. The charism becomes an operative mission only as a consequence; it primarily is the spirit with which the Holy Spirit inspires the Founder and his family. It is the illumination and gift of God that the human person welcomes, meditates, contemplates and adheres to wholeheartedly, transforming the Spirit's desire into concrete action. The following writing offers us a reflection on mercy, which is the source of all charisms brought forth in the church and without which every charism, although brilliant, wouldn't have any impetus.

I wish for each Guanellian the continuous awareness of the gift received and a creative and unique ability to place his/her own life at the charism's disposition. May the Guanellian charism find in each of you openness and wisdom to transform it to a mission of service towards our treasure, those most in need.

Rome, February 22, 2019

Fr. Umberto

## **2) Charism of Fr. Guanella**

### **Notes for a reflection**

#### **The Charism**

In the aftermath of the Council and above all of the document *Perfectae Caritatis*, promulgated on October 28, 1965 on the renewal of religious life,

the subject of all the concerns of the orders and congregations was “the research of the charism” of their own Institute. A curious thing because in that document the word ‘charism’ doesn’t even appear once.

However, during these last 50 years there wasn’t a term more used, either correctly or erroneously, especially to indicate relative but also different things. The confusion of the language emphasized the confusion of ideas, therefore we will aim to provide a basic clarification.

In other documents of the Council, above all *Lumen Gentium and Apostolicam actuositatem*, the charisms are indicated as “special graces” (*peculiaria dona*) freely distributed by the Spirit among every category of the faithful, to make them capable and ready to assume activities and endeavors useful to the renewal and expansion of the Church. In other words, the Holy Spirit, in order to renew and expand the life of the Church, bestows on some people specific gifts to suit them for a special mission.

Obviously, since charity is the charism of all charisms, according to the renowned words of Paul to the Corinthians, all of the other charisms are a manifestation and an actualization of the only one grace that saves: the unconditional love of God for each person. Specific Charisms are lived and used rightly only if they are animated and guided by charity through which their edification is conceded, and without which, even the most extraordinary of charisms, would leave those possessing them empty, with a sense of “nothingness”.

Under the realm of language, the great confusion consists in making the term charism contain a little bit of everything: the inspiration of the Founders, their underlying idea, the manner in which they respond to the gift, the service brought forth for the good of the church, the wholeness of their spiritual themes, the compilation of devotions promoted and spread by them, the anthropological and pedagogical principles of their field of action, some characteristics of their personalities. In short, a generality without end, for which the word charism for many years said everything and nothing. Even worse was the confusion which then slipped into relativism to the moment of identifying the nucleus of the charism, for which in many Congregations – and also in ours – was easy to partake in solemn proclamations: “For me the charism of the Founder is without doubt...” and one said the Sacred Heart, another Providence, others still the Paternity of God, someone mercy...

Another mistake: the frequent confusion, and many still get confused, with the terms charism, spirit and mission, as if they meant the same and were interchangeable.

For clarification: one must correspond to the grace that is the charism because the grace, by its nature, calls for the correspondence of those who receive it and the ministers who must discover and help the development of the charisms. Now, the response of the person to the gift of God, which is the charism, is what we call the “spirit”. In our case the spirit of the Founder is the typical manner with which Fr. Guanella adhered to the gift of God, giving all of his life for this purpose.

And the “mission”? The mission is the irrepressible consequence of the covenant born between God and the Founder, between the charism and the spirit. To give a noted and easily understood example: Francis of Assisi is called by God to intuit the beauty of the spouse of Christ, the Church, a beauty blurred by emerging wrinkles and cracks (charism). To give light back to the spouse of Christ, Francis leaves everything and becomes the passionate lover (spirit), announcing the Gospel as it is, without too many superstructures, by preaching through life, words and actions (mission).

At our house the study of the charism started while Fr. Guanella was still alive, with a small book of 1906 signed by Fr. Martino Cugnasca, which today cannot be found, followed by the biography and writings of *Charitas* of Fr. Mazzucchi, which we go in depth with during some of our General Chapter meetings. It reaches its culmination during the drawing up of our Constitutions, leading to the institution of a special “Guanellian Center of studies.” Throughout its entire journey, it makes use of all the detailed studies of our two most prolific and brilliant confreres on the theme: Fr. Piero Pellegrini, for the historic and spiritual side, and Fr. Attilio Beria, for the philosophical and theological aspect.

Credit is due to Fr. Beria, without a shadow of doubt, for the key reading analysis to delve into Fr. Guanella’s soul and rediscover the light that guided and made him the founder that he had become. After intense reading (dominating, component, theme, light, direction), Fr. Beria helped the Guanellian family to identify the charism as Fr. Guanella’s “digital imprint”, which marked his thoughts, writings, activities, relationships, projects, utopias, and sentiments: the charism is what imbued in some way every fiber of his being and work, to the point that looking behind his things, his choices, activities, without knowing that they are his, we’ll recognize him.

### **The charism of Fr. Guanella**

Let’s save ourselves right away from a common theological slip: in our recent literature we often touch upon the word charism, but with the common

mistake of defining charism as something externally added, in a second moment, almost as an additional gift.

*Charism* is the gift of the Holy Spirit, in a full, stable and intimate way, that helps Fr. Louis to come out and reveal himself for who he is; in other words the charism isn't like a divine force that transforms the person nearly giving him a new personality to equip him for the mission entrusted to him. The Holy Spirit doesn't transform Fr. Guanella, but reveals who he is, intimately; he doesn't change his identity, but makes it visible, transparent, and readable. The Charism highlights him as a beloved son sent to the most beloved sons, along the line of the chosen Son: to bring the news of joy for the Father's little ones.

The *Charism* of Fr. Guanella is his person as a gratuitous work of God and of his Spirit, put at disposition. In other words, the charism of Fr. Guanella is what emerged when Fr. Louis allowed himself to be worked by God, as a product of grace, in all of his being and during the course of his whole life, from the cradle to the tomb. Therefore through the word charism we need to imply the permanent action of the Holy Spirit in him, with all the fruits that were derived in terms of visibility, transparency, of exhibited proofs.

Charism isn't above all the joy of having found the key, the *something to do*, the direction of march in life, but the fortune of the story that Fr. Guanella has with God, almost the chronicle of their relationship, from which the "*what to do*" springs forth.

The elements at risk are two: the action of the Spirit, which is a pure and gratuitous divine initiative; and its fruits, which prove its docility. And for fruits in Guanella we mean his life, all oriented towards the Lord Jesus, because this is the work of the Spirit: to bring the entire being of the person involved towards Christ.

The work of Christ is entirely centered on the announcement of the paternity of God; the Gospel brings us the news of the news, especially in the page of the Beatitudes that Fr. Guanella chose<sup>1</sup>: no one is alone and left by himself, there are no orphans in this world, there isn't any life that is senseless, because God is a Father who wants his children blessed and saved.

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<sup>1</sup> The word "blessed" is one of the most recurrent in his vocabulary and the quotations taken from the page of the Beatitudes fill all his literary productions, as well as correspondence. Among other things, he dedicated one of his spiritual writings to the Gospel page of the Sermon on the mountain, in the crucial years of his failed foundation of Traona: it is L. GUANELLA, *Let's go to the mountain of happiness. Invitations to follow Jesus on the Mount of Beatitudes*, published and unpublished works, vol. III, Nuove Frontiere editrice, Rome 1999.

To present this announcement as *the novelty* brought by Fr. Guanella is the worst service that we can do to history, to the Church, and to Fr. Louis himself because from the era of the Apostolic Fathers up to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, passing through Francis of Assisi, Vincent de Paul, Francis of Sales, Alphonsus of Liguori and thousands of others, the theme of the paternity of God marks the entire history of the Christian spirituality: enough is the example of Francis who strips himself in the square of Assisi and passes symbolically from his father, Peter of Bernardone, to his Heavenly Father, with the radical choice of living trustingly abandoned in the hands of this Father.

Fr. Guanella, by now it is known, understands by tradition and by Christian reflection the reason for this paternity<sup>2</sup> and nurtures it as his most vibrant certainty, able to give color to everything, seeing in the parable of the Prodigal Son the whole story of God and the human person: a Father, a house, the sons. Departures and abysses of misery, depravations or losses, then the return. Above all the sadness of the Father for the poverty and the solitude of his sons, to the point of the foolish and sublime gesture of placing at risk Jesus, the Beloved Son, so that all of his children may find the way back home. That foolish and sublime gesture that the biblical tradition and our better spirituality call ‘mercy’ becomes his motive: the providential mercy of the Father guides the world and in order to go towards the little ones he makes use of other little ones. He is one of them.

This is the story that convinces his heart, the best icon of the *charism*, in which he, beloved son, finds his vocation to mercy. In his reading of the Gospel parable of the Father who calls his sons to reciprocally save each other, the journey of Fr. Guanella is completely singular and new. As is new the page that he writes in the history of the religious life because it generates *new monks and new nuns*. The monastic life, with a strong contemplative component<sup>3</sup>, but new, because everything developed on the outside of the new monastery

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<sup>2</sup> The famous cycle of the sixteen Berlin Conferences of the Protestant theologian Adolf Von Harnack on the Essence of Christianity, which focuses on God the Father and his love for man, is only in 1900. But for at least three centuries this point was a frequent refrain in the reflection of the Church and Von Harnack only emphasized this theme as the foundation of Christian life.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately the brilliant foundation of the opening of the women’s house in Genico di Musso, on Lake Como, which was to serve for the Daughters of Santa Maria who had been reduced to inactivity due to health reasons and would totally dedicate themselves to the purest contemplative life, was never studied in depth. Don Guanella had thought it over and started it. However, he didn’t live long after that and this idea of his was not revived.

conceived as 'home' and co-inhabited by *monks* and by *the poor*. "*Pray and suffer*" which reechoes the Benedictine "*pray and work*" is the most apparent sign of the new shoot born on the old stump; I think it's interesting to note that in the writings of Fr. Guanella to his Congregations this mandate never appears. They were the last words pronounced on his death bed, offered to who had asked him for a last word, the better of the best. The synthesis in this expression was welcomed by the listener right away and put in *circulation* as the project of his life - his project and one which was possible to his followers.

The *praying* part is clear and does not ask for explanations, but the word suffering must be saved from a misinterpretation that risks of digressing into masochist victimizing, unacceptable even for holy intentions. The entire post-Tridentine spirituality presents itself as a spirituality that is centered on self-immolation: the true disciple of Jesus knows how to suffer with Jesus and he understands it as a grace, a glory, and a priceless fortune. But it is a suffering *with Christ*, in Pauline<sup>4</sup> key, where life, one's own life, isn't considered the primary good: the primary good is the mercy of the Father for whom we were meant to serve, "*your grace is worth more than your life,*" cites Psalm 62.

I uphold that the charism of Fr. Guanella should be considered, above all, in its most immediate effect, that of giving unity to the person, because it regards a monolithic drive, which is unitarian, that focuses its thoughts, actions, words, and its sentiments. In the spiritual and biographical compilations of Fr. Louis' profile that emerged in our literature in the last half century appeared almost like a fragmentation, such of inciting questions and doubts: what is the propelling center of the Founder's sanctity? Providence? Charity? Paternity? The Sacred heart? The Eucharist? Suffering?

Every now and then someone is forced to re-center Fr. Louis in this or that lens according to the moment, to the circumstances, the use, the contingent convenience, or to align him with the latest Papal Encyclical, with a suited slogan from various Synods, with eventual documents of the religious conferences...

The charism shapes unity in the person and is a fire. It emanates sparks, one bigger than the other, another one smaller, but the fire is one. Fr. Guanella appears at the curtain of the historical and literary criticism as a unified personality, walking in one direction, with one sole interest, with one word to say. Within him there is a center. Actions, thoughts, realizations are emerge from that one center: the Father, his benevolent Providence, the charity with

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Colossians 1:24

which, through the love of the Heart of His Son present in the Eucharist places himself at the foot of the poor person and seats him at the table of His kingdom.

### **In his daily life**

The attentive reader of the Gospel is touched by Jesus who speaks of ‘your Father’ only when he turns to his disciples, never to strangers. Because Jesus doesn’t regard the paternity of God as something natural, almost a prerogative of all human beings, but the distinctive ownership of his disciples. To sum it up, only in the setting of the Kingdom does it make sense to speak of the paternity of God...

I ask myself, at the end of many words, what the word ‘father’ and the certainty of being a son meant to Fr. Louis, shortly, in everyday life.

First of all, I must say that this point in his soul – as we said in the beginning – gave him **the certainty of partaking in the future salvation**; for Fr. Louis this is the true force of his life. Every human person must do all that is possible to not lose Heaven and to belong always to the family of God. Certainly, like the Father, even the children may become unrecognizable and repudiating, but have no fear: he, the miserable one, who has to sadly sleep on a rock during the night before ascending the painful path to Calvary, reaches the point of doubting everyone, even himself and of his discernment, but not the Father. The Father gives only out of love, he cannot give anything else.

Another point of this discourse is the **trust as security of the foundation of daily life**: the Father knows what Louis needs and his Providence is unlimited other than good. Perhaps there will be small things that are needed, but for God nothings is too small. You work, today: the Lord will take care of tomorrow or as the Psalm 40 says, “*The Lord cares for you.*” Today is your task, tomorrow his Providence. This trust is the root of tranquility, because no one lives serenely if he doesn’t trust someone; for sure, if someone trusts another person, he runs the risk of being fooled or disappointed, but entrusting oneself is the only condition for serenity. The popular proverb, “*to trust is good, not to trust is better*” is the furthest thought from Fr. Guanella’s soul because it reveals a wretched pettiness, from the moment that a useful meter of human greatness is his capacity to entrust oneself. Otherwise it is a life continuously in suspense and suspicion... Fr. Louis preferred to entrust himself and be betrayed than not to trust by keeping a distance.

In this certainty, Fr. Guanella found **the courage to kneel in front of the unfathomable character of the Father's plan**. Challenges and obstructions were not lacking, but every trial along the way became an occasion to deepen his intimate relationship with his God. He knew and would reiterate that the sufferings, almost all of them, serve for the glory of God, that is, knowing who God is, and his power.

The charism also gave Fr. Louis a **reason for his solitude**, since there is a solitude that is linked to the fact itself of being called by God for a mission. In Fr. Guanella this experience had at least two faces: first of all the isolation from politicians, of the local clergy, of superiors, even by his own family members; in certain moments, then, he appeared alone in front of God, who with his silence doesn't seem to keep the given word. In this situation he questions himself about his vocation: "...To Fr. Guanella – he himself wrote – “ the peak of Olmo was reserved because he was not able to exercise dangerous influences, and so he stayed away, as it was said, and spent a few months studying theology, in solitude and also in prayers, because he strongly felt the need and he saw the timid image of discouragement approach... and so he closed himself in the sadness of his heart, not without receiving from heaven a glimmer of light upon its arrival”<sup>5</sup>. In this incommunicable suffering, there lies a sign of the sanctity of Fr. Louis because when someone enjoys too much being a prophet perhaps there's reason to be skeptical... This solitude weighs down on him, it seems even unjust to him and yet it is useful to uncover the hole of dialogue in which it's as if he said to the Father: “*You told me something and something else happened; you send me to say and accomplish things in your name and nothing comes about.*” During that period of trial he is heavily tempted to leave everything and return to Don Bosco, but it was a fleeting temptation, because the Word that he hold within was too deep; therefore a thought of giving up could taunt him, but it lasted an instant and then he started up again. In the meantime, however he did seek consolation from God.

In analogous situations many people think: at least my superiors should understand me, the bishop, my community, and instead at this level he met up with at times, the worst disappointments. Jesus, too, had looked for understanding and companionship one evening, to no use. We should form our communities as a place of understanding in which someone could expose

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<sup>5</sup> L. GUANELLA, *The Ways of Providence, Autobiography of a saint*, St. Paul Edition, Cinisello Balsamo 2011, pgs. 70-71.

himself without remaining alone, while it is very difficult to be understood in one's own environment, especially when different values are defended! And what does Fr. Guanella do during the highest moment of confusion and temptation? **He puts himself in crisis, not God;** the Father doesn't have to change, he is the one who must convert.

Slowly he understood that it is precisely at that moment that God was waiting for him: for his authentic adherence. His first consent was only a mental one, when God had revealed in a flash his task to him and he, Fr. Louis, had left everything to carry it out. Now a total adherence was called for, now that he had left everything, he placed his task behind, and felt that he was unable to conclude anything. What remains with us of those terrible days is a splendid letter, as a relic, to don Bosco written in the Olmo hermitage in September 1881, in which he opens up his sad soul citing the noted Gospel passage of the unsuccessful catch: *“Most Reverend Don Bosco, it's been now three years since I left Your Dear Fatherhood in order to start an institution in this my province and Diocese, but I have worked all night without catching anything”*<sup>6</sup>.

It was a moment of tiredness; he had recently received the most heated of threats from his Bishop and the dearest treasure that he possessed was at risk, his priesthood; a probable suspension was lingering in the air. It is easy in moments like this to return to the past when everything was a lot simpler, less suffered. It regards a moment, a long moment. He put himself in discussion with God and slowly, through the dialogue, he found light once again.

Without knowing it, Fr. Louis sealed for good his best lesson for us, up there, in those four houses around the seventeenth century Church of the Holy Trinity; each time that what counts is at risk, even in our small boat, the silent peak of Olmo and the shudder of the solitude of the Founder resolved in the battle of prayers suggest us a way...

*Father Fabio Pallotta, Guanellian*

## THE CHARISM OF DON GUANELLA

### *Reference Outline*

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<sup>6</sup> Letter of Louis Guanella to Don John Bosco, Olmo of Chiavenna, September 5, 1881, AG, Como.

**Preliminaries:** if today we ask ourselves about the charism, it is because

- a) *this story was worth telling*
- b) *this story had the strength of the future in it*
- c) *this story touched us in some way and reached even us*
- d) *this story has not yet revealed all its secrets to us*

A. STUDIES ON THE FOUNDER

- 1. Importance of **memory**: the relationship between roots and buds
- 2. The advantages and limitations of **traditional biographies** of Don Guanella
- 3. The **best sources** of knowledge are unknown or little used
- 4. **Perspective** error: charism, something living or an archaeological find?
- 5. Value of **utopia**: we are children of the said and the unsaid ... of the fact and...

B. 1st EVOLUTION OF STUDIES on the charism: the research of Don Beria

- 1. what we find in him **since the beginning\_and forever** DOMINANT
- 2. what is in him as a result of **education-formation** COMPONENT
- 3. what he breathed as a **culture and problem** of his time THEME
- 4. what he received as **confirmation** (meetings, readings, trials) LIGHT
- 5. the directives, the guidelines, the result (the **mission**) DIRECTION

C. 2nd EVOLUTION OF STUDIES on the charism: research of Don Pellegrini

- 1. **THEOLOGY** *God is Father*
- 2. **SPIRITUALITY** *serving the little ones is a journey towards God*
- 3. **ANTHROPOLOGY** *"cogito ergo sum" - the other ... so I exist*
- 4. **SOCIOLOGY** *the world runs but leaves its waste behind*
- 5. **PEDAGOGY** *bringing people to their utmost beauty*

D. A SUMMARY: Founder and Congregation

- 1. CHARISM the gift of God to Fr. Louis, the revelation  
MOVEMENT FROM ABOVE TO BELOW

*you are my son ... I, God, am your Father*

2. SPIRIT

Fr. Louis' response to the gift of God

MOVEMENT FROM BELOW TOWARDS UP

*absolute abandonment to Divine Providence*

3. MISSION

pact between God and Fr. Louis: go, care for my children

GOD AND FR. LOUIS, TOGETHER FOR THE POOR

*everyone feels they have a Father*

E. THE IMPRINT of the charism-spirit-mission of the Founder

A useful mirror: THE HOUSE-MOTHER of Como

Almost a digital imprint? Como says ... the Founder's characteristic

**PHOTOGRAPHS AND RELIEFS:**

1. His fatal attraction to anything destined to degradation
2. The favorites: those without protection, discarded by others
3. Favored among the favorites: "*the innocent by fault*" - good children, one per home
4. The passion for the lost, the fallen (*the good ones are not who ...*)
5. The motive: everyone can start over, everyone can be educated and re-educated
6. Identity and image of a Guanellian house: Noah's Ark, variety
7. Background icon, the Samaritan's inn, where Christ brings those who...
8. An open house (which adapts to whoever arrives) always on site
9. Overall climate: joyful, affectionate environments. Homes, not companies.
10. 'Preventive method': the other, immersed in goodness, can only grow
11. Community, not a team; people who help each other towards holiness
12. At the Center - architecturally and spiritually - the Church, the Eucharist
13. The 'form', the educational structure: a family-run company
14. Work: as a personal contribution (each to its own measure)
15. Life marked by the hours of prayer: as in a monastery
16. The plan of the formative offering: "Bread and Lord"
17. Sobriety and essentiality of people, things and places; only enough to live
18. The cross, of each one and of everyone, it's not an accident, but the way
19. If someone arrives and wants to join us ... he is formed with the poor
20. Relationship with money: we receive providence, we become providence

21. Family spirit (children, servants, lay people): originally we were all "home"
22. Relationship between house's exterior and interior life: communication, benefactors...
23. In the world: do what others do not dare, say what they do not say
24. Openings: going towards those who ... remain alone if we do not go
25. We proclaim the Gospel in this way: living for those who are left behind in life
26. Therefore we are Church, who welcomes and gathers, values what is dying

*Father Fabio Pallotta, Guanellian*

### **3). LECTIO / The Adulteress: an encounter that resets one's journey**

From the Gospel of John 8:1-11

*1*Meanwhile Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.\* *2* But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them.*3* Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle.*4* They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. *5* Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women.\* So what do you say?" *6* They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. *7* But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."*8* Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. *9* And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. *10* Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" *11* She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin anymore."

The word of God offers us wonderful points of meditation for deepening the meaning of our Lenten journey.

## LECTIO

### **The author of the story.**

This story is recounted in the fourth gospel, but according to the opinion of critics, its author is not the fourth evangelist.

This conclusion of scholars is based on critically well-founded reasons, such as those of the manuscript tradition and of the language.

In fact, the narrative is not conveyed by the best manuscripts and those that tell it are dated after John 21:24 or after Lk 21:38. Furthermore, the language differs considerably from that used by the fourth evangelist.

For these reasons the author of the story cannot be the fourth evangelist.

Some scholars are convinced that this story is part of Luke's tradition. This hypothesis seems very probable since the forgiveness granted by Jesus to the adulterous woman is part of the forgiveness theme that Jesus, in his mercy, gives to sinners, and this theme is characteristic of Luke's Gospel.

Whatever may be the tradition and location of this narrative, what is certain is that it has preserved and passed on the memory of an event and two significant "sayings" of the Savior.

### **The characteristic data of the narrative.**

Examining the story carefully, we note that through it the author highlights some characteristic data.

**a/** The Evangelist points out first of all how Jesus behaves and what reactions he has before a serious fact to merit the penalty of stoning, according to the dictates of the Mosaic law (v. 5).

John does not say why the scribes and Pharisees lead the woman charged with adultery before Jesus who has no discretionary powers, rather than before their judicial authorities who could have the law of stoning applied.

Likewise, Jesus does not give any answer to the question posed to him concerning the woman blatantly caught in adultery, rather he seems uninterested in it (vv. 5.7).

**b/** The Evangelist notes that Jesus, urged by the accusers of the adulterous woman to speak on this case (v. 5b), not only gives no vocal answer, but "begins to write on the soil with his finger"; this detail is mentioned twice in the story (vv. 6.8).

Scholars have shown abundant creativity in attempting to determine the meaning of this gesture of Jesus.

Obviously we cannot think that he wrote the sins of those present to make them drop their charges.

The text is extremely laconic; the author indicates Jesus' action without specifying its purpose; if this gesture had a decisive value for the development of the episode, the author would not have failed to say it.

The Savior's action therefore is a gentle way to allow time to pass and to tacitly invite the woman's accusers to open up to considerations different from those of the strictly juridical norms and their zealous belief in abiding by those laws.

**c/** It should be noted that Jesus, having stopped writing on the soil and broken the silence, addresses these words to the woman's accusers: "Whoever is without sin among you, let him be the first to stone her" (v. 7).

Jesus takes the initiative by bringing the case above all juridical consensus and the intentions of his adversaries, eager to compromise it (v. 6) before the religious authorities and possibly also in front of the Roman authority who had advocated for death sentences.

With this "saying", Jesus in turn questions those who had questioned him about the case of the adulteress.

He wants these accusers of the woman to ask themselves:

- Do we, by virtue of the dictates of the Mosaic Law, have a real right to judge?

-Or: Although we have not committed adultery, aren't we ourselves sinners? Can we consider ourselves better than the woman who has sinned?

These are questions that Jesus raises in the conscience of those who had brought the adulteress to him. Similar questions Jesus proposed explicitly in another circumstance (cf. Lk 13: 1-5).

The expression: "Be the first to throw the stone at her" (v. 7) recalls the Mosaic Law concerning the lapidating of adulterers, which says: "The hand of the witnesses will

be the first against him [the adulterer] to make him die; then the hand of all the people. Thus you will destroy evil in your midst "(Dt 17: 7).

The evangelist observes that the accusers of the adulterous woman, after Jesus' words, "went away one by one, beginning from the elders to the younger ones" (v. 9).

This particular narrative should not be excessively reinforced; it doesn't mean that people who are more advanced in years have more sins than others. Here "elders" means the persons regarded with the most authority and most exemplary; these "elders" more than others have valued the scope of Jesus' words and have withdrawn from him very thoughtfully.

**d/** The story notes that Jesus remained alone with the sinful woman, after all her accusers had left (v. 9b).

Even in this last part of the narrative, Jesus presents himself as the protagonist.

A brief dialogue takes place between Jesus and the woman (vv. 10-11a) to emphasize that none of the accusers condemned the sinner.

Having ascertained this also from the adulteress herself - it is the only word she pronounces in the episode - Jesus replies that not even he condemns her (v. 11b).

The Savior, however, does not limit himself to saying that he does not condemn the guilty, but adds: "Go and henceforth sin no more" (v. 11).

These words reveal the meaning of the whole story.

The Evangelist suggests that all the woman's accusers are sinners and that they, like the woman, have no dream of condemnation, but of forgiveness.

Jesus also stated that the woman, because no one has condemned her, does not become innocent; however, declaring to the woman that he does not condemn her, he wants to assure her of his forgiveness. With this forgiveness, she can begin a life different from the past. It is the novelty of a Christian's condition.

**e/** Finally, we cannot fail to point out that the adulterous woman's story puts the two protagonists of the history of salvation in front of each other: the human person with his sin and Jesus with his forgiveness and his salvation; on one side there are those who lie in the misery of sin and need mercy, on the other side is the one who grants

this mercy. Saint Augustine captures this profound sense of the story and comments on the last part of it with these precise terms: "*Relicti sunt duo: misera et misericordia*" (Treatises on John XXX, 5).

There are two characters: misery and Mercy, our human misery, our frailty, and our effort to walk in the right path, but above all and much stronger is the Mercy of God.

## **MEDITATIO**

The narrative of the adulterer's forgiveness is primarily a story of the Pharisees' fight against Jesus.

The Pharisees refer to the Law of Moses, not so much to enforce it, but to put Christ in difficulty.

Jesus poses them with the same question, putting the Pharisees themselves in contrast with the Law, forcing them to recognize themselves as sinners.

## **GOSPEL AS GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S FORGIVING LOVE**

The Gospel passage of this Sunday –through the "synoptic" characteristics, notably more of Luke than of John- offers to the believer's reflection the theme of forgiveness that the Father bestows upon us through his Son, the central element of the Christian announcement, often recalled by the Lenten liturgy.

This, however, has some particular theological and spiritual content that invites us to make some very useful considerations for our spiritual life.

### ***1/ Easy condemnation.***

In the zeal that the accusers show for the application of the law of Moses against the adulterous woman blatantly caught, a common trait of our nature is eloquently revealed: to observe others, judge them, condemn them; to focus our attention on the speck in the eye of our brother rather than paying attention to the log in our own eye

(cf. Mt 7: 3-5); to be demanding, inflexible towards others, but tender, indulgent towards our weaknesses.

The clear and decisive word of Jesus: "Who of you is without sin, cast the first stone" is a light that starkly reveals our misery and blindness; it is a blow that healthily injures our pride, laying bare our secret tendency to find every sort of justification for our weaknesses before God and humans.

The word of Jesus is not a simple invitation to humility, but a revelation of truth, of the truth of our sinfulness; it is an invitation to confess it to ourselves, so that, recognizing ourselves as limited human beings, debtors, with sincerity of heart, we can accept God's forgiveness, before invoking him because he is granted us by grace, and to be non-complacent and yet generous, generous in judging the next one.

## **2/ Respect for modesty.**

The attitude of Jesus in front of the adulterer demonstrates an important element of divine pedagogy: the Lord respects modesty. The people who shame others, who spread sin with the excuse of fighting it, who view evil as much greater than goodness, do not act according to God's ways.

In front of the adulteress who was taken by surprise in blatant adultery (John 8:4: and this seems to indicate that those who discovered the crime did not wait long to drag the woman into the square, meaning that they probably barely gave her time to wrap a sheet around her), Jesus looks down (cf. Jn 8: 6-8), unlike the interlocutors who stared at the evidence of that sin with avid eyes; and did not further contribute to the poor woman's shame.

Jesus does not fix his gaze on our sins, he does not make our mistakes a center of gravitational morality.

It is therefore not in God's style to publicly shame.

We must keep in mind that even a matter of evidence, in itself fair and true, but exposed in a bad, arrogant, aggressive, discouraging, inconvenient, morbid or indecent way, cannot come from God.

The gospel must always therefore maintain the characteristics of a Joyful News.

## **3/ Forgiveness that does not condemn but commits.**

"Neither do I condemn you; go and from now on sin no more "(v. 11).

These words of Jesus do not lend themselves to any misunderstanding nor should they be misunderstood.

Sometimes, due to indulgence, only the first part of the sentence is cited: "I do not condemn you either." Often the following is added or clarified: "God sent his Son not to condemn, but to forgive, to save the world (cf. Jn 3:16); he is a mercy that forgets all, that "casts the sins of men behind him" (Is 38:17). This thought, especially today in a time of easy indulgence, indeed of acquiescence with regard to evil and sin, can distort the image of God revealed to us by Jesus. Thus, a misunderstanding of the authentic meaning of conversion in Christian life and Lenten penitential commitment may arise, essentially disqualifying it as an ascetic commitment of true conversion.

"Do not sin anymore" is the seal that Jesus places on his declaration of forgiveness.

Therefore, divine forgiveness cannot coexist with a persistent attachment to evil; God and what is evil in his eyes are mutually exclusive; divine absolution aims to render and renew the heart, the whole life of man, new and renewed.

The adulteress is not a rebel, but a humiliated and silent sinner. Forgiveness does not mean, on God's part, to legitimize sin, indulging in a permissiveness that would like to eliminate every difference between good and evil. The Lord does not forgive us because we can bask in the satisfaction of feeling good, but because, convinced that everything derives from faith in Christ, we leave the past aside for the goal of heaven.

God's forgiveness is not indifference or connivance with evil, but the liberation of the human person from the burden of his own actions, in order to be able to run towards a new road, with only one new criterion: *Jesus and his Gospel*.

For Jesus, human beings are worth much more than general principles. He sees only persons, each with their own history, their own frailty, their hopes, their own anguish, and leaves each individual to his or her own conscience, opposing their need for conversion to the abstract tyranny of the Law. Only in this way does the Law cease to serve as an alibi and rediscovers its true purpose, that of recalling consciences to their own responsibilities.

At a few days before Easter, may the words of St. Augustine help us: "*Examine yourself, dig within yourself, appear before the tribunal of your soul, stand before your conscience, and lead yourself to confession.*"

*Let us recognize ourselves as sinners, ask forgiveness, converting ourselves.*

The Christian life therefore is a commitment to the struggle against evil in the shadow and sustained by the stimulus of divine mercy.

Seen in this light, it becomes a serious thing, a truly renewing journey, "a re-creator", an "Easter itinerary", which allows divine grace with the crucifixion of evil. And this is at the origin of this movement, to permeate more deeply and wider the existence of the believer in time, making him mature through the eternal embrace with the God of mercy in Jesus Christ, to whom he strove to conform.

## **COLLECTIO**

### **Within the community:**

What attitudes characterize us in our mutual relationship?

Critical attitudes? Condemnation for our brother?

Or of kindness? Of forgiveness?

### **Outside of the community:**

Do I make myself available to help my community interact with the territory and vice versa or do I create obstacles or put a brake on things

I'm rather pessimistic and not much of a mediator.

# ORATIO

## Prayer (Psalm 126)

When the LORD restored the captives of Zion,  
we thought we were dreaming.  
Then our mouths were filled with laughter;  
our tongues sang for joy.

Then it was said among the nations,  
“The LORD had done great things for them.”  
The LORD has done great things for us;

Oh, how happy we were!  
Restore our captives, LORD,  
like the dry stream beds of the Negeb.

Those who sow in tears  
will reap with cries of joy.  
Those who go forth weeping,  
carrying sacks of seed,  
Will return with cries of joy,  
carrying their bundled sheaves.

*Father Tommaso Gigliola, Guanellian*

## 4). PRAYER AFTER THE XX GC

Lord Jesus, you who have called us to follow you  
as consecrated and lay Guanellians,  
send your Spirit to enlighten our minds  
and to inflame our hearts  
in this six-year period after the celebration  
of the XX General Chapter of the Servants of Charity.  
Renew us in the joy of living your Gospel  
and revive in us the charism you have given us  
through the Founder, Saint Louis Guanella.  
Let these next years be a time of grace,  
auspicious occasion for spiritual renewal  
and to strengthen the bond of charity  
with the whole Guanellian Family, enjoying the beauty  
of fraternal love and co-responsibility  
in the mission received from the Spirit.  
Make us capable of understanding and valuing various cultures  
in which our Work realizes its project of charity.  
Give us the strength to be, in our world,  
prophets of communion and servants of the poor  
that your goodness entrusts to our care.  
We ask this through the intercession  
of Mary, Mother of Divine Providence  
and of our holy Founder, Father Louis Guanella. Amen.