

## A “teaching of fraternal life” sculptured in our hearts. Pope Francis with the Poor Clares in Albano.

*The Poor Clares*

*Albano Laziale - Rome*

You can't always express the happiness of your heart, because when joy is great it does not need words, but silence. It is in this silence in front of God that joy is converted into prayer, praise and gratitude.

There are no words that can express what our hearts grasped inside a glance, a smile, a holding out of his hand or even a single word he said. Yet our hearts perceive what cannot be expressed in writing.

Keeping in mind the aforementioned certainties, we would like to share the great gift of the two meetings had with Pope Francis, the joy and amazement that invaded our hearts for two times in a single month. In gratitude for the benefices that we have received and continue to receive every day from our Donor, Father of Mercy, we are certain that what has been given to us by the Holy Father with his words and actual presence, constitutes for us all, a precious inheritance that must be received, meditated, preserved and carried out throughout our lives as Poor Nuns.

### <<Pray for me!>>

Probably the Sunday dated 14<sup>th</sup> July would have been for us a normal one, but late in the morning we received an unexpected telephone call informing us of the imminent arrival of Pope Francis to the Monastery. What seemed to be a dream suddenly became reality... It is true that if everything is part of a project of grace, *nothing is impossible to God*: it was the action of extreme sensibility of a God that always surprises us...

The very first words that he said *“I have come here, because I know that you pray for me”*, emerge again heartily in our minds. These words enclose an incalculable meaning that the Holy Father attributes to prayer and enunciates his profound esteem for contemplative life, this he expressed to us during our meeting when “in camera” we were alone with him in the chapter-house:

*<< I thank you so much for everything you do for the Church: prayer, penance, taking care of one another... You have given your life to The Lord... Your life is lofty! Your vocation to contemplative life is lofty!>>*

There are no words that can express the deep affection, the concentrated participation, the profound silence and compassion that our hearts underwent when his countenance and tone of voice changed and he said to us: <<Pray for me!>>. On behalf of all the Sisters, our Abbess Sr. Maria Assunta expressed our being very close to him and assured, in a simple but resolute way,

our prayers intimately linked to the offer of our lives. After listening to her words, Pope Francis said:

*<< Thank you! The Church needs this, it needs martyrs... because evangelization is performed by kneeling, it begins here. That is why your mission in the Church is so important>>.*

### **Charity, the source of real peace**

Before going into the chapter-house, Pope Francis was showed a marble tablet in the corridor, the place that was bombed during World War II, and 18 of our Sisters were killed. The Holy Father prayed in silence in front of the tablet: during his meditation he didn't utter a single word, his face was veiled with suffering, his hand placed on his breast as if he himself felt the burden of man's sin, the cause of war and violence. Referring to that tablet, he recommended us to remain always in peace, recalling to mind how harmful war is, any kind of war. <<Peace, always peace!>>, he repeated. There is a war, inside ourselves, that we are all called to fight and which asks us to renounce the evil, its temptations, and have the firm will to choose what is good: it's the endless life-lasting route of personal conversion, and the unique pathway that leads to true peace.

In what seems to be a small "teaching of fraternal life" he told us that the best way to preserve the capacity of prayer is to live charity, encouraging us to the continuous observance of spiritual life and in inward caring of our sentiments ...

*<< ... because the devil busies himself to interfere ... I always recommend what the Church advises: accuse yourselves. Learn to accuse yourselves, always. And the peace that one finds in self-accusation goes to the other persons. We all have faults, but you must decide to realize and endure patiently ... If you decide the following: "Never speak ill of anybody!", you will be saints soon, you will become saints soon!>>.*

One of the bases of our life as Poor Sisters: to "*preserve unity of mutual love and peace*", left to us on consignment by our Mother St. Clare in our Rule, is expressed by the Holy Father's words.

### **With the heart of a Father**

What Pope Francis has entrusted us with his words remains concealed in every Sister's heart, because it was whole-heartedly that he spoke to us: his countenance was full of affection, like the one of a loving father who nourishes and takes care of his children.

How can one express how we lived those moments of emotion? The Holy Father was here with us and was showing us the route to sanctity!

His courtesy was warm and his mode of being with us was very natural, as it he had always been here. In fact, all of us had this same sensation. It's similar to what expresses his Being: a very ample humanity, that is not superficial, but very profound resulting in the creation of fraternal relationships.

He confidently asked us for information regarding the history of the Monastery and Community life nowadays.

We can say that meeting him, we have encountered the face of a *Father* and it is lovely to perceive how close he is to our way of living and heartily likes our charisma. In his words he

manifested his appreciation for our Brothers belonging to the First Order, mentioning Minor Friars, Capuchins and Conventuals, towards whom he expressed words of esteem and gratitude, for the tasks that they have among the poor in Argentina.

Before leaving, he gave us his blessing and, as if he wanted to recall the real meaning of his being with us, so that it was impressed in our hearts, he said: << ... *I wanted to ask for a prayer for me ... Pray for me*>>. They were his last words, so similar to his first ones and the ones he left in writing: <<*Pray for me*>>.

### **Love has no limits**

It's not difficult to imagine the life we lived after we met the Holy Father on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July and how profoundly we perceived his determined request to enhance our prays. If what St. Augustine wrote: <<*your heart is more present in what you love, than in the body it lives in*>> is true, then it's impossible to give limits to love: the Holy Father is truly with us and we are truly with him, even if we are within the walls of Monastery, that projects us deeply into the very heart of God.

In the mystery of this communion that discloses to us the intimate reality of the Church, we perceive the grace and profoundness of the vocation that has been gratuitously donated to us by God, and *"the greater and more perfect it is, the more we owe Him"*.

As the days roll by, recalling those moments, and "revisiting" the words that he left us, the consciousness that all this was possible became deeper with time *"not due to our merits, but for the sole grace and mercy of the Donor"*. A grace, therefore, a gift which is, at the same time, a great responsibility.

### **In the "sign" of Mary**

Before saying good-bye, Pope Francis said: *"I'll come back soon!"*, but we could never have imagined that it would have happened in a month's time! This new meeting with him bore the sign of a very special day: in fact it happened on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, the solemnity of the *Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*.

This time we had the great gift of praying together with him in our Choir, the supreme place that preserves our "being" in front of God: in humble meditation, Pope Francis, absorbed in deep silence, knelt in front of the "Shrine" (this is how he calls the Tabernacle that preserves the Blessed Sacrament ).

Before we met in the community room, he paused in prayer in front of the sarcophagus which contains the body of God's Servant Sr. Maria Chiara Damato (1909 – 1948 ), who had lived in our Monastery, and declared Venerable in 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI, and whose canonization is being accomplished.

It is impressive to perceive how the Holy Father's countenance changes when praying. It is as if he is tuning into another "wave-length", in an intimate talk with the Lord, so as to stay in front of Him and in His presence. Pope Francis speaks, listens, he goes around the world, but he never goes away from that "centre" in which he lives permanently.

## The “ascendancy” of Mary, “omnipotent in pleas”

During the meeting in the room, the Pope addressed us an idea on Mary, which, he said, came from his heart while he was praying with us in the Choir.

Referring to a reflection made by him in the garden - << Women have commanded since that afternoon that Eve ate the apple in paradise!>> - he then continued...:

*... << Mary commands too. And how does Mary command? How does Our Lady command? Who does she command? She commands her Son ... The fact is clear in the wedding of Canaan: she got mixed up in a human problem, in a human difficulty ... She commands or makes her Son perceive our needs, our necessities, because her Son left her room for this. Her Son in person, has quite so, left her a “place” close to Him.*

*And it is in this that the Church (the Fathers of the Church, the Tradition of the Church) has always believed that Mary has been omnipotent in supplication: what she asks for, is accomplished by the Lord ... It is to a certain extent the power that Our Lady has, supplication. What she asks her Son for, her Son grants. This is how Mary commands>>.*

Mary is the one that pleads for sinners. This “position” that her Son has prepared, intersects her mission as Mother and Mediator in the history of salvation. It’s as if the Pope wanted to remind us sternly that we cannot be part of the Church without accomplishing this task, without participating in a mission which as Mary does, places us in the heart of the world, and lives the burden of our brethren. The supplication to which the Pope invites us, is the great prayer of mediation that requests, *for Christ, with Christ and in Christ*, to bear the burden of sin, by involving us through our daily realities in the most secret folds of human history, in the obscure scenarios of the world where the true battle is conducted, the one that Paul the apostle speaks about: << *For we fight not against flesh and blood, but against Principalities, against Powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness* >> (Eph. 6, 12).

## Intercede for sinners

In reminding us of our mission, Pope Francis told us about a popular legend in Southern Italy that he learned from labourers he met, and which tells the story of “Our Lady of the Tamarind-trees”. It is very easy to understand in its simplicity – it’s a popular devotion-, it actually contains a theological solidity and a very profound significance.

*<< Our Lady is in Heaven and looks at the door of Paradise. When big sinners arrive, she tells them not to get near the door, but to stop a little far from it, because, if they get close, St. Peter will not let them in. And when night falls, in the darkness and silence, she goes, she opens the door and lets them all in >>.*

It was clear that the Holy Father spoke to us in this way about Mary, in order to say something regarding our mission and identity in the Church: this he did with few words and a persuasive immediateness. In silence, in darkness, at night, when nobody sees, nobody knows, nobody hears, our mission aimed at opening the door of “Paradise” to the utmost distant people, of being solid for sinners and for the last, is accomplished by praying.

In other words, the Holy Father entrusted us with our “way” of standing in history: similar to Mary and, much more, *in* Mary.

## Trust Mary, our Mother

When the Pope spoke to us about Mary, Mother of God and our Mother, his statements were very frank and simple. His expressions were wise and always linked to his personal relationship with her. Therefore his words had the flavour of confidence, the unmistakable savour of the purest and most genuine love.

*<< Mary has a great power in our lives and in the life of the Church. Let us entrust her and speak to her of all the problems we have, even our sentiments, the problems of the Church, the problems of families, of the Monastery, of the people that ask us for prayers ... Say: "They are your children!". Speak to her about those Egyptian and Syrian Christians who are suffering so much: so many churches burnt! So many dead. And she is the Mother of them all. Say to her: "But, Our Lady...!", because she has great power...*

*It's really sublime to hold this dialogue with the Mother, telling her about our things, our confidences, our problems... It's a very easy way: leave everything up to Our Lady, everything>>.*

## Identity and belonging to charisma

The grant of having a sincere dialogue with Pope Francis has also enabled us to look deeper into the present condition of consecrated life in the world, in its concreteness, with the joy and fatigue which mark it. We asked which are the risks that can deviate us from following Christ in an authentic and radical way. We asked him to say *a few words for us nowadays*, for us Poor Sisters of St. Clare. And this is how the Holy Father answered:

*<< I believe that religious life is diluted when identity is lost. And identity means "belonging", belonging to the "foundational" charisma. "Foundational" charisma is not intended as a situational thing that can be made in a specific period and not in another.*

*What can I say to the religious? A belonging to the "foundational" charisma, to what is essential; and, if something is changed, let non-essential and situational things change, but never what is essential, never! This gives identity!*

*You clearly know what the charisma of St. Clare and St. Francis is. It's in the conventual Chapter, which has the assistance of the Holy Ghost and helps to find the way that the selection is made. But always with the stem in the Founders. Otherwise you go away from your own charisma ... you leave behind praying, you leave behind this and that ... This is worldliness!*

*I repeat: the most severe enemy that religious life has at present is worldliness, spiritual worldliness, that is, undertaking the criteria of the world. Read the second verse of the Letter to the Romans, chapter 12: "And be not conformed to this world". Worldliness>>.*

Short, unswerving words that express everything. What the Holy Father has left us is a strong recall to the essentiality and centrality of the Gospel, to keep looking at the *Son of God*; a monition which strongly reminds us of our *being in the world but not belonging to the world*; a spur and an encouragement to follow the path that was marked out for us, more than eight centuries ago, without straying in any way, without adaptations, compromises in values even referring to a

presumed “good purpose” which quite often can disguise a worldly mentality under its various forms, where the relativistic way of thinking places the “ego” at the centre and covertly takes the place of God. In the choices we make there is nothing that is insignificant or unimportant: each step, even if apparently small, either leads us to our goal or to the opposite direction.

### **If “nothing happens casually”**

We are sure that the gift we received, exhibited to us by the benevolence of God and the Holy Father, is part of a greater project which infinitely surpasses us.

We know that in God’s plans “nothing happens casually”... Thus we have to believe that the first official visit to a Monastery by Pope Francis did not take place by chance on the day of the “Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary”... And it is not by chance that, exactly on this day, the Holy Father spoke to us of Mary’s role in the history of salvation, underlining her maternity, her mediation... We are thus pleased to think of the universality that the meaning of this action assumes: the restitution of the “marian inwardness” of the Church as vocation and mission of contemplative life in the world faithful to its own charisma.

“*Evangelization is accomplished by kneeling*”, Pope Francis told us. It will be our “being” kneeled in front of the “Shrine” to support his fatigue, when he is pilgrimaging around the world. It will be our “silence” that will accompany his words, in the vivid fruitfulness of our mission and evangelization in the Church, which fully and joyfully accomplishes our being women, close to the Holy Father, close to every brother and sister, intimately united to Christ.

Before leaving us, Pope Francis wrote a few words in our ancient “Signature Register”, bearing the date of August the 15<sup>th</sup> 2013, a precious synthesis of what he said to us and an “authentication” of our two meetings. We would like to fraternally address to you also, the words he wrote as a seal to these pages:

*<< Please, preserve the identity of your consecration, your belonging to the foundational charisma. And pray for sinners, of whom I am the worst>>.*