



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE SOCIETY OF THE PRIESTS
OF ST JOSEPH BENEDICT COTTOLENGO**

To Reverend Fr Aldo Sarotto

Superior General of the Priests of St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo

1. One hundred and seventy-five years have passed since that 2 September 1827 when St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, called to the bedside of a young mother of three children who had been refused admittance by the city's hospitals, was inspired to found an institution in Turin for the poorest and marginalized. Five years later, on 27 April 1832, he opened the Little House of Divine Providence, called by popular wisdom "the citadel of the miracle". The holy founder said that here sick people would be cared for who would "otherwise have died neglected, such as those in a condition of ill health whom no respectable hospital would admit", as well as "other categories of poor and abandoned persons", so that they would be able to set out "on the path of work and health". Each one would be assured of having "a room of holy education", that is, the possibility to live a committed and devout Christian existence.

Ten years later, on 30 April 1842, Cottolengo died. He was only 56. In that decade of tireless apostolic fervour, he had opened the doors to every kind of needy person and founded communities of sisters, of religious lay brothers and of priests, and several monasteries of contemplative life.

As time passed, the seed of the Little House grew into a flourishing tree of charity that continues to produce abundant fruits of good. Whereas the various branches of this religious family were approved separately by the Holy See, they work together under the guidance of the Father of the Little House, the founder's successor. In the past 40 years, more and more volunteers have offered their collaboration, and a numerous group of lay people recently founded the Association of the "Friends of Cottolengo".

The happy event of the 175th anniversary this year, 2002, offers a providential opportunity to thank the Lord for the growth and development of the Little House, which is currently extending its radius of action beyond its original centre in Turin, opening its arms wide to the poor of other cities and nations, from Kenya to the United States, Switzerland, India, Ecuador and, since last year, also Tanzania. The fire kindled by Cottolengo still burns in many regions of the earth.

2. "The love of Christ urges us" (II Cor 5,14), he used to like to repeat, knowing that every form of social assistance must be inspired by the Gospel passage on the last judgement (Mt 25,31-40) and by Jesus' exhortation to abandon oneself with confidence to heavenly Providence (cf. Mt 6,25-34).

This conviction emerged clearly, for example, in the foundation of the house for the mentally disabled, whom he called "buoni figli" (good sons) and "buone figlie" (good daughters). Christian charity, illumined by faith, was telling him: "What you did to one of the least of these my brethren, you did to me".

What a rich and important charismatic legacy Cottolengo bequeathed to his spiritual sons and daughters! They must jealously guard this patrimony, indeed, they must courageously actualize and renew it, mindful of the challenges emerging in our time. It is an ecclesial service that reaches out to the poorest and lowliest; a service nourished by constant trust in divine Providence. At a time when life is often misunderstood and even despised, when selfishness, private interests and personal profit seem to be the prevalent criteria to go by, when the gap between poor and rich in the world is dangerously widening and it is especially the lowly, the feeblest and the weakest who pay the cost, it is urgently necessary to proclaim and witness to the Gospel of charity and solidarity. Charity is a precious treasure of the Church who, through her charitable works, speaks even to the hardest and seemingly most insensitive of hearts.

3. Of course, in comparison to the time when the Little House opened, a great many situations have changed. The general standard of living has improved and more attention and respect are paid to human dignity, as is apparent from the legislation for social assistance.

In Church circles today, the consecrated life encounters unheard of challenges, after going through a disturbing vocations crisis in the recent past which did not even spare the Cottolengo institutes.

The role of the laity has developed, and volunteers have become a high quality resource for running many forms of social assistance.

Along these lines, Joseph Cottolengo's charismatic intuition, expressed well in the motto of the Little House, appears more timely than ever. Now, as then, St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo recalls that service to the brothers and sisters must stem from a constant, deep contact with God. Secular

responses are not enough for people in difficulty, and those who help them must not be content only with satisfying their legitimate material demands. They keep to the fore the salvation of souls, ever seeking God's glory, ready to do his will, confidently abandoning themselves to his mysterious saving plans. In a word, it is necessary to seek holiness: "in relation to which all pastoral initiatives must be set" (cf. *Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 30).

The spiritual sons and daughters of Cottolengo should tend to this "high standard of ordinary Christian living" (*ibid.*, n. 31), endeavouring as far as possible, as the saint recommended, to keep their minds and hearts filled with God and things that have to do with the salvation of souls. The practice of love should be like a single fire that burns with two flames, one that leaps up towards the Lord, and the other to the poor person, because, the saint observed, "zeal for the glory of God and for the benefit of the sick should never be separated".

4. "Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, make us saints!". May this favourite aspiration of the founder be a reminder to members of the Cottolengo family to tend toward holiness, the most important prophetic witness that the Little House of Divine Providence can offer to humanity in the third millennium.

Here I repeat what I had the opportunity to say on 13 April 1980, when I visited your Institute in Turin, a true citadel of suffering and piety: "If your effort should to lack this supernatural dimension, the Cottolengo [institution] would cease to exist" (*ORE*, 28 April 1980, n. 4, p. 5).

In order to live this high ascetic and apostolic ideal, Cottolengo founded three institutes which, despite the diversity of their canonical condition, offer a single, effective witness, acting as a unit in the context of the Little House. I hope they will pursue their way together, faithful to the fundamental charitable and pastoral choices he made, wisely and with foresight, involving lay and especially young people in their work. May they be untiring in their service to the lowliest, but at the same time, never forget that "prayer is our first and most important task", as the Founder said, "because prayer makes the Little House live". In this respect, how providential was his insight in founding, at the end of his earthly pilgrimage, monasteries of contemplative life! While certain brothers and sisters are responsible for service to the poorest by night and by day, others burn in silence before God, melting like candles in contemplation and in prayer.

What an extraordinary example of that harmonious synthesis between action and prayer which must distinguish every Christian's life!

May the heavenly Mother of God and St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo help your communities firmly to preserve this charismatic intuition of your origin. For my part, I accompany you with deep affection, as I bless you together with the residents in the various houses, their families and those who generously support this most providential institution that was born from the heart of a great apostle of charity of the 19th century.

From Castel Gandolfo, 26 August 2002.

JOHN PAUL II

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana