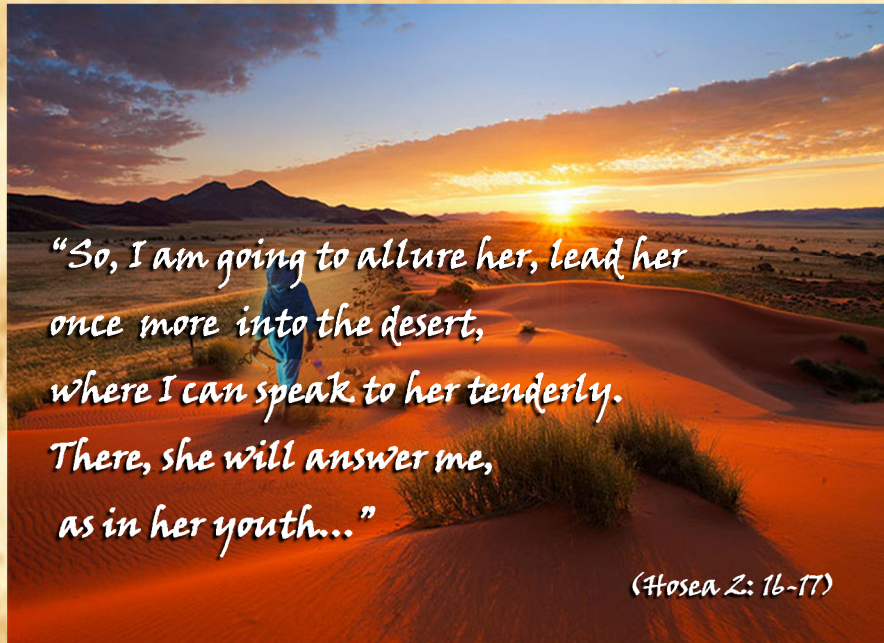


- OPERA DON CALABRIA -
Verona, September 8, 2021



Letter from the Casante
Fr. Miguel Tofful
in preparation for the
renewal of the triennial vows



*“So, I am going to allure her, lead her
once more into the desert,
where I can speak to her tenderly.
There, she will answer me,
as in her youth”.*

(Hosea 2: 16-17)

Dear Brothers Poor Servants, Poor Servants Sisters and Missionaries of the Poor,

May the peace and love of the Lord, who calls us to live the joy of fidelity and prophecy through our consecration, remain in our hearts.

On the occasion of the renewal of the triennial vows, on 8 December next, I address my fraternal greetings to all of you and, in communion with Mother Lucia and Sister Jandira, we wish to invite everyone to prepare this extraordinary event of grace with a greater awareness of the gift received in the consecration and profession of the Evangelical Councils.

Every three years we have the grace and the opportunity to renew our consecration, which meant to become more and more open and loyal to the love of God, who remains faithful to his promises and who invites us in every moment and situation of our life, particularly in the present time, to be new people, continually renewed by his grace.

I take the insight from the words of the prophet Hosea: *“So, I am going to allure her, lead her once more into the desert, where I can speak to her tenderly. There, she will answer me, as in her youth”*, to offer a reflection on our consecration and renewal, encouraging each of us and our communities to stop, meditate and share together what the Lord wishes to revive in us. He continues to call us and our response is interwoven, over time, with the threads of perseverance and creative fidelity, according to the needs and lights of our charism.

The call of the Lord is a free initiative of his love. It is always new and dynamic, it is constantly renewed in our hearts, making the beauty that has attracted and seduced us to shine since the days of our youth. This beauty is always luminous, but it can happen, as happened to the people of Israel, that the events and experiences of life obscure this light in us.

In these verses of the prophet Hosea, verbs that belong to the experience of love are used: "*allure*", "*lead*" and "*speak to the heart*". The first verb, "*allure*", indicates a movement generated by a greater force, like a magnet that attracts a metal, which inevitably moves towards the source of attraction, goes towards it. There is no forcing or any form of violence, there is a source of seduction that always attracts and continues to attract.

This force of attraction is followed by the verb "*to lead*", which means to accompany, to guide, almost like a constant presence that is beside and leads, making one experience something new, dynamic, extraordinary. It is a lead in solitude - in the desert - so that each one can meet in a profound way with himself and with the One who seduced him.

In this particular atmosphere the third verb comes to life, "*to speak to the heart*", which refers to the words that the Lord wants to pronounce again, which are the words of the covenant fixed in our heart, are words of life and love, which illuminate with new light the meaning of our life and we understand that our fidelity must always be renewed in and on his Word, new every day. It is the transforming impulse that God proposes for an ever ancient and ever new encounter between Him, the Lover, and us, the Beloved.

There she "*will answer me*". The answer must always be new, because the contexts that arise in our life are new. The answer will have to be a response of fidelity. While recognizing our limitations, our frailties and the difficulties we may encounter along the way, God always gives us a new possibility of response, which has as its basis his fidelity, his mercy and grace. This response must always be renewed according to the desire of our Founder: "*Either renew or perish!*".

Today, brothers and sisters, we have this new opportunity to resume a journey of renewal, which makes us rediscover the beauty and essentials of life and of our consecration. Today we too are led into the desert, a desert that is represented by the different situations that the whole of humanity lives, which deeply question our being consecrated and our fidelity, and invite us to become new people who widen our hearts, our gaze and the horizon to the different situations. Just think about what has happened and is happening in these almost two years of pandemic.

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“Renew the awareness of God's love”

The Consecration is a life choice made out of love, which has its foundation in the love of God and must always draw from this vital source. When loving is more demanding, it is necessary to entrust oneself to the sources of love, to the love of God, where everyone is called to take care of their frailties in order to reaffirm the primacy of God in their own life.

In this sense, the renewal of consecration is not something we do on our own initiative, as if it depended only on our effort to be faithful and persevering in the commitments undertaken. The most important thing is to renew the awareness that the Love of God, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, keeps our fidelity alive, despite the situations that may arise in us and around us. Allowing ourselves to be embraced by the Love of God, "*allures us again*", making us feel his presence who does not abandon us.

Certainly, God the Father is giving birth to something new in the midst of this troubled time, which tests our fidelity. God embraces us with a message of encouraging love and concrete closeness: "*You are precious ... worthy of esteem ... I am with you ... I love you ...*" (cf. Is. 43:1-21). They are unshakable assurance, which God offers to his people and to each of us. It is as if God were saying to Israel and to us: in this change there is something that remains forever, which is my love for each of you. And this love does not collapse, does not fail, does not abandon. It is the certainty that God gives us today.

However, it is necessary to emphasize that attitudes to learn to love according to God's heart imply a change of perspective, a true conversion of the heart. From this awareness of love springs an inner potential that makes us love God and neighbor.

Lord renew in us the awareness that your love is forever!

“Renew the awareness of the light and strength of the charism”

In this particular time, the Lord "*leads*" us by the hand to make us understand how much the charism, with its light and its strength, is current and gives meaning to our life and to the present moment that humanity lives.

If we look at history in its reality, there are many signs and many voices that speak to us of the need to change direction and to review our lifestyle. We are so occupied with our illusions and desires, that we do not listen to the voices and signs of the times. Instead, we must rediscover the strength and originality of our charism, as the light that illuminates the darkness of a closed world.

Fr. Calabria repeated on various occasions that our being consecrated persons in the Opera "*commits us*" to live the pure and genuine spirit, which is a beacon of light for the world: "*Never as now, the world looks at us, and we must radiate, amidst the dense darkness, the pure light of Christ, which brightens the path of poor humanity*"¹.

We have a charism that is a light of hope and gives us full certainty that God is leading history, that we are in his hands. A charism that is a beacon of light for ourselves and for humanity. We are invited to revive the awareness that we too are little beacons of light, living Gospels, in this time of shadows and closure.

The renewal of vows is an invitation for each to "*embrace*" the newness of the charism, which prompts us to look to tomorrow with hope and to entrust all of us into the hands of the Father. He "*leads us by the hand*", he speaks to us with his Word to nourish

¹ Fr. Calabria, Letter to Fr. Rosa, June 9, 1947

our hearts with the newness of the Gospel, he guides us in the search for the Kingdom of God, which manifests itself in people and in different situations; He gives himself to us in the Eucharist, to nourish in our hearts the faith and trust in divine Providence, tender mother.

Lord renew in us the awareness of the greatness, present relevance and richness of the charism, rekindling in us the sense of belonging to the Opera!

“Renew the awareness of fidelity to the Vows”

The renewal of the triennial profession questions us about our fidelity to the evangelical counsels embraced in religious profession and which we wish to embrace again with creative and dynamic fidelity, so that our hearts may belong more and more to the Lord.

By freeing the heart to love, the Lord can "*speak*" to us intimately where he does not find hindrances and impediments, where only his love can give the true meaning to our life, where, having removed the masks that we had often worn or still worn, we are made capable to live a sincere and unified relationship of true love.

The evangelical counsels are the concrete face of consecration, and they give us the strength to live "in Christ, the perfect man": "*Whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a man*"². There is no true experience of consecration if you do not grow in humanity, because the evangelical counsels contain a profound anthropological significance.

Pope Francis prompts us never to give up prophecy as a chance to live the Gospel here and now, whatever the situation we find ourselves in³. In this perspective, the evangelical counsels remind us of the very humanity of Jesus, his tenderness, his mercy, his friendship, his closeness, his obedience and his poor living ...

Re-embracing chastity means letting God open our hearts to live authentic emotional relationships, learning to love the other for himself and not for our own advantage. A chaste affection is one that knows how to live a true and profound love in a relationship, which does not take possession of the other and does not exploit him. Such a love frees the heart more and more to love God and others.

To embrace poverty again is to remember our condition as fragile and vulnerable creatures, in need of everything and, at the same time, to open our hearts to the sharing of our goods, whether personal or material, with those who have less. It means freeing the heart from materialism and worldliness, in order to become ever more sympathetic and sensitive to the needs of others, emptying oneself to enrich ourselves with the loving presence of God.

² Gaudium et Spes 41

³ See Pope Francis, *Letter to the Consecrated*, 2014.

To embrace obedience again is to get involved and remember that freedom is not accomplished in absolute autonomy, but in recognizing ourselves as children of the Father, entrusting ourselves to him, since he knows what we need. The path of obedience is the sure way to hand ourselves over to the will of God by exercising "the willingness to do everything" as a path to sanctification.

In the desire to renew the evangelical counsels, let the Lord's invitation resound within us to allow ourselves to be "*allured again and led back into solitude*", because he wants to speak to our hearts and make us his property. By abandoning ourselves to him in love and fidelity, we will become more and more human, with a big and generous heart, capable of loving everyone without distinction.

Lord renew in us the awareness of our fidelity to the evangelical counsels we have professed!

“Renew the awareness of the call to fraternity”

Fraternal life in community is one of the pillars of our consecrated life. By embracing the religious life, we embrace the brothers and sisters that the Lord gives us so that together we can become true brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. We live in times in which it is urgent to weave fraternity with the daring threads of mutual love and according to the radicality to which the Gospel calls us.

New fraternity, which is a concrete sign of communion and prophecy of hope for the world, in the contexts in which we find ourselves living our life and our mission. This new time, full of challenges and changes, invites every consecrated person to be more than ever a tireless builder of authentic and open fraternity.

We have realized, or at least we should realize, that something must change in our way of being and living fraternity within our communities. There is an urgent need for a fraternity that has the dresses and the evangelical flavor of communion and sharing, according to the style of the first communities where they were "*one heart and one soul*", and where "*none of them was in need*".

The virus of individualism has made us believe that freedom is identified with the autonomy of the person, forgetting that freedom is relationship and responsibility towards others. Fraternity requires co-responsibility in caring for one another freely.

The fraternity, which we are called to renew and live, will be authentic if based on the depth of relationships: "*whoever does not love his brother whom he sees cannot love God whom he does not see*". It is a place where love does not remain a good intention, very generic, but becomes a word, a gaze, a welcome. The specific mission of Religious, with the choice of consecrated life and the consequent life in community, is expressed in being builders of communion in fraternity.

Consecrated life in general, and in particular for us consecrated persons of the Opera, is a call to offer a prophecy of fraternity. Especially in today's time, our fraternal relationships and the acceptance of diversity testify to the value of every person considered brother, sister, who enriches and makes true our being a family, children of one God the Father.

If this fraternity is authentic, it opens up ever more to sharing with the laity in the mission of daily life.

We welcome this occasion for the renewal of vows to strengthen the bond of a true fraternity, which becomes friendship in valuing and caring for each brother and sister.

Lord renew in us the awareness of the call to fraternity by living authentic relationships of friendship and brotherhood!

“Renew the awareness of our mission with the poorest and most abandoned”

The pandemic is leaving a series of poor people on the sidelines who are becoming poorer, more and more invisible and suffering in their solitude. Consecrated life and especially we, brothers and sisters of the Opera, are called to take care of the poorest, the most disadvantaged in society. The pure and genuine spirit of the Opera requires that love for the poor and the abandoned be operational criteria and practical discernment.

Going towards the new poverties, those that do not enter the "systems" and generate the waste of society, involves a process of mental and spiritual conversion, which pushes us to assume new attitudes, both from a personal and institutional point of view. The necessary creativity is that which comes from the Gospel, which invites us to respond with boldness to the new poverties of today.

For Fr. Calabria, belonging to the Opera is closely linked to the need to take care of the poor. He gathered and motivated his first collaborators, brothers and sisters, to live a fraternal relationship together: "*first of all looking at each other as brothers ...*", and then taking care of poor and abandoned children. Fraternity and mission with the poor are two characteristics that distinguish us in our being Opera.

In consecrated life, in the proposal of Jesus and the Kingdom of God, love is everything. There are no other purposes - at least so it should be - outside of love. And this love is so decisive and fundamental that Jesus always translates love with concrete charity and compassionate attention to the other. To love means to take care, and to take care means to do something concrete to ease the life of the other who is in need.

There are many faces of lonely people, of situations we encounter in our realities in which we live. Renewing our awareness of the mission with the poorest means verifying ourselves, today, with respect to our attitude, as men and women religious, towards poor and needy people. Recognizing where we are and where we have left the poor is an important step to revitalize and qualify our service, our mission to take care of people, but also our way of life and our lifestyle.

Lord renew in us the awareness of our mission with the poor, so that the direct contact with them may change our attitudes and our certainties!

“Renew the awareness of starting afresh from Christ to be living Gospels”

Our consecrated life has a foundation: Christ. And it is precisely for this reason that we always need to return to him, renew our personal relationship with him, to receive from this personal encounter with Christ the ability to live a new style of life.

If we look at the history of the Church and consecrated life, we realize that every conversion of mentality and return to evangelical and prophetic freshness passes through a return to Christ. *“Yes, one must start afresh from Christ because it was from him that the first disciples started in Galilee; from him, that throughout history men and women of every status and culture, consecrated by the Spirit in the strength of their call, have started out; for him they have left family and homeland, following him unconditionally, making themselves available for the announcement of the Kingdom and doing good for all (cf. Acts 10:38)”*.⁴

When Christ occupies the center of attention and affection in our life, our lifestyle embraces His way of being, living and serving; his mission becomes ours. Fr Calabria also reminds us how decisive it is for us consecrated men and women to draw on this continuous search for Christ and the holy Gospel lived. *“Returning to Christ, practicing the Gospel with absolute coherence, this is for us and for all the pressing and urgent call of these events”*⁵.

Lord renew in us the awareness and the continuous desire to start afresh from Christ to be living Gospels and a concrete sign of his love in the world!

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, let this invitation of the prophet Hosea resound in our hearts, *“So, I will allure her again, I will lead her into the desert, I will speak to her heart. There she will answer me as in the days of her youth...”*. We take the opportunity of the renewal of vows as a time of grace: the Lord wants to seduce us again and lead us into the desert of our life and interiority, so that we can, with the power of his grace, respond once again to his call, which is a call forever.


As a concrete journey of preparation for the renewal of vows, I propose to live intensely the liturgical feast of St. John Calabria and the days of the Novena, which will have as its theme: *“Returning to the Gospel to be a light of hope”*. In the week or days prior to December 8, 2021, I suggest dedicating a day to a community spiritual retreat, following the path that will be proposed on the occasion of this important event.

⁴ John Paul II, *Start afresh from Christ*, 21.

⁵ Fr. Calabria, *Letter to the Religious LXXXV. November 1953*.

May the Immaculate Virgin, Mother of the Opera and Saint John Calabria help us to take on the challenges of the present time by living the Evangelical Councils, for a new awareness of our call and vocation to the authenticity of love.

Pray for me, I remember you in my prayer and I accompany you with my fatherly and fraternal affection.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, enclosed in a hand-drawn oval. The signature reads "P. Miguel Tofful".

P. Miguel Tofful

September 8, 2021
Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed
Virgin Mary