

**Fr. John Calabria:**  
**A path to holiness**

*Second edition*

Fr. Gino Gatto  
*Original Italian*

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*I was struck by something said to one of our confreres by a person who, though without faith or religion, deeply respected the Opera don Calabria and its work: «You are saints! ». My God, what a lesson for us! Heaven help us if we do not live up to it!*

*St. John Calabria*

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

John Calabria was born at Verona, in the Santi Apostoli (Holy Apostles) parish, on 8 October 1873. His father died when he was twelve years old and he spent his childhood and adolescence in conditions of extreme poverty. On two occasions he was forced to interrupt primary school and take up temporary jobs in order to earn some money for himself and his family. Humiliations and difficulties of every kind, together with the grace of God, brought to maturity within him a spirit of faith and surrender to Divine Providence.

The love, faith and industriousness of his mother helped him to grow up serene and altruistic despite many hardships. Fr. Pietro Scapini, the rector of the church of San Lorenzo (St. Lawrence), helped him to fulfill his vocation to the priesthood, preparing him over a period of three years for the entrance examination to high school at the seminary of Verona. He passed the exam and was admitted to the seminary as an external student. Military service, which he described as “the most wonderful time of his life”, made him miss another two years of study.

He was, however, very fortunate to meet Father Natale di Gesù, a Carmelite priest, who became his confessor and spiritual director. Fr. Natale saw in young John Calabria “the one chosen specially by the Lord” to found “an Institute for the needs of the present times”: a Congregation of Priests and Brothers, inspired by an evangelical spirit, with equal juridical status, and equal rights and obligations.

During military service, John engaged in an intense vocational apostolate and charitable works, distinguishing himself above all in the care of the sick and in the heroic act of volunteering to assist soldiers who had contracted typhoid; he also became seriously sick with the same illness.

Once he returned to his studies, he did not wait for ordination to the priesthood to attend to his personal sanctification and work in favor of the poor. Indeed, while still a Theology student, he founded, the “Pia Unione per l’assistenza agli ammalati poveri”<sup>1</sup> and, upon finding a gypsy on his doorstep who had escaped from his task masters, he welcomed him into his home, shared his food with him and gave him his own bed.

These were the first seeds of the “Casa Buoni Fanciulli”<sup>2</sup> that was officially opened on 26 November 1907, in vicolo Case Rotte.

John Calabria was ordained priest on 11 August 1901 and assigned to the parish of Santo Stefano (St. Stephen) in Verona as assistant parish priest; he was also appointed confessor at the Seminary. Seven years later, he was transferred to San Benedetto al Monte as rector. In the meantime, an increasing number of abandoned young boys were being received into the “Casa Buoni Fanciulli”, making it necessary to look for bigger accommodation: Divine Providence sent it their way.

The new headquarters were located in Via S. Zeno in Monte, number 23, and would later become the “Mother

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<sup>1</sup> An association for the assistance of poor sick people.

<sup>2</sup> Institute for orphaned and abandoned boys.

House” of the Opera don Calabria. The boys officially moved in on 6 November 1908.

As the number of boys being sheltered increased, the number of collaborators, Priests and Brothers, was also growing. On 11 February 1932, the diocese of Verona approved the “Casa Buoni Fanciulli”: it was named the “Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence” and spread to various parts of Italy.

At the same time, the female branch, the “Sisters”, was also founded and thereafter raised to the status of Congregation with the name “Poor Sisters of Divine Providence”. Fr. Calabria wanted the Brothers and Sisters to be two branches of the same tree, a single family, with the same charism: to live in a spirit of faith and trust in God the Father, surrendering themselves fully to Divine Providence, neither asking for anything, nor looking for support in human protection, fully embodying the Gospel teaching: “Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well” (cf. Mt 6:25-33).

Fr. Calabria carried out a vast apostolate: he took care of orphaned and abandoned boys, the elderly and the sick; he provided formation in his houses to poor young men with a vocation, leaving them free to decide, on the threshold of theology, whether to join the Diocese or other Congregations or Orders; he helped priests in difficulty, people in prison (“our separated brothers”) and an anonymous mass of people in search of enlightenment, comfort and advice and with whom he maintained an extensive written correspondence even in times of relentless suffering and illness.

He felt that the time was ripe for lay people to give their contribution and, through his words and writings, he formed them into Christians rooted in the Gospel. He also founded the “Famiglia dei Fratelli esterni”<sup>3</sup>, made up of ordinary lay people who, from within their own family and their professional activity, were called to embody the spirit of the Congregation. The essence of all he did, and his true personal greatness, lay in his daily commitment to intensify his knowledge of God’s will, his passionate love of the Father’s will, his “losing” himself in it and living it out at any cost. On every page of his “Diary” he wrote his resolve to either become a saint or die: O santo o morto<sup>4</sup>.

John Calabria died in Verona on 4 December 1954. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II in Verona on 17 April 1988, and canonized in Rome on 18 April 1999.

His Congregations carry on his spirit and have also spread to Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, Colombia, Angola, Kenya, Romania, Russia, India and the Philippines.

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<sup>3</sup> Lay Associates.

<sup>4</sup> A favorite motto of don Calabria, it means “either saint or dead” in the sense that he would have preferred death rather than fail to become a saint. In the text it appears in the original Italian in order to conserve its conciseness.

## Preface to the Second Edition

“O santo o morto!”

This was the fixed idea in the mind of Fr.Calabria, the words with which he concluded almost every page of his diary. These words are his powerful message to men and women of all times.

We are so superficial and small-minded. We prefer idle chatter to conversion. We prefer to speak about spirituality rather than commit ourselves to conversion.

I was struck by an episode in the life of Fr.Calabria narrated in this book. When the Theology students were carrying out research on “the pure and genuine Spirit of the Opera don Calabria”, he told them to suspend it. Why did he do this?

He was obviously making the point that we run the risk of becoming proud through the use of solemn words. We easily prefer solemn words to a real journey towards holiness.

In our modern world, we hold too many meetings and conferences and speak too many words, but we never actually decide to commit ourselves to conversion and embark on the journey to holiness.

The words of Fr.Calabria haunt us:

*“My dear brothers: there is a great need for holiness!*

*We are living in terrible times, but the hour of Jesus has arrived.*

*Now is the time for holiness.*

*This is not the time for discussion or theories; it is a time, dear brothers, for putting into practice what we believe” (1951).*

Fr.Calabria was in touch with the times; but what would he say today, seeing what we see now? Every day we witness the violence of the most perverse immorality.

Perhaps he would summon us to take the first step on the road to conversion: put an end to idle chatter and the waste of paper and engage in silence and reflection.

Fr.John Calabria wrote the following words in a famous letter to Fr Stanislaw:

*“Anyone who does not meditate is standing on the edge of a cliff” (1936).*

Fr.Calabria deserves a monument for this one remark he made to a son who was already well along the path to holiness.

Let us begin listening to Fr.Calabria, choosing silence and reflection as our starting point.

This book, now at its second edition, will help us.

Fr.Gino Gatto, an affectionate son of Fr.Calabria, confided to me that the last words written to him by the Founder were: *“Become a saint”*.

*Fr. Andrea Gasparino*



## **PRESENTATION BY THE CASANTE<sup>5</sup>**

I wish to thank the novice master and the Italian novices who, after months of hard work, have produced this book to honor the holiness of our Founder, Fr. John Calabria.

Until now, no one had undertaken this difficult task because it may appear presumptuous to penetrate the soul of a saint and, above all, attempt to understand the path he traveled towards holiness.

I believe, however, that the authors have been successful in their endeavor.

The reflections in this book also provide an answer to the following question: “Becoming a saint is one thing, but how can we fulfill the plan of holiness that God has for each one of us?”

The answer is to be found in following, at least in its broad lines, the path traveled by Fr. Calabria because the Lord never repeats his plans.

I also believe that this book could be useful as a formation manual, both in our houses and for the many lay people who are attracted by the spirituality of the Opera.

I hope that these pages, which contain many radical expressions of both the Founder and the accompanying commentary, does not frighten anyone because the Lord, who is the Author and the Agent of holiness, fulfills his plans with total respect towards each person and never gives us a cross that we cannot bear.

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<sup>5</sup> The title corresponds to the figure of Superior General in other Congregations. It means: custodian, guardian.

It is said that Fr. John was called to give life to a movement of holiness in the Opera and in the Church; today, from heaven, he continues this mission as head of the movement and he invites all those who yearn to be holy to follow him: he assures them that they will reach the peak of transformation in Christ, the New Man, if they allow the Lord to mould and fashion them according to his own designs.

It is striking to read the expressions of Fr. Calabria that reveal to us his almost “stubborn” desire to become a saint, a great saint.

We are familiar with his motto “o santo o morto” that did not deter him even in the face of his weakness and, as he used to say, “his great sins”; Fr. Calabria reached the high peaks of holiness through his trust in the Lord’s power and by starting over again every day.

Thanks to this humility, which was motivated and sustained by his trust in Divine Providence, the Lord made him a truly great saint.

May our Founder’s desire to give to the Church and to the world “a great army of saints”, as Abbot Caronti and Cardinal Schuster told him, find hearts willing to make this dream become reality.

I wholeheartedly bless those who welcome this book in a spirit of faith and, in a special way, those who follow Fr. John in committing themselves to a sincere journey towards holiness.

*In Christ Jesus, Fr. Waldemar J. Longo*  
8. September 1999,  
*Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

## PREFACE

It would undoubtedly be presumptuous to attempt a systematic presentation of Fr. John Calabria's path to holiness. This can be explained, above all, by the fact that he did not leave any written account of his experience. Eyewitnesses who are still alive know that he had a great fear of making a doctrine out of the pure and genuine spirit that characterizes our holiness.

I remember when, during the war, he suspended our study of the spirit of the Opera, sending us this message: "The spirit is something we should live, not study".

It is not easy to conceptualize the kind of holiness embodied by Fr. John Calabria because his holiness was a profound experience, and experience is something that can never be reduced to mere descriptions. The spirituality, in which his spiritual director (the Carmelite Fr. Natale di Gesù) formed him, together with his personal written accounts, will allow us to try and penetrate his soul and discover the action of the Holy Spirit that led him to the summit of holiness.

The spirituality of Fr. Calabria is obviously influenced by Carmelite spirituality. Anyone who is familiar with the works of the great Carmelite mystics, St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, is aware of this; I noticed it myself when, as a young priest, I read the works of these great saints. Fr. John wrote the following words to Cardinal Adeodato Piazza at Christmas 1952: "I pray the Lord that all of us, Carmelites and Poor Servants of Divine

Providence, *whose Opera is inspired by Carmelite spirituality*, will be together in God's family in Heaven".

Though Calabrian spirituality is undoubtedly close to Carmelite spirituality, Fr. Calabria has an entirely distinctive characteristic of his own, which he calls: "the pure and genuine spirit". He calls upon the members of the Opera to embody this characteristic and states that "*if there were a saint among us, but without the pure and genuine spirit, he would be harmful to the Opera itself*". We also know how much he used to insist on fidelity to the founding charismatic inspiration by saying: "*even a small shift of the radio dial is enough to lose the transmission*". We will clearly see this distinctive characteristic in the Founder's writings.

I ask the reader's forgiveness if I have not interpreted authentically the path traveled by Fr. John; however, one must be a saint in order to know a saint and I am not a saint.

Holiness, and the desire to reach holiness, are the great ideal that Fr. Caldaria bequeathed to us. I believe that our most authentic response to his canonization consists in a re-awakening of the Founder's burning desire in all the members of the Opera: that we commit ourselves to achieving Holiness. Holiness and the pure and genuine spirit is one and the same thing.

Fr. Calabria took holiness very seriously and his confessor's words convinced him that he was called to holiness: "*...become a saint, sanctify the members of the Opera and its endurance will be guaranteed*" [Lettere del

Padre ai Religiosi<sup>6</sup>, no. XXVIII, 6-2-1942, p.113, Ferrara, Scuola Topografica Casa Buoni Fanciulli, 1956]

He was also convinced that the author and sanctifier was the Holy Spirit, in whose hands he had entrusted his “*zero and misery*”. Another certainty accompanied him throughout his entire life: holiness means climbing Calvary to be crucified with Jesus. Fr. Calabria’s writings confirm that in his path to holiness he was in total harmony with the ideology of the great mystics.

In giving this work a logical order, I was guided by an inspiration I received from an experience in novitiate, following the itinerary of prayer. In this process, measuring ourselves against the examples and the writings of Fr. Calabria, it clearly emerged that he too had traveled the same path, with determination and passion, under the guidance of his confessor.

*Fr. Gino Gatto*

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<sup>6</sup> Henceforth L. a R.

## INTRODUCTION

*We have chosen not to include community and liturgical prayer in these pages; we shall deal, instead, with personal prayer as the path to personal holiness. When he speaks of holiness, Fr. John always uses the adjective “personal” because holiness is something that we achieve at a personal level; we cannot delegate it to others, nor can we wait for others to start off on the journey before following them. It is true that religious achieve their sanctification in a community where common religious devotions are carried out, but it is equally true that, unless a religious has an intense personal prayer life, he runs the risk of carrying out the communal devotions and liturgical prayer in a superficial manner. The Gospels present Jesus as the model of “personal” prayer: with the exception of some visits to the Temple with the disciples and the celebration of Passover - “I have ardently desired to eat this Passover with you” (Lk. 22:15) – he is always seen in solitary prayer. This is the result of his “unique” relationship with the Heavenly Father, as Jesus himself says to Mary Magdalene “my Father and your Father, my God and your God” (Jn. 20:17). Nevertheless, there is no lack of recommendations in the Gospels to engage in communal prayer: “I tell you solemnly once again, if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them” (Mt 18:19-20).*

*Fr. John Calabria is also a great model of solitary prayer. If the armchair in his room and his seat in the choir*

*could speak, they would tell us of the many hours he used to spend alone in prayer; indeed, we can safely say that Fr. John was prayer incarnated. Fr. Pesenti rightly defined him as “the mystic of the apostolate”. We are also familiar with the phrase in every letter to the religious in which the Founder recommended the common religious devotions<sup>7</sup>: “Abandon everything except religious devotions. My heart fills with sorrow when I see someone neglecting these practices because it is a sign of disorder in the Opera, at which the devil rejoices, and our poor confrere becomes a prisoner of deception” (L. a R. no.2, 26-11-1932, p. 7). Experience, however, has shown us, and we stress once again, that the soul of community prayer is personal prayer. According to Vatican II: “The Christian is indeed called to pray with others, but he must also enter into his bedroom to pray to his Father in secret” (SC 12).*

*We do not wish to speak of personal prayer only as a support to community and liturgical prayer, but as an experience that walks hand in hand with the path to holiness; this was how the great mystics, at whose school Fr. John was formed, spoke of prayer.*

*I also wish to make it clear that the reader will encounter in these pages some terms used by Fr. Calabria and the author, such as: mortification, renunciation, detachment, death to self, self-annihilation, cross, penance...and some might object that this takes us back to pre-Council days. It is undoubtedly true that the Council’s anthropology exalts man’s great dignity, a dignity that must be protected and defended*

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<sup>7</sup> In those days, these devotions included Mass, meditation, examination of conscience, confession, communion, morning and evening prayers.

*against all ideologies, political systems, cultures, etc. Some readers might object: “How can we impose on post-Council humanity an aesthetic model with expressions that smack of “masochism”? A word of warning is necessary here because such an attitude runs the risk of emptying the very values of Christianity of their meaning. (cf. Ph 3:18-19). In a homily on Christmas Day 1902, Fr.Calabria said: “I know that many Christians do not want to hear words like penance and mortification”; we could say the same thing today about many religious. Christianity without the cross is a false Christianity. The consequence of such an attitude is that, because of a distorted interpretation of Vatican II, everything falls apart and we plunge into mediocrity and mundane values. Unless it is supported by Christology, anthropology will produce an impoverished model of man. The Redeemer of man is Christ; the Liberator of man is Christ. “For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2Cor 5:17). Christ lived his consecration to the Father in a radical and total way, in the dynamics of kenosis (Phil 2:6-11).*

*The difference between pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II spirituality is that the former was often lived out in a moralistic and voluntaristic way, with an abundant casuistry that favored loopholes; the post-Vatican II spirituality, with its emphasis on Christology, calls us to radical and total commitment and does not contemplate such loopholes. Either Christ is our All in all or He is nothing. Those who misinterpret the Council and wish to cancel the cross from the Christian faith are wrong; they are equally wrong when, in their quest for liberation, instead of looking for a good*



*spiritual director, they turn to a psychologist, ignoring Christ. Whether we like it or not, the Gospel teaches us that holiness is achieved by following the “via crucis”. Fr. Calabria confirmed the value of this teaching and followed the path of the cross to the peak of Calvary.*

*We do not wish to mislead anyone, and we hope that no one will be scandalized, by accompanying Fr. Calabria in the way of the cross.*

*Fr. Gino Gatto*

## PART ONE

### THE DESIRE FOR HOLINESS

#### *1.a - Introduction*

In these pages, Fr. John Calabria's journey towards holiness is inseparable from his prayer experience. We will therefore stress the fact that every stage of prayer experience corresponds to a stage in the journey towards holiness.

Among the many paths we could travel to highlight the characteristics of Fr. Calabria's holiness, we have chosen his prayer experience for the following reasons.

This choice is the result of an experience: initially, the spiritual life is often buried under a cloud of confusion; one never knows where to begin. To overcome this state of confusion it is absolutely necessary that we undertake a journey of simplicity in order re-establish inner unity. We have already identified his journey of simplicity with prayer.

The choice of simplicity and unity was made initially at an intellectual level, in the expectation that the Lord would grant us these gifts as the process unfolded. Little by little, as we made progress, we were surprised to discover ever more clearly how prayer and personal holiness walk hand in hand.

Fr. John left us a very rich collection of expressions that sum up the spirit of the Opera, but we cannot allow them to remain at a merely doctrinal level. We could speak eloquently of all the characteristics of our charism, such as: "*The Opera will be great as long as it remains simple, it will be rich if it*

*remains poor... like rags, clay, without a head<sup>8</sup>... faith, trust and abandonment... buseta e taneta<sup>9</sup>... ecumenism, Church... expiation and reparation... souls, souls, souls... reach out to the poor... Casante... priests and apostolic brothers... interior life... supernatural atmosphere... living gospels...*” however, it would all be in vain unless we profoundly embrace the content of these values, which must penetrate the deepest levels of our being like the blood that sustains our life. The Founder insisted, in an almost exasperating manner, on the importance of *living the pure and genuine spirit*.

How can we embody the wonderful charism left to us by the Founder? We believe that the best way of interpreting his thoughts and the dynamics of his holiness is: **through prayer**.

Prayer leads us to understand that the Lord is the origin and fulfillment of the pure and genuine spirit (Phil 1:6). As we proceed along the path of prayer, the Lord brings the pure and genuine spirit to fulfillment within us. At every stage of the journey, the Lord enriches us with new values and the price we are asked to pay is the price of the cross, which will always be proportionate to each one’s ability to bear it.

For example, the expression “Living Gospels” can only be fulfilled at the peak of holiness, when we have achieved conformity with Christ, after paying the price of total self-dispossession. The phrases, which Fr. Calabria often repeated,

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<sup>8</sup> This expression means the avoidance of all self-promotion and the submission of self in obedience only to God.

<sup>9</sup> The expression, in the dialect of Verona, is a favorite saying of don Calabria. It means to shun the limelight.

reveal many decisive values which can be fulfilled in our lives only if we opt for holiness, which is akin to saying: we resolve to enter into Prayer, which will purify us and make us like Christ.

Fr. John used to say: *“The Gospel is Jesus”*.

### *I.b – The motive of holiness*

Let us now look at who and what inspired Fr. John to embark on the journey towards holiness.

Fr. Calabria firmly believed that holiness is possible because he totally trusted the God of the impossible (Mk 9:23; 10:27). In our personal conversations, he often encouraged us by saying: *“No defect, no fragility, not even sin, and when we detest it...can slow us down in our journey towards holiness”*.

We will now see how Divine Providence helped Fr. John to embark on the journey towards holiness through his encounter with certain persons and experiences.

The main experience: the Gospel revealed to him the truth that was to become the light of his life: **God is Father and Mother**. In his own written words:

*God is Father, He takes care of us and those who are dear to us; nothing escapes Him and He is always present. He governs over everything by His supreme wisdom, power and kindness. No mother has ever loved a child as much as God loves each and every one of us. His love reaches everywhere, even more and better than the rays of the sun penetrate each blade of grass, or the most distant atom in space. He has even counted the hairs of our head and not even one of them falls to*

*the ground without Him knowing it; the birds of the air that neither sow nor gather stock in barns, are nourished daily by Him; He clothes the lilies of the field in splendor: why then should we fear for ourselves and our dear ones?*

[L. a R. no. 47, Epiphany 1946, p. 215].

This was the light that shone in his mind and filled his heart with zeal; it inspired his faith, trust and abandonment to Divine Providence. It also made him more determined to make the most heroic decisions, it allowed him to know God, himself and others, seeing them as: “Sons of God, redeemed by the blood of Christ and destined for Heaven”. No one, not even the greatest sinner, was to be excluded and everyone was to enjoy **equal dignity**. In order to assert this principle within the Congregation, he waited and suffered for 15 years before the Vatican acknowledged the parity of brothers and priests. The poorest people and cast-offs of society were the jewels in the crown of Fr. Calabria. He embodied the paternal love of God and made it visible through a special abandonment to the Father. Divine mercy shone through him.

Fr. John was such a true incarnation of **God’s mercy that he became its “icon”**. **His burning desire was to manifest this mercy for the whole of eternity.**

Fr. Calabria often used the word “mercy” when he spoke of holiness. This is no mere coincidence because he was convinced that holiness does not consist in perfection (God alone is perfect) but, rather, in mercy. This is the holiness of God (cf. Mt 5:45-48; Lk 6:35-36). Mercy is perfect charity, in other words, holiness.

*[Jesus] is always close to me, he calls me and he loves me: he wants me to become holy.*

[Diary (unpublished) – 28, 8-1-1913]

His response to this call was:

*I want to become holy in spite of the devil. I want to go to Heaven in order to glorify God's mercy for all eternity.*

[Diary – 135, 24-5-1917]

*I do not feel well and my spirits are low. The devil wants me to lose my way by distrust, but I shall not give in! With the grace of the Lord Jesus, I wish to be a sign of God's great mercy in this life and the next. Heaven, Heaven: this is my desire.*

[Diary – 220, 10-10-1918]

*This Opera will survive and spread only if it has neither human support nor protection; we must practice the Gospel to the letter, hidden from everyone, and trusting in God's Divine Providence. Souls, souls: these are our greatest treasure.*

[Diary – 53, 10-11-1914]

*I feel the power of God's merciful love for me and Heaven help me if I do not correspond to it. Dear Lord, it may be too late, but with your grace I wish to meet your expectations and become a great saint, to reach Heaven and bear witness to your great mercy for all eternity.*

[Diary – 397, 28-3-1922]

In the light of God's paternal love, from which he drew his sustenance like a small child, Fr. Calabria knew that it is possible to manifest God's love only by becoming small, as Sacred Scripture says: "*at her breast will her nurslings be carried and fondled in her lap. Like a son comforted by his mother will I comfort you*" (Is 66:12-13); "*enough for me to keep my soul tranquil and quiet like a child in its mother's arms*" (Ps 131:2); "*does a woman forget her baby at the breast, or fail to cherish the son of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you*" See, *I have branded you on the palms of my hands*" (Is 49:15-16).

Fr. Calabria loved evangelical simplicity because the Gospel taught him that we have to become like little children in order to enter kingdom of heaven: "*I tell you solemnly, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*" (Mt 18:2). The little ones entrust themselves totally to the Father and it is essential that we "*become little*", otherwise we shall never be able to live "*the pure and genuine spirit*" of the Opera.

His feelings of being "*zero and misery*", "*good for nothing*" and the least of all: "*...I am nothing more than a poor Custodian and Casante, chosen by God from among the least suitable to carry out great things in order to show more clearly that it is God who does everything here; we are only good at spoiling things*". (L. a R. 11, 24-8-1934, p. 50). Fr. Calabria also shunned anyone who looked upon him "*as a saint*" and he said repeatedly "*those who praise me, scourge me*", revealing just how insignificant he really felt.

This was certainly not a self-mutilation on his part!

This spirit of profound humility and simplicity also has some apparently contradictory manifestations. *“For God’s sake, listen to me and give my words the importance they deserve”* (L. a R. no. 3, 19-3-1933, p.10).

Fr. John knew that he was a sentry, vouching for the pure and genuine spirit, and the criterion for living out the charism of the Opera. When he reached the depths of simplicity, trusting only in the power of Christ (2Cor 12:10), he left his *“buseta e taneta”* and embraced the prophetic mission for the Church and the world, especially through his writings, which were received in Italy and elsewhere as the voice of a prophet. We should not forget his vast correspondence with all categories of persons. This is the humility of Fr. Calabria and it has nothing to do with “masochism”.

He wanted to empty himself so that Jesus might work in him. He was a simple man, aware of his calling to a great mission.

Fr. Calabria was truly a paradox, a paradox that trusted solely and exclusively in the Heavenly Father, in whom he found the strength and audacity to undertake his mission. He was able to instill this total abandonment in his Opera, making it what he called *“the pure and genuine spirit”*:

*...in order to show this almost forgotten characteristic of God, His Divine Providence towards everyone, especially those who abandon themselves to Him and confide in His maternal love; I must confess that I felt my heart breaking, as if the Lord was looking at me sadly and reproachfully, asking me: «Why do you doubt? Is not I who founded this Opera and*



*made it my own special creature? Are the signs I have given you over the years not enough for you? Is my word that guarantees the survival of the Opera not enough for you, when I promise that it will certainly not perish because I want it to continue, I sustain it and everything I do or allow is for its benefit and, if necessary, I will also perform extraordinary miracles in order to save it? Why do you fear times of trial and tribulation? These are necessary and, when you endure them in a spirit of faith, they are like the twilight which makes this Opera of mine, exclusively mine, and shine more brightly. Be calm, therefore, be assured and continue contemplating your nothingness, your misery, and your sins which I have forgiven and which will always be with you to keep you humble. You owe me honor and glory, and remember that I chose the weak and imperfect for my Opera, the things that are not to confound those that are. This Opera, as you know, is great; how often have I told you this and you have repeated it to the Brothers!”»*

*These are the words the Lord seemed to say to me, telling me how great the Opera is and that it has so many plans to fulfill ...*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni (unpublished) – 8090, Pentecost (24-5 1931)]

*I. c – A history of holiness*

### **The starting point**

Fr. Calabria's entire life was an uninterrupted desire for holiness, a desire that he expressed in a motto: "*O santo o morto*".

Fr. Calabria wrote this short but effective formula in his Diary, Mass Register and personal notes and resolutions during spiritual retreats. The motto “*o santo o morto*” appeared in his Diary for the first time on 9 August 1916; its last appearance was on 13 June 1953.

He inculcated this same desire for holiness in everyone, especially his confreres, the Poor Servants, Poor Servants Sisters and the Lay Associates because he was convinced that the Opera’s survival depended entirely on all its members becoming holy.

During a retreat he gave to the Sisters in May 1914, he wrote: “*One of his monks told the revered Fr. Giuseppe that he had become a religious in order to save his soul. His reply to this monk was: “No, my son. You became a religious in order to become holy”.*”

*“Sisters, remember first and foremost that you are here in order to become holy, and heaven help you if you do not do all you can to achieve this goal”.*

[Lettere alle Sorelle <sup>10</sup>(Unpublished) - S34, May 1914]

### **Persons**

Two persons in particular had an important influence on Fr. Calabria’s path to holiness.

In chronological order, the first is Fr. Pietro Scapini, who never had any doubt about the priestly vocation of Fr. John Calabria.

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<sup>10</sup> Henceforth L. a. S.

In purely human terms, there was nothing in him, except a true kindness, which could possibly indicate the presence of an authentic vocation:

a) he was financially poor and therefore unable to sustain the cost of studies and the Seminary fees; we know how much weight this would have carried in those days;

b) his natural shyness made him ill-equipped to deal with certain people and situations;

c) his health was weak: he was always sickly to an extent that might have prevented him from pursuing a vocation to the priesthood;

d) His poor performance in certain subjects in High School and Theology caused him problems in his studies.

Against all hope, and making use of his authority in the Seminary, Fr. Scapini, who was undoubtedly enlightened by God, strenuously defended the authenticity of John Calabria's vocation. He continued this defense until his young protégé was ordained priest.

The second person who exercised a decisive influence was a Carmelite, Fr. Natale di Gesù, who was to mould Fr. John's inner life according to God's plans.

John Calabria met Fr. Natale di Gesù during his military service. The Carmelite priest thereon became his spiritual director and confessor. John opened his heart and entrusted himself to Fr. Natale with such an unconditional obedience that

he was able to say: “*I have never disobeyed my spiritual director*”.

Fr. Natale took the well-disposed young man into his care and fashioned him like clay, accompanying him until he reached his much desired goal:

*My confessor tells me that I must become holy. With the help of God I want to begin. Ego dixi nunc coepi<sup>11</sup>. My God, how many times have I said this! Now, with the grace of God, I say it once again. Yes, oh Lord, o santo o morto. Ego dixi, nunc coepi.*

[Diary – 322, 29-8-1920]

“**Ego dixi, nunc coepi**” was another “motto” that accompanied him throughout his life because he understood that the path to holiness was a journey that had to start over again and again.

*I.d – The signs of the call to holiness*

### **1. The charismatic reading of the Gospel.**

*The charismatic reading of the “Quaerite” Gospel passage (Mt 6:24-34) had a profound effect on his interior life. He did not read this passage as a theologian or exegete, but as a mere child to whom the Lord reveals his mysteries (cf. Mt 11:25ff.).*

He was struck by the paradoxes of the Gospel and how it overturned his way of thinking and acting.

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<sup>11</sup> Another favorite saying of don Calabria, which means: I am so resolved and I begin now”.

His insistence on: living the Gospel “*to the letter*”, “*you either believe or you don’t; if you don’t, it would be better to tear up the Gospel*” (L. a R. no. 32, Lent 1943, p. 129), reveals just how much he had been struck by the Holy Spirit.

He said and wrote:

*I have always been greatly struck by these words of the Gospel whenever I read them during Mass: “That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, or about your body and how you are to clothe it. Look at the birds in the sky. Think of the flowers growing in the fields”. And again: “When I sent you out without purse or haversack or sandals were you short of anything?” They said: No. I realized that the Word of God never changes: it is as true now as it was then. Why did reading these words of the Gospel have such a strong effect on me? My dear brothers, it was because the Lord revealed to me then that we had to abandon ourselves fully and entirely into the loving arms of His Divine Providence”.*

[L. a R. no. 28, 6-2-1942, p. 109]

The “*Quaerite*” was, without any doubt, the decisive factor that convinced Fr. Calabria that only by becoming holy would he be capable of living this Divine Word to the letter:

*Dear Brothers, let us pause for a moment and, following the counsel of Sacred Scripture, let us examine our soul and see how we are living as regards abandonment: let us be assured that God never abandons us, provided we never*

*abandon. Him, that we remain faithful to our steadfast Quaerite project...Does this trust permeate all we do? Of course we will encounter moments of trial because these are inevitable; these too are moments of God's grace. At such times let us turn to every means at our disposal, for they will not fail us, instead of worrying and wallowing in anxiety, ...let us first of all make an examination of conscience and see if we need to remove any obstacle that stands in the way of Divine Providence. **One obstacle could be: not making any progress in the way of perfection. Another obstacle might be: a lack of faith. The greatest obstacle would be sin, the usual tepidness, without any effort at amendment. We must amend at all costs and then turn with faith to the Lord, to Our Lady, to our Saints, who hold perennial offices and with good reason. Let us turn to them, with at least with the same trust we place in human protection and we will experience their effective help.***

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni – 5611, 4-5-1929]

For Fr. Calabria, living the “*Quaerite*” meant, first and foremost, self-sanctification (searching for the kingdom of God in himself), calling the members of the Opera to sanctification, putting himself at the service of the brothers, the poorest of the poor, because they were God's chosen ones.

The “*Quaerite*” therefore became **the rock-solid project** of the Opera, which had to be formed of a great army of saints.

In proposing this to the members of the Opera, Fr. Calabria knew that it was a paradoxical option, impossible to achieve with “willpower” alone. **How can we possibly live in**

**faith, trust and total abandonment to God the Father, with absolute security, in conditions of absolute insecurity?** Fr. John sought insecurity, he wanted no human protection, no capital, and he resolved to go where there is no human reason for hope, making no propaganda, in concealment because he was to trust in God alone.

**Only a great holiness makes it possible to live such a program, which demands that we believe in the Word and its fulfillment without any hesitations.** This was the faith of Mary, which deserved the praise of St. Elizabeth: “*Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled*” (Lk 1:45). Fr. John challenged the Lord, saying: You told us to look for the kingdom of God and I am doing so by becoming holy, in the certainty that you, the faithful One, will accomplish the rest: “*and all these other things will be given you as well*” (Mt 6:33). The Lord never went back on his promise.

**This is the longing for holiness that could never falter on account of personal fragility and misery.**

*Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul: Unfortunately, I have had to humble myself. I humble myself profoundly on account of my misery and, with the Lord's grace and the intercession of the Apostles Peter and Paul, I wish to begin striving for holiness once again and become a perennial monument to the Lord's kindness and mercy.*

[Diary – 489, 29-6-1925]

**The feeling of being loved helped him to overcome all doubts and uncertainty:**

*How wonderful it is to know that we are children of God, that God is our Father and he loves us very much and wants us all to be united for the whole of eternity in his Divine and Holy Family, in Christ; with the help of his Divine grace, which we never lack, it is up to us to live our brief stay here on earth in a Christian manner in order to be eternally holy and happy in Heaven.*

[Registro delle SS. Messe, 15-8-1944]

## **2. A dream**

Fr. John was so struck by an unusual dream that he drew from it one of his dearest mottos: **“zero and misery, a good condition to be in”**.

This is how he described the dream in a letter to the pupils of the Collegio Fr. Bosco in Verona:

*“I want to tell about a dream I had some ten years ago; some of you may already know about it.*

*I think it was in the church of St. Anastasia in Verona. Mass was in progress and Fr. Bosco was preaching. As he was stepping down from the pupil, I approached him said to him: “You do a lot of good; I, instead, am zero and misery”. He took my hands and said to me: “Zero and misery: a good condition, a good condition to be in”.*

*I woke up and called a brother to write the dream down.*



*My dear brothers and sons, this is my dream and I keep it for myself, but it can be applied to everyone. My being zero and nothingness, my misery, is the best thing and I place all my trust in God our Father: upon my misery He will build a monument to His mercy to the glory of His name and the good of souls”.*

[Letter to the “Collegio Fr. Bosco di Verona”

\*5444/a – Verona, 26-5-1934]

The “**zero and misery**” dream revealed to Fr. Calabria that the only sure road to holiness consists in embracing the path of **self-annihilation** in order to reach the **Totality** that is Jesus. Fr. John lived this reality with the conviction that, even as he asked the Lord to grant him the strength to become holy and even if the Lord granted his prayer, he was still “**zero and misery**”, totally dependent therefore on the Lord.

I would like to remember here an image of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, which I will try to interpret in order to make his thought clearer. She says, more or less: “I thought I could see a stairway, at the top of which Jesus was standing and He invited me to join Him; I repeatedly tried to lift my foot, but without success; all my efforts to do so were in vain. I then begged Jesus to give me the strength to climb the stairs but, in spite of all my begging, I was stuck in the same place. I shouted even more: “Jesus, I cannot do it, please give me your strength”. After this entreaty, which expressed my utter inability, the Lord came down, took me in His arms and carried me to the top of the stairs. Once we reached the top, I realized

that I still did not have any strength. This was to ensure that I did not glorify myself, recognizing instead that all the work being done within me was entirely his”.

This image also reveals the soul of Fr. Calabria who, in his profound humility, recognized that holiness is a gift; in his nothingness he was to make himself available to the Lord, recognizing Him as the Author and Agent of holiness (cf. Phil 1:6).

### *3. The priestly vocation.*

John Calabria felt that he was called to be a priest since his childhood. He often used to say: “*My vocation to the priesthood was born with me*”. As radical as he was in everything he did, he surely was convinced even as a small boy that being a priest meant becoming holy. His familiarity with truly exemplary priests also helped Calabria to grow in his conviction.

### *4. A sign of the future mission.*

“*One winter evening, the Lord gave me a clear sign when I met a poor abandoned child, of about five years old, on the doorstep of my house. I took him inside and gave him my bed*”<sup>12</sup>.

[Memorandum – 7027, September 1933]

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<sup>12</sup> Don Calabria showed his concern for the child by watching over him the entire night, seated on a chair in the room whilst the child slept.

He interpreted this episode as a sign that he was to become holy by serving orphans, the abandoned and the least of all.

There is no written evidence of Fr. John's interior life in the period from 1895 (when he met Fr. Natale di Gesù) until 1911 (when he began his diary); consequently, we do not know how he lived the beginning of his journey towards holiness, but he had undoubtedly even then caught a glimpse of his final goal: his transforming union with Christ.

Since a Carmelite was his spiritual director, there is no doubt that he was initiated in the path of holiness along the lines followed by the great Carmelite mystics: St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Avila and the now proclaimed Doctor of the Church, St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, to whom he was especially devoted on account of her great humility.

A letter to Cardinal Adeodato John Piazza (already mentioned in the preface), dated Christmas 1952, confirms this conviction.

### *I. e –The firm resolve to holiness*

The starting point was his **great desire to be a saint** and the firm unshakeable certainty that the Lord would make him holy. Even though we have nothing written on the early period of Fr. Calabria's life, the desire to reach great holiness accompanied him throughout his entire life, as his following writings confirm:

*I want to become a great saint; my great sins will serve as solid foundation for my humility. I begin today.*

[Diary – 20, 4-6-1912]

His “*great sins*” became for him a school of humility, virtue and the foundation of holiness.

*I must begin once and for all to reciprocate. Lord Jesus, Holy Mother Mary, help this poor sinner in his desire to become a saint.*

[Diary – 57, 17-5-1915]

*Trusting in God's great mercy, I pray for the forgiveness of all my sins and the grace to become a great saint.*

[Diary – 254, 13-6-1919]

This is how he expressed his firm proposal to achieve holiness:

*Enough of sin: I prefer any form of death to committing a single deliberate venial sin.*

[Diary, 138, 15-6-1917]

*Enough of sin, enough of ingratitude: o santo, grande santo! o morto.*

[Note e Propositi fatti negli Esercizi Spirituali – 2317, 1-10-1915]

*For several days now I have been experiencing more than ever the Lord's loving mercy. I trust in Divine help that I may reciprocate and arrive at death's door without ever committing another deliberate sin. Holy Mary, pray for me. Ego dixi, nunc coepi. O santo o morto.*

[Diary 459, 14-7-1924]

*My God, how many are the graces and mercies I have received. Heaven help us if we do not reciprocate. Lord: o santo o morto. Lord Jesus, I desire with the help of your grace a true conversion for me.*

[Diary – 242, 6-4-1919]

In his desire to become a great saint, Fr. Calabria was aware that he could never do so by his own strength. He was in perfect agreement with St. Theresa of the Child Jesus when she said: “...I desire to be a saint, but I experience my own inability and ask you, my God, to be my holiness” (Act of offering to the Merciful Love of God). Fr. Calabria added:

*I experience the full extent of my great misery. Only the great mercy and kindness of Jesus comfort and sustain me. I trust myself entirely on Him. I have placed my hope in you, O Lord, may I not remain confounded forever. O santo o morto.* Either a saint or death.

[Diary – 442, 12-3-1924]

*When I consider my misery and the never ending graces and blessings I have received from the Lord, I experience the*

*full extent of my embarrassment and shame for my unceasing ingratitude and lack of response; however, when I consider His infinite kindness and mercy, especially towards my poor soul, my spirits revive and I put all my trust in Him and, once again with His Divine help I say: Ego dixi, nunc coepi. O santo o morto.*

[Diary – 443, 22-3-1924]

*O santo o morto! How many times, Lord, have I made this resolution; unfortunately I have always failed. This time, with the help of your grace, I hope to succeed.*

[Diary – 374, 30-10-1921]

The experience of his misery never caused Fr. John to give in to discouragement. He always kept alive his only important desire: to become a great saint, abandoning himself to the loving arms of the divine mercy of the Lord, who continually and gratuitously bestowed upon him the necessary gifts for becoming a saint.

*My God, how many gifts, graces and mercies you have given me, while on my part there is only great misery! I humble myself and abandon myself to your divine mercy: o santo o morto, this is my desire for what is left of my poor life.*

[Diary – 1458, 8-8-1943]

*Time flies and death is drawing very near; unfortunately, the many graces I have received from God and my own ingratitude weigh heavily upon me. Lord, have pity on*

*my poor soul. Your great mercy sustains me, consoles me and leads me to say once again: With the help of your grace I desire to become a saint.*

[Diary – 334, 1-11-1920]

*Today is the last day of the retreat and, with the grace of God, I hope it will be the first day of my true sanctification. Lord, o santo o morto.*

[Diary – 369, 26-9-1921]

*The whole night and day until 3.30 pm was terrible. God alone knows how I suffered. There is no doubt that I am the most miserable of miserable men. Nevertheless, precisely because I am so miserable, I strongly desire, with the Lord's help, to trust in his great kindness and mercy and become a saint. With God's help, and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and my saintly advocates, I renew all my resolutions and say yet again: o santo o morto. I also promise to begin observing the timetable faithfully.*

(Diary – 395, 11-3-1922)

*God in His great mercy has brought me to a new year; I hope that it marks the year of my sanctification and helps me to become more worthy to face the great judgment.*

(Diary – 423, 19-1-1923)

*By the grace of God, today I begin my Diary after neglecting it for several months. Please God that I, beginning from this moment and until the last day of my life, become*

*entirely His and, as a Christian and a priest, live as an instrument of this great Opera of the Lord. Until now, unfortunately, I have been more able with words whilst in my behavior there have been so many sins and such great misery. O Lord, be always merciful and grant me the grace, at least from this day forward, of making reparation for the past making a new beginning for my true sanctification. Ego dixi, nunc coepi.*

[Diary – 436, 19-2-1924]

No hostile force ever deterred Fr. Calabria from his commitment to saintliness:

*I am a poor, wretched man. I offer my poverty and misery to the Lord and I hope he will accept them wrapped in my great self-humiliation. I made my confession today and my spiritual director told me that I must sanctify myself in an extraordinary way because the Lord loves me so much. Dear Lord, o santo o morto.*

[Diary – 475, 2-2-1925]

Fr. John interprets Satan's "furious" attacks against him as a necessary purification for the sanctification of his poor soul:

*A great day of celebration for my soul, remembering the great grace of Baptism bestowed upon me by the Lord 78 years ago. How many graces and how much mercy He has shown me in all these long years, and how poor has been my response. I spent today on retreat to thank the Lord and, with His help,*



*renew my good intentions. Satan is furious: he makes a fire from a small spark and builds a mountain from a grain of sand. He uses anything to attack this poor casante but, with the grace of God, intuitu operae (in view of the Opera's welfare), it all contributes to the purification and sanctification of my poor soul. O santo o morto.*

[Diary – 1922, 1-11-1951]

*Lord, listen to my humble prayer through the intercession of your dear Mother, the Immaculate Virgin Mary: Parce mihi Domine; loquere, Domine (Have mercy on me, Lord; speak, Lord) your servant is listening to you. A great Opera, great sufferings and, through God's mercy, a great reward. Lord, grant me the gift of perseverance. O santo o morto.*

[Diary – 1944, 8-12-1951]

### *I. f – A universal proposal of holiness*

Two elements enlighten the spiritual path of every Christian (after a brief mention here, this topic will be developed further in the second part of the book).

The first element is the knowledge of God, the second is self-knowledge.

At an intellectual level, the knowledge of God enlightens us on the mystery of His love which led Him to dwell within us (cf. Jn. 14:23). He gave us this gift, pouring the Holy Spirit into our hearts (Rom 5:5); loving us first (1Jn 4:19) and giving us a share in His divine nature (2Pt 1:4) so that we

may love Him as He loves and become His friends (Jn 15:14). This is the prior love of God that moves our will to a loving dialogue with him.

Self-knowledge, as the dearest children of His love, called to the highest peaks of holiness: contemplation and transforming union with Him.

Besides the faith-inspired knowledge of these great and nobles realities, the experience of God's infinite love also leads us to the knowledge of our own misery and fragility, without causing humiliation and discouragement, which would happen if our self-knowledge were to be restricted to a merely psychological level.

God loves me as I am because His Love is gratuitous.

These two elements, an unshakeable faith in God the Father and the awareness of his own misery, were always present in the writings of Fr. John when he contemplated the goal of holiness. His resolution was not abstract; it was rooted in the love and fatherhood of God, which are at the same time the cause of, and the means to, achieve holiness.

Pain, suffering and tribulation had an important role in the project of Fr. John: they were not only a means of expiation of sin, but also the means adopted by the Lord in order to fulfill His plan of holiness. This is the price that must be paid, a price sustained by His grace, a price whose payment is given freely by the Lord Himself.

*I am unwell; my health is continually troubled in body and spirit. Every so often there is a small ray of sunshine and then profound darkness. I accept all this suffering as penance*

*for my sins, putting my trust entirely in the Lord's great mercy; I pray to Him always and hope to go to Heaven and glorify him forever.*

[Diary – 233, 5-1-1919]

Fr. John interpreted his trials as gifts which the Lord, in His kindness, bestowed upon him in order that he might offer himself entirely to Him:

*How many trials and tribulations, both physical and spiritual suffering I face. This is the result of the great kindness and mercy of God, who is always urging me through these sufferings to give myself entirely to Him as a Christian and as a priest. Lord, you know the abysmal depths of my great misery, my grave sins and my unending ingratitude. If only this were the day, the hour of my true and lasting conversion. Dear Lord I renew all the resolutions I have made so many times during my life and I entrust myself entirely to you. Under the protection of my Heavenly Mother, the Immaculate Virgin Mary, and through the intercession of my saintly Advocates, I promise to strive sincerely to become entirely yours. I don't know how much more time your great mercy will allow me to live here on earth, but may it all be yours, for your greater glory and for my poor soul, dear Lord. Ego dixi, nunc coepi.*

[Diary – 345, 25-1-1921]

His trials and tribulations shaped his apostolic character:

*Just as Jesus used to instruct, correct and form the apostolic character of his Apostles, so today He is fortifying and forming the character of this poor sinner. How good the Lord is! He tells me that I am a son of God, that God is my Father, that my Heavenly Father wants me to be among the blessed in Heaven, and that I am in the world solely for this purpose. The things of this earth, worldly goods and earthly ills are all dona Dei (gifts of God); it is up to me to make them bear fruit for eternal life. The only thing I must fear is sin because it distances me from my Heavenly Father: the rest does not matter. Lord, thanks to your grace I now begin to understand my great destiny. I detest all my sins and I propose to love you sincerely and through your love to be available for all.*

[Notes and resolutions made on the annual retreat.–  
2322, 24-9-1929, evening]

His poverty and misery encouraged him to trust God more:

*I have suffered greatly both physically and spiritually. As I write, my sufferings continue though they have subsided somewhat. How painful it is to be misunderstood! May this serve to expiate my sins, contribute to God's Opera and obtain for me grace and mercy to prepare for the great and approaching call to judgment. I have made my ordinary confession. I am so poor and miserable. I confide entirely in God the good and merciful Father. O santo o morto.*

[Diary – 1699, 20-6-1947]

The Lord looked favorably upon him in his trials:

*This morning I managed to celebrate Holy Mass only with God's special help and grace. Deo gratias. What does the Lord want from me? How many trials, how much misery! Nevertheless, so my spiritual director tells me, the Lord looks favorably upon me in my suffering. O santo o morto. Lord, have pity on me.*

[Diary – 2000, 20-12-1952]

Fr. John never gave in to pessimism and discouragement even in the face of the great evils and miseries afflicting the world; instead, he was convinced that sanctity was the only answer to these problems.

On 3 April 1914 he wrote to Fr. Luigi Pedrollo: *“These are very bad times; people are saying that there is no solution but this is false, false, false; a reliable and infallible solution exists: we need priests who live according to the Heart of Jesus, the Gospel”*.

*There is much talk of a “new order” and we must feel the need to give our own contribution too. Nevertheless, my dear brothers, let us remember that today, as in the past, only the Saints can bring about a true new order. We must strive for this goal as Christians, as religious of this very great Opera; as I have told you on so many occasions, the Lord has great plans for the Opera, and he will fulfill them on the sole*

*condition that we become saints, return to the pure and genuine source of the Gospel and do not place obstacles in his path ...*

[L. a R., no. 25, Christmas 1940, p. 96]

*My dear sons, there is one thing you must always bear in mind, and in a special way at the present time in which Satan is causing so much strife, the ruin of souls and plunging the human race into the most profound misery because it has abandoned God: only truly holy priests, ministers of God, living a holy life, can save humanity from its fate and raise it up again. We need holy priests!*

[Conference and exhortations – 5661, 11-2-1946]

*I. g – The present hour, the hour of holiness*

*The present time calls for great solutions because it is afflicted by great evils. The only solution consists in returning to the genuine source of the Gospel and that we Religious and Priests become other Christ.*

[Conference and exhortations – 2279, undated]

*My most beloved brothers, there is a great need for holiness. These are terrible times, but this is the Lord's hour. We, priests and religious, are the ones who must bear Jesus and make Him known, especially at this hour of need. It is time for holiness, not discussions or theories; it is time we put into practice what we believe, my dear brothers.*

[Audio recording “Voce che grida” – 1951]

*Unfortunately, we adopt the wrong tactics: we do not think of our own sanctification and it is upon this alone that the salvation of souls depends. This was the praxis of Jesus and the Saints.*

[L. a R. no. 43, 7-6-1943, p. 191]

In these pages we have outlined Fr. Calabria's strategy for holiness; we have caught a glimpse of his inner life and have seen in him a man whose heart was on fire with the love of God. By placing his entire trust in this love, it became his own ideal of life.

### **To become a great saint**

Fr. Calabria was convinced that if one as wretched as himself, the least of all and "the greatest sinner", were to become a saint, this would serve as an incentive to all to do likewise, convincing them that holiness was possible. He truly became a flag carrier for the cause of holiness, inviting all of us to follow him along this path because the Opera, so small but enriched by the holiness of its members, was to fulfill the great designs of the present hour.

His *zero and misery* and his *total availability* were the foundation of his acceptance of God's plan of holiness upon him. It was also the advance acceptance of the accomplishment of the project, living out in extreme simplicity the life the Lord was giving him day after day in the service of the least of men.

## PART TWO

### THE WAY OF PRAYER

The reader may be surprised that, after dedicating part one to discovering the secrets of Fr. Calabria's holiness, we now shift suddenly to the question of prayer.

How often we hear people speak of sanctification, how often we are told to "become saints", "the Opera needs saints", "the Lord needs saints in order to save the world". Nevertheless, these exhortations run the risk of ending up as mere pious desires or, at best, good resolutions made during "Spiritual retreats".

A sure path towards true holiness is urgently needed and we believe that this consists in the way of prayer, along the same lines as those experienced by the great mystics.

St. John of the Cross says without hesitation: "**Anyone who resolutely takes up the way of prayer and perseveres will surely reach the high peaks of holiness**". Fr. John believed him and lived these words faithfully.

We begin our journey "bearing in mind that the Author and the Agent" of holiness is Jesus; he is also the model and master of prayer. All the others have our respect, but they cannot guarantee that we will reach the peak of prayer: only the prayer lived out by Jesus, the prayer that he taught us, can do so.



Let us now cross the threshold of his school of prayer.

## *II. a – Jesus, model and master of prayer*

### II.a.1 – The path of prayer taught to us by Jesus

Jesus is *the way, the truth and the life* (Jn 14:6) but he must also be our goal. When St. Theresa was asked to give an account of her life, she wrote down the history of her prayer life. In the “Way to perfection”, she began to speak about prayer, but immediately shifted her attention to her concrete life experience and the practice of the virtues of poverty, humility, detachment and fraternity. Prayer must therefore be understood as being strictly bound to concrete life in continual conformity to the life of Christ and animated exclusively by love.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the spiritual life quickly cools unless it is nourished by times dedicated exclusively to prayer, since only in prayer can the Holy Spirit descend into our hearts, to live in us the radical following of Christ. This truth is revealed in Jesus’ earthly life.

### II.a.2 - Looking to Jesus

Let us consider the thirty years of Jesus’ life in Nazareth and the forty days he spent in the desert praying and fasting. The Gospels bear witness to his intense life of prayer: “*Now when all the people had been baptized and while Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer, heaven opened*” (Lk 3:21); “*In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left*

*the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there”* (Mk 1:35). Jesus spent entire nights in prayer: *“he went out into the hills to pray and he spent the whole night in prayer to God”* (Lk 6:12). *“Jesus was praying alone in the presence of his disciples”* (Lk 9:18). *“I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail”* (Lk 22:31). He prayed in the Upper Room during the Last Supper: this is his longest prayer of petition to the Father, for himself, the disciples, for those who would come to believe in him and for the Church, *“ut unum sint”* (may they be one) (Jn 17).

The most moving and eloquent scene of Jesus at prayer takes place in the garden of Gethsemane. *“And going on a little further he fell on his face and prayed: “My Father”, he said “if it is possible, let this cup pass me by; Nevertheless, let it be as you, not I, would have it.” He came back to the disciples and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “So you had not the strength to keep awake with me one hour? You should be awake, and praying not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”. Again, a second time, he went away and prayed: “My Father,” he said, “if this cup cannot pass me by without my drinking it, your will be done!” And he came back again and found them sleeping, their eyes were so heavy. Leaving them there, he went away again and prayed for the third time, repeating the same words”*. (Mt 26: 39-44).

In this intense prayer of combat (agony) the will of Jesus, truly human like us, became one with the will of the Father. This is the ultimate goal of prayer: uniformity with the will of God.

Jesus also prays on the cross: “*Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing*” (Lk 23:34). Then, in the words of the psalmist, he prays: “*My God, my God, why have you deserted me?*” (Ps 22).

In the journey to holiness, good will is important (as we will see when we examine the way of active purification), but it must be integrated with faith in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the words of Fr. Calabria:

*In our apostolate let us act as Jesus did: let us attend, first of all and above all, to prayer and a life of union with God. How many hours and how many nights Jesus spent in prayer, in intimate communion with his heavenly Father! External activity is doomed to remain sterile unless it is rooted in the sacred and fertile terrain of the interior life.*

(L. a R. no.88, Verona, Saturday 23-10-1954, p. 426).

The Gospel mentions a questions asked by the disciples of Jesus: “*Now once he was in a certain place praying, and when he had finished one of his disciples said, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples”* (Lk 11:1).

We must cry out to the Lord with this entreaty: “**Jesus, teach me to pray**”.

There are many teachings of Jesus on prayer: the prayer that cries out (Mk 10:47), continual prayer (Lk 18:1), humble prayer (Lk 18:13), prayer made in his name (Jn 14:13);

nocturnal prayer (Lk 11: 5-8); prayer at the lake (Mt 8: 25); Peter's plea as he sank beneath the water (Mt 14:30).

Prayer is a gift that the Lord offers to all because it is the great means of salvation. However, we must ask persistently for this gift and strive to create the necessary conditions for living a life of prayer. "*Ask and it will be given to you...*" (Lk 11:9).

Anyone who resolves to travel the road to holiness must ask tirelessly for the gift of prayer because it is the means established by God for reaching the goal of sanctity.

## *II. b – The fundamental elements of prayer*

### **II.b.1 - Introduction**

It must be said immediately that prayer is not easy. What happened to the blind man on the way to Jericho can happen to us: "*He began to shout and to say, 'Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me'. Many however scolded him and told him to keep quiet*" (Mk 10:46-47). The same thing can happen when we begin prayer; many voices rise up within us and try to silence us and force us to abandon prayer.

It is not a mere coincidence that St. Paul calls prayer a "struggle": "*I beg you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of the Spirit, to help me through my dangers by praying to God for me*" (Rm 15: 30). And again: "Epaphras never ceases fighting for you in his prayers". In the Old Testament, Genesis narrates Jacob's nocturnal struggle with God at the ford of the Jabbok (Gn 32: 23-33) where, after a

long fight, he ends up with a dislocated thigh bone and is given a new name: Israel, which means “strong against God”. The most eloquent struggles are those sustained by Jesus in prayer, first of all during the forty days in the desert, where the devil tried everything to turn him away from the messianic mission of the suffering servant of Yahweh (Mt 4:1-11), and the other final battle, called the “agony” (combat) in the garden of Gethsemane, where he struggles against his human nature, which was overcome by fear and anguish (Mk 14:32) in the face of imminent death, until he succeeded in conforming his will to that of the Father.

When they were going to pray, the desert fathers used to say: “Let us go into battle”.

Combat and conflict are the terms used by Sacred Scripture to remind us that prayer has many enemies: the first among them is the devil who, when he succeeds in dissuading someone from prayer, makes that person his own.

*My dear sons and brothers, let us pray well, with faith and inner and external attention. We can be sure that Satan, when he sees a person is striving to pray well, will tempt him in thousands of ways; do not fear; let us fight and, if he comes back to tempt us 100 times, we will turn our mind to God 100 times.*

[Thoughts – Maxims – Sayings – 4186, 23-1-1920]

There is a reason why few people pray in such a way as to reach holiness. Too many people are satisfied with the so-

called “devotional practices”, but there is an abyss between these and authentic prayer.

It is vitally important that we discover, with the power of the Holy Spirit, the authentic prayer that walks hand in hand with holiness.

This book deals with this kind of prayer and, therefore, some truths about prayer need to be clarified.

### **II.b.2 - What prayer is**

*Prayer means to abandon oneself to God’s Love and plunging into his will.*

Fr. John thus described his experience:

*I wish to live and die in God’s holy love and then sink into this divine love for all eternity.*

[Note e Propositi fatti negli Esercizi Spirituali – 2323, 1-10-1922]

*I throw myself completely into the immense sea of your mercy.*

[Note e Propositi fatti negli Esercizi Spirituali – 2317, 1-10-1915]

*Dear Lord, I throw myself entirely into your love ...*

[Diary – 114, 16-01-1917]

It is not simply a matter of turning to the Lord with entreaties, thanksgiving, petitions for the forgiveness of our sins, or pious devotions. It is more about **beginning a journey that will lead us to identification with Christ** (Rm 8:29). As we shall see, prayer is a journey.

St. Paul describes this experience in these words: “*and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first-fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free*” (Rm 8:23).

In the words of Fr. Calabria:

*Let us remember, my brothers, that if we do not conform our lives to Christ, by practicing his law and living the same virtues he commanded us to live, we cannot participate in his glory; we cannot, once our mortal life is over, go to Heaven. Jesus has ascended into his glory through virtue, suffering, tribulations and the cross and this is also our way to Heaven, the only way. Let us think about this carefully and, at this moment, let us ask God for the grace to truly understand this warning.*

*We must bear in mind that it is not the one who says “Lord, Lord” who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the one who does the Lord’s will, as Sacred Scripture clearly says: “Voluntas Dei, sanctificatio vestra” (the will of God is your sanctification): We are here to sanctify ourselves, and we, as Catholic Christians, have the necessary means in abundance: we enjoy continual graces, we breathe grace within this holy ark that is our “holy Mother Church”, which is unceasingly*

*guided by the Holy Spirit, who speaks to us, counsels and exhorts us through the Supreme Pontiff, our Pope.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni – 1352, Undated]

We have already said that spiritual teachers maintain that prayer life and the road to holiness walk hand in hand: every stage of progress in prayer corresponds to a stage of progress in the journey towards holiness. When the Lord grants the gift of prayer he simultaneously grants the gift of holiness. Anyone who embarks on the road to holiness must ask unceasingly for the gift of prayer. In short, to speak of the path to prayer is the same as speaking of the road to holiness.

Holiness is reached in the perfection of love and prayer is the place where we live love; from stage to stage, we advance in love until we reach its summit.

Love has been God's design from the very beginning: God created man in his image and likeness. **God is love! And man, the image and likeness of God, is love.**

This is the vocation that man has received from God: he must fulfill himself and find happiness in loving and in being loved. The love received by man from the beginning was of the same nature as God's love and it is, therefore, free from all contamination, gratuitous and universal. However, sin then entered the scene and man lost God's love, though his nostalgia for love survived. Often, because of his fragility and the deceptions of the world, man confuses authentic love with the pleasures of the flesh.

Jesus came to give us back the love we had lost and he wanted this love to be the sole object of our quest. He gave us



his Commandment: “*You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength...you shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (Mt 22:37). He then completed it by saying, “*I give you a new commandment: love one another, just as I have loved you*” (Jn 13:34). The disciple of Jesus fulfills his humanity by living this love and, responding to his call, achieves the holiness that is “perfect charity”.

*Brothers, the secret of being totally available, of being like clay, without willpower, lies in the fire of God’s love. Why does a certain Brother obey reluctantly, refuse to observe the rules, grumble and fail to exercise patience ...? It is because his heart is not on fire with the love of God! You know, my brothers, that iron must be placed in the fire and be struck into shape by the blows of a hammer. In the same way, let us endure patiently all the trials that the Lord sends us, for the blows of the hammer are to no avail if the iron is not hot.*

*In order that our trials may be of benefit to us, we must allow God’s love to set our heart on fire. Let us always remember that if the Lord’s love does not set our heart on fire, everything will seem difficult and unbearable; our soul will be incapable of bending to anything, no matter how small, but with the love of God in our hearts everything will become easy, gentle, mild ...*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni – 4135, 10-12-1913, Monthly Retreat to the Brothers]

When St. Theresa of the Child Jesus used to say “*love is my vocation*”, she was asserting a truth that each one of us should repeat for his own benefit. The path of prayer aims at leading man back to his first love; obviously, given the traces of sin within man, this process comes about through purification. This was how the mystics understood man’s situation. Purification consists of two phases, **active purification** and **passive purification**. This process was truly fulfilled in the life of Fr. Calabria and he paid a very high price for it, in being called to a high degree of holiness and a great mission within the Church.

To live one’s own vocation in love is to restore simplicity and unity to the entire spiritual life. These virtues free us from the confusion we often find ourselves in when we fail to understand that Christian life is essentially about love. Prayer is the place where we reach the goal of simplicity and unity in love.

II.b.3 – Prayer is a dialogue of love between God and the one who prays.

The Second Vatican Council states: “*The most sublime aspect of human dignity consists in his vocation to communion with God. From his birth man is invited to a dialogue with God*” (GS).

Christian prayer is essentially a participation in the sublime dialogue between the Son and the Father in love and in communion with the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is a dialogue between two persons. It is therefore necessary that God becomes present and a real partner in dialogue, visible only to the eyes of faith, and the conscious participation of the one who prays.

Moses is undoubtedly an eloquent example of prayer, as Scripture says: “*Yahweh would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend*” (Ex 33:11).

Anyone who lives out the vocation that God has given to man makes love his paradigm and he measures himself unceasingly against it: “*Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence*” (Eph 1:4).

St. Theresa of Avila used to say: “*Prayer is not about thinking a lot but about loving intensely*”.

Does my heart palpitate with love? Are my thoughts enlightened by love? Are my desires oriented towards love? Is my will oriented to love? Are all my choices determined by love?

Where can we find love?

We learn to love in prayer, which is the dialogue of love. How good the Lord is to us by calling us to a dialogue of love with Him!

I often recall the moments of prayer I experienced with Fr. John, reciting the *breviary* with him and others in the choir and in his study. Afterwards, he would speak to me about prayer and point out to me the conditions for praying well.

I shall present them briefly and then develop them in greater depth.

## II.b.4 – The essential elements of prayer

### 1) **The threshold of prayer**

We enter into prayer through:

- I) the presence of God
  - II) Exterior and interior silence
  - III) Attitude of profound humility

### 2) **The heart of prayer**

- I) The intellect, or meditation on God's love
  - II) The will, or dialogue of love

Fr. John's prayer was very simple. He said that he continued to pray throughout his life as he was taught in nursery school.

*I tell you in confidence that even today I say the prayers that my nursery school teacher taught me: the good seed produces good fruits.*

[Lettere personali ai laici – 9639, Palm Sunday, 30 March 1952].

I well remember the evening prayers we said with him: they were indeed the prayers taught in nursery school.

## **II. c - A closer examination of the elements necessary for prayer**

### II.c.1 - The threshold of prayer

We enter into prayer by recognizing:

II.c.1.a - The presence of God

The presence of God cannot be improvised at the moment of prayer: it is something we must cultivate throughout the entire day. During work and our various other occupations, we must pray constantly for the gift of living always in the presence of God.

*As soon as we open our eyes in the morning, we should make an act of faith in God's presence, an act of love, a promise to dedicate the entire day to Him and, from that moment, let us ensure that all our actions of the day are offered to God.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni – 5617/B, 26-9-1911]

Sacred Scripture says: *“I shall gaze my fill on your likeness”* (Ps 17:15); *“My heart has said of you, seek his face”* (Ps 27:8); *“Look to Him and you shall be radiant”* (Ps 34:6); *“Bear yourself blameless in my presence”* (Gen 17:1). *“The Lord is close to all who invoke him, to those who seek him with a sincere heart”* (Ps 145:18).

First of all, it must be said that, in prayer, it is always God who takes the initiative to become present. *“If you search for God it is because he has already searched for you”* (St. Augustine); therefore, we must ask him to grant us this gift: *“My soul is thirsting for you”* (Ps 62:2). God is present in various ways: in creation (presence of immensity). The existence of the cosmos points to the pre-existence of a wise

and provident creator, who keeps it in being. Man's "ratio" can discover this active presence of God (Rm 1:19). "Fides" goes even further and discovers his presence in the Sacraments, especially in the Eucharist, the Church, his ministers, the brothers and in the community gathered in his name.

There is also a very personal presence in the spirit of man, sanctified by His grace, which can lead to intimacy and communion. "*If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home with him*" (Jn 14:23); "*With me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one*" (Jn 17:23); "*I am the vine, you are the branches*" (Jn 15:5). To say nothing of Paul's often repeated expression "in Christ Jesus". This is the Trinity in us, making us "*living temples of God*" (1Cor 6:20).

Fr. John lived this intimate relationship with the Lord intensely. Being close to him, I could see him absorbed in silent prayer: it was easy to perceive that in those moments he was in dialogue with the Lord!

*I recommend the spiritual life to you, the life of intimate union with God; do not forget that the fruitfulness of our activities and sanctification depend on this alone: "Whoever remains in me. With me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing".*

[L. a R. no. 69, Verona, 1-7-1951, p. 321]

*Let us therefore give pride of place to the spiritual life; let us remain closely and intimately united to Jesus Christ through the spirit of prayer, with a fervent love that makes us*

*think always of Him and ask Him for His help, which indispensable for the fruitfulness of our apostolate.*

[L. a R. no 81, Verona, 21-7-1953, p. 398]

St. John of the Cross says: “*What more do you want, my soul, and why do you search outside yourself when you possess inner riches, delights, satisfaction, abundance and your kingdom, in other words: the Loved One that you long for?*” (Canticle 1:8).

### **Where is God’s hidden presence? In me!**

Speaking in the name of God, Isaiah says: “*With heaven my throne and earth my footstool, what house could you build me, what place could you make for my rest? All of this was made by my hand and all of this is mine – it is the Lord who speaks. But my eyes are drawn to the man of humbled and contrite spirit*” (Is 66: 1-2).

This is the greatest grace we can receive. The discovery of God’s presence in our innermost heart satisfies the great thirst of our soul. After his conversion, St. Augustine searched for God everywhere, in creation, in beauty, in people...One day he had a sudden inspiration: “Why are you looking for me outside yourself, don’t you know that I am in the most intimate part of your innermost self?” This experience marked the beginning of his full communion with God. We can also use images to help us envisage God’s presence (Fr. John used his crucifix).

*Here, at the feet of my Crucifix, I reflect on the modern world; I have the impression that we are on the threshold of something special.*

[\*Memorandum to Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster – 8375, 23-6-1951]

I am in front of my crucifix as I write this humble letter to you in the name of God, to tell you that Jesus, the only Lord of the Opera, has given us his divine approval, through the Holy See, granting our Congregation the “Decretum laudis”.

[Lettera ai Fratelli Esterni – 7092, August 1949]

Even more the Lord’s presence in the Eucharist, (one day, when I was in the choir, Fr. John came in, called me and took my hand; he pointed to the tabernacle and said to me: “Jesus is there, living and active”. This episode made a great impression on me and I have never forgotten it).

Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity wrote: “*Dear Jesus, I can receive you every day and then, from one communion to the next, I can live united to you. This intimacy is heaven on earth*” (Letters).

A useful suggestion recommends beginning prayer with the slow repetition of a name, for example: Father...Jesus..., asking the Holy Spirit to “...*help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words*” (Rm 8:26). The Lord will respond to this simple petition and make himself present.



### II.c.1.b – Outer and inner silence

The second absolutely necessary condition for entering into prayer is silence: outer silence, in a place where we shall not be disturbed by noise or anything else. Above all, however, inner silence is necessary. This is more difficult to achieve because we have to deal with distractions, both voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary distractions can be rejected through the strength of willpower. The task of dealing with involuntary distractions is difficult for everyone, especially those who have a lively imagination. We must therefore learn to dominate imagination with imagination itself. This can be done by creating with our imagination some Gospel scenes, or by concentration on some holy image or on the Tabernacle, whenever distractions assail us. The value of silence reminds me of the mystical experience of Elijah on Mount Horeb, which confirms the fact that our God is the God of silence. God was not in the wind, or the earthquake or in the fire but “*in the sound of a gentle breeze*” (1Kings 19:12).

*The Lord speaks in silence. Excessive talk empties the soul; remember the admonition of the Holy Spirit: “There is a time for keeping silent and a time for speaking”.*

[L. a R. no. 33, 8-12-1943, pp. 135-136]

The Lord will speak to your hearts in silence as he has never spoken before: it is something divine.

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni – 1359, undated]

Silence invites us to transform our innermost life into a refuge where we can be alone with God. This is the basic assumption. Silence favors intimacy with the One we have chosen as our one and only Lord.

### II.c.1.c- *Humility*

The third condition for prayer is that we present ourselves before God with an attitude of humility, like the publican in the parable who left the temple justified in the sight of God (Lk 18:13). God welcomes and fulfills the prayer of the humble. Before entering into prayer, our brothers of the Eastern Church spend a good deal of time repeating what they call the Jesus prayer: *“Lord Jesus, have pity on me, a poor sinner”*. St. Theresa of Avila recommends the recitation of the *Confiteor* before entering into prayer. She says: *“prayer must be built upon a foundation of humility; the more a soul humbles itself in prayer, the more does God exalt it”* (Autobiography).

One who prays is like a beggar, aware of his nothingness and worthlessness, thereby fulfilling the Word: *“Cut off from me you can do nothing”* (Jn 15:5). How often did the Founder repeat: *“Remember that nothing means nothing”*. After the famous Don. Bosco dream, Fr. John entered into prayer by placing his zero and misery into God’s hands.

*In truth, prayer is man’s humility in the recognition of his profound misery and the infinite greatness of the One he adores and implores, depending entirely on God and expecting*

*nothing from himself. Faith is humility of the intellect, which denies its own judgments in order to bow before the judgments of God and the authority of his Church. Obedience is humility of the will, which submits to a will that is not its own. Chastity is humility of the flesh, which submits to the spirit. External mortification is humility of the senses; penance is humility of all the passions, which it sacrifices.*

*Brothers, let us examine ourselves this evening on humility. What is the purpose of our devotions and why do we carry them out? Is it always for the glory of God, or are we looking for our own gratification and self-love? When we perform an act of charity, do we conceal it for the love of God, or do we prefer to be seen, speak willingly of it with other people in order to receive praise? Remember, my brothers, that this would be the most fatal deception and, at death's door, we would hear the words: "My son, you have already received your reward: approval, praise and the respect of the world. Can there be a greater unhappiness than this?"*

[Esercizi Spirituali – Prediche – Ritiri – Esortazioni – 3839/A, undated]

Prayer is the heart and the foundation of the Christian life because it is through prayer that the Christian, relating to God in truth and, therefore as a sinner, freely and humbly renounces himself in order to let himself be possessed by Christ.

**Prayer is a gift from God.** When we prepare to pray, we must do so with the attitude of one who recognizes that he

is incapable of prayer unless he is drawn to it by the love of God (cf. 1Jn 4:19).

## II.c.2 - The heart of prayer

Prayer is an activity of the spirit but, at the same time, it commits the entire being of the one who prays. The body must assume that positions most favor prayer but, above all, prayer engages the inner faculties: the intellect and the will.

We must keep in mind that

**prayer is a dialogue of love**, therefore all the conditions necessary for prayer must tend towards this dialogue of love. Let us now consider the activity of the intellect.

### *II.c.2.a*-The intellect or meditation of God's love

At the outset of prayer, we perceive the necessity of entering more profoundly into the mystery of God. The initiated discover the great instrument of meditation, which can be done in various ways (Word of God, *lectio divina*, *Scrutatio*, meditative prayer on some passage...). This is always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whom we must unceasingly implore. The most essential meditation for prayer is the one that helps us to reflect on God's infinite love. The passages that speak of God's love can be of great help, but prayer begins when the intellectual meditation moves the will to express acts of love towards God. Fr. John looked upon meditation as a fundamental tool for making progress in holiness, for

conforming ourselves gradually to Christ and for our growth in God's love in order to become living Gospels, as we established in the "Introduction".

Fr. Calabria strongly recommended meditation. Whenever I met him, he usually asked me: "What did you meditate upon this morning?" We sometimes commented upon it together. I don't remember him ever asking me about other devotions and this made me understand how important meditation was for me: we commit ourselves to meditating on the mystery of God's love and then to discover it in every event of our own life and the life of others.

In our reflection we can recall great benefits we have received from the Lord and, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, let them move our innermost will. Fr. John was so imbued with the Heavenly Father's merciful love that he vibrated with the desire of being *the sign of that mercy for all eternity*. His untiring repetition of the phrase: "*the Lord loves you*" flowed from the superabundance of his faith and abandonment to God the Father.

In his own words:

*St. Alphonsus used to say: "Anyone who makes his meditation well is protected from offending God through grave sin". Does this seem of little import to you, my dear brothers? I advise you to meditate well, do not sleep. Finish your meditation with a resolution for the rest of the day. I recommend that you guard the fruits of your meditation. Once you are outside the church, do not engage in idle chatter, laughter or joking! This is the hand of the devil who wishes to*

*destroy and sweep away your good intentions. Be recollected; fulfill your duties in the dormitory, the kitchen, with the boys, the souls that the Lord entrusts to you, but always in a spirit of recollection.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni – 5617/B, 26 –9-1911]

The love of Jesus is the preferred object of meditation.

*Meditation on all that Jesus did and suffered for our sake must be a never-ending lesson for us, in order to conform our lives to his, the Son of God, who is equal to the Father and who came down to earth for our salvation. Out of his great love for us, he led a life of continual suffering, he was persecuted and mocked, scourged and crowned with thorns, drained of his very blood, and crucified between two thieves. This, my brothers, is our norm, our rule.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni – 4135, 10-12-1913]

We may abandon. everything, but let us never abandon. meditation, the Divine Office and devotions. Due space should be given to the examination of conscience, the Hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, the dialogue with the superior and the exact observance of the rules...

[Lettere inedite a Religiosi – 5240/B, 1934 (?)]

*Therefore, dear Fr. Stanislao, I cannot recommend enough to you the interior life and meditation because it is there that our love for God and souls is kindled. Anyone who does not meditate is standing on the edge of a cliff.*

[L. a R. no. 14, 8-12-1936, p. 62]

We must meditate in order to transform our lives to Christ.

*Thanks to the grace of God, I feel the greatness of the Opera, which must always be humble. What a responsibility weighs upon me, I who am so poor in everything! May the study and meditation of the life of Jesus, the divine Founder of the Opera of the Poor Servants, be a lesson and telling off for me to conform my life to him in everything. Holy Mary, pray for me.*

[Note e Propositi fatti negli Esercizi Spirituali – 4167, 1-7 September 1949]

*Make sure, therefore, that the prescribed times are set aside for meditation and spiritual reading and that the meditation be carefully prepared the previous evening.*

[L. a R. no. 72, 28-12-1951, p. 341]

Meditation fosters a twofold knowledge: the knowledge of God and self-knowledge, both of which are necessary for entering into prayer.

### **The knowledge of God**

St. Augustine used to implore: “Lord, make me know you and myself”. The initiative of the knowledge of God comes from God himself. From Old Testament times, God

wanted to enter into contact with man to reveal himself, not with treatises but through events, all of which always revealed his infinite love even when he was punishing his people (cf. Pro 3:12; Heb 12:6). There is knowledge of God that comes from the intellect, the knowledge we all received from our family, catechism in the parish, formation meetings, theology and religious sciences. The limit of this knowledge lies in our intelligence, which, great as it might be, can never penetrate the mystery of God. The characteristic of this “science of God” is the coldness that is proper to the intellect, limited by reason. This knowledge is often the source of conflicts between faith and reason. *“Knowledge gives self-importance, it is love that makes the building grow”* (1Cor 8:1).

Fr. John tells how one day Fr. Natale asked him a point-blank question: “Fr. John, who is God?” As Fr. John was giving the standard catechism answer, Fr. Natale interrupted him saying, “Fr. John, God is love”.

Only the man who loves can know God because God is love; furthermore, our heart possesses a capacity for knowledge that is immensely greater than that of the intellect.

St. Benedict Labre, the holy beggar, often spoke of the Holy Trinity. One day, a theologian asked him: “Benedict, you speak often of the Holy Trinity, but what does it mean to you?” The saint answered: “The Trinity is a truly wonderful thing ...” and was incapable of going further. The knowledge of the heart is formed by experience and this experience cannot be put into words. It must be pointed out that the experience of God’s love is the fruit of prayer and, more precisely, the fruit of lengthy dialogues of love. It is through this experience that God makes



himself present, a living presence that is then transformed into contemplation.

In the experience of love we reach knowledge of the mysteries of God, even though they can never be described because experience cannot be reduced to mere concepts.

### **Self-knowledge**

It must be said immediately that few people really wish to know themselves. We are afraid to look inside ourselves and we prefer noise to silence because silence forces us to reflect and look deeply into our conscience.

There are many ways to reach self-knowledge. Psychology can penetrate the depths of the psyche and probe the maze of conscience, but how effective is it? What results does it give? It often leaves an individual in distress after discovering his psychological problems (and who is entirely free of these?) without offering a deep and lasting cure.

Faith, on the other hand, gives us the most authentic self-knowledge. As we plunge into the ocean of God's love, we come to know ourselves: we get to know the wonders that God has performed within us, the divine plan of love prepared by him before time began, the abundant gifts he has unceasingly bestowed upon me since the day I took my first breath until now. We know his love: "*the Son of God loved me and sacrificed himself for my sake*" (Gal 2:20); "*He had always loved those who were his own in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was*" (Jn 13:1). "*God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son*" (Jn 3:16).

*Always remember that we are born of love, we live by love and will return to love. What else does eternity mean but to love God? The Lord is not content if we do not love him. He desires our love. Just as the waters of all the rivers flow into the welcoming sea, so must we end up in the immense ocean of God's love, in the ocean of his loving kindness.*

[Pensieri – Massime - -Detti – 4147/D, 17-2-1928]

We only have to look at the cross. St. Alphonse wrote underneath his crucifix: *“this is how love should be”*. This is why Fr. John always used to say to me whenever I met him: *“The Lord loves you, you are his favorite son”*. To know that we are loved and favored is so liberating that there is absolutely no other thing so sublime. Self-knowledge is born of the love we have experienced. Self-knowledge is something that can never be described: at the most one can say, with St. Theresa of Avila: *“God is all I need”* and, with St. Paul, *“I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord”* (Phil 3:8). Also: *“Nothing therefore can come between us and the love of Christ. (...) I look on everything else as so much rubbish”* (Rm 8:35). The Lord loves us gratuitously, not because we deserve his love.

*And if now, as I speak, there were some poor victim of sin that cannot find peace, what should he do? Give him over to despair? No, no, for the love of God, this would be an even greater sin. He should immediately turn to Jesus, gaze upon the*

*crucifix, think how much Jesus loves sinners and how he always forgives a contrite and humble heart.*

[Pensieri – Massime – Detti – 5587, 18-8-1918]

In this immersion in God's love we can accept our own sins, our misery, the burden of our faults, even those that are like thorns in our flesh and we can proclaim: **“Yes, I am a sinner, but a sinner who is loved!”** When we are immersed in God's love, we spontaneously make the plea mentioned in the Gospel: “Lord...(my name), the one you love is sick” (cf. Jn 11:3). In this invocation we affirm two truths: the first one is the love of God; the second truth is that we are sick, afflicted by many ailments, but no less loved by Him.

## II.c.2.b-The will or the dialogue of love

Moved by the intellect with a vision of faith in our merciful Father's love made visible in Jesus and bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit, our will inspires us to give a response from love. This is the great humanity of God, who calls poor creatures to a dialogue of love with Him. This is the source of a dialogue that can even last a whole hour, with ever increasing intensity. Prayer is where we live the “Schema”: *“Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one Yahweh. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength”* (Dt 6:4).

We can imagine the warmth of Fr. John's love in his lengthy silent prayer in his favorite places that promoted his dialogue of love with God.

## **Fr. John was a man in love with God.**

His Diary is filled with the warmth of his love for the Lord. Some excerpts will show this:

*Lord, I abandon. myself entirely into the arms your Divine Providence. Miserere mei (have mercy on me).*

[Diary – 114, 16-1-1917].

*Lord, I love you so much. I will always love you here on earth and I want to love you for all eternity.*

[Diary – 256/A, 15-7-1919]

Considering himself a sinner did not prevent him from expressing his great love to the Lord.

*Lord, I love you so much and, although I am a great sinner, I want to go to heaven so that your great mercy may triumph.*

[Diary – 372, 16-10-1921.]

He firmly believed that God is love and that his actions are always inspired by love.

*O Lord, only your kindness and mercy make me capable of beginning this new year. What will become of me this year? Lord, from this moment I abandon. myself into your loving arms and say: fiat voluntas tua (may your will be done). I believe that all you do will be for the benefit of my poor soul and the welfare of your great Opera.*

[Diary – 505, 1-1-1926]

The prayer of the mind and the heart aim, therefore, at making us experience God's great love for us. This prayer, this "dialogue of love", has the power to gradually transform the one who prays. In the words of Fr. John:

*...we must allow God's love to set our heart ablaze. Let us keep in mind that if the Lord's love does not set our heart on fire, everything will seem difficult and unbearable and we will be unable to bend our soul to anything, no matter how small, but when we have the love of God everything will be easier ...*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni – 4135, 10-12-1913]

God is love and everything that surrounds us is an expression of his love.

*Dear brothers, at this moment I make my own the words of the great apostle and I beg you, I implore you, in the name of God: let us grow in charity. God is love and all creation, the entire world, everything, speaks to us of God's love. We can understand this abundance of love in the Incarnation, Passion and death of Jesus. Let us also remember that love demands love. God desires our love, he commands us to love him: "You shall love the Lord your God..., adding another commandment: and your neighbor as yourself".*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni – 5640 (undated)]

The love of God kindles and intensifies the fire of love within our hearts.

*Dear brothers, I recommend to you the interior life of union with God; renew yourselves in the fervor of your devotions: perform them with ever increasing fruits and draw from them the love of God with which you will warm the hearts of all your brothers of the world.*

[L. a R. no. 83, Verona, 31-8-1953, p. 406]

*We are nothing, yet we are everything! We are like rusted iron that does nothing, but when it is hot, even a rusted red-hot iron can do much! When a person carries within the love of God he can persevere and continue to make progress. Let us always ask the Lord to bestow his love upon us. Let us also ask the Blessed Virgin Mary to intercede for us.*

[Audio recording “Voce che grida” – 8-9-1952]

We have already said that in order pray, besides the knowledge of God, we also require self-knowledge, but self-knowledge in the fervor of God’s love: “The Lord loves you, you are his favorite son”.

Fr. John prayed intensely and what we have described in words were visible aspects of his personality. We must also add that Fr. John’s prayer was interior but not “intimistic”: like Moses on the mountain, he prayed for humanity, the Church and for the Opera. Often his prayer transformed him into a sacrificial victim.

Prayer is authentic when it produces this intense love of neighbor, including our enemies. *“What matters is faith that makes its power felt through love”* (Gal 5:6).

Fr. John was open to all the works of the Church and he loathed parochialism because, as he said: *“the whole world belongs to God”*. He also wrote:

To promote communion between the works of the Opera and all other religious works, all for the glory of God and the good of souls.

[Diary, 1913 – 24-9-1951]

*...I have often said that the Lord has great designs that he will fulfill on one sole condition: that we do not put obstacles in his path, that we become saints and that we return to the pure and genuine source of the Gospel, living as the first Christians did, without selfishness, parochialism; considering that the whole world belongs to God and working unselfishly for the good of souls, only for souls, souls, souls, and nothing else.*

[L. a R. no. 25, Christmas 1940, p.96]

He was open to any initiative in which he saw the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

*Today, in the presence of God, my Holy Mother Mary and the entire Heavenly Court, I renew the offering I have made so many times. In practice I have always failed to be a victim for the greater glory of God, in expiation for all my sins*

*and for the salvation of souls. Dear Lord, accept my renewed offering, bless it and grant me the grace of persevering until the very end.*

[Notes and resolutions made in annual retreat – 2316, 5-10-1914]

Fraternal love consists in: *“treating each other like brothers and helping each other, especially in the spiritual life”*.

*How strong was the fraternal love that reigned among the first Christians! To be a Christian in those times meant being a Saint, it was one and the same thing. The Gentiles, in order to distinguish the Christians from others, called them: “those that love each other” (St. Dionysius, ...Acts of the Apostles: one heart).*

*My dear brothers, I put a question to you: does the same love reign among us today? The painful reply is: no! Why? Because we do not love God, because we are attached to the things of the earth. Because many rich people do not think that what they possess has been given to them by God as a pure loan, and that the poor people appeal to their charity. Above all else, I believe that to exercise charity and to help our neighbor, we must be worthy of this grace and there are so many that could help but do not deserve this grace. God does not consider them worthy because their lives are not in accordance with the Gospel. My brothers, I recommend charity to you with all my heart, but the charity that flows from the love of God. This is universal charity, it makes no distinctions*



*and it includes our enemies because they too are creatures of God, and God wants us to love them.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni – 5640 (undated)]

Fr. John defined himself as a “*sensitive plant*” and this made him participate in the sufferings of all, he paid the price of the world’s afflictions, taking them upon himself and holding himself responsible for them. He had a great love for sinners, calling them “*pearls*”. He also used to pray and celebrate Masses for the eternal salvation of the enemies of God and the Church.

*Today I felt the need to celebrate Mass for Mussolini and Hitler that, if it pleases God, they become instruments of his mercy rather than tools of Satan.*

[Diary, 1355, 10-6-1941]

The Founder always carried in his prayer the burning thirst for “*souls, souls, souls*”.

*I am a wretched man. My God, how many reasons I have for humbling myself; yet, I feel that the Lord loves me very much. I alone would suffice as reason and proof of the Lord’s kindness and mercy towards poor sinners. Lord, I want to be entirely yours. I shall use my misery as a ladder to climb up towards you.*

[Diary, 84, 29-3-1916]

*Dear Lord, your love, concern and great mercy towards poor sinners encourage me and give me confidence.*

*I throw myself entirely into the immense sea of your great mercy. I bury the past in your wounded side. I will use the rest of my poor life to glorify your great mercy here on earth and then, I hope, I shall exalt it forever in Heaven!*

[Note e Propositi fatti negli Esercizi Spirituali, 2317, 1-10-1915]

Souls, created by God, are rich in the treasures of heaven.

*Through God's grace you have returned to the field that the Lord has entrusted to you, a field that must be always in your mind. It may be full of weeds, but it is rich in the treasures of heaven, as souls that God has created. It is your task, Fr. Pomini, to pull up the weeds, separate, purify and wash the precious pearls. I am sure that you will succeed with the help of God's grace because I have observed your great spirit and your willingness to do good in union with Jesus Christ, the High Priest. Dear Fr. Pomino, blessed are you; the Lord will be with you and you with him. You will accomplish great things for the good of your soul and the souls of others.*

[Lettera a Fr. Mario Pomini – 4103/B, 23-10-1937]

Not even his great trials could diminish his certainty of being loved.

*In my profound darkness, and in my physical and spiritual sufferings, I also feel the Lord's kindness, his mercy and his great love for me. I also see how much he loves and favors the Opera, his Opera that, in this hour of great justice and mercy will fulfill his new plans. May he find us all ready and suitable instruments of his will.*

[Diary, 1355, 10-6-1941]

*The more I pray, the more time I spend in the presence of Jesus, the more I am convinced that this Opera will give life to other works, all of them for the good of souls. However, we need priests with an apostolic spirit, priests who abandon themselves entirely to the Lord's Divine Providence. Faith, faith, great faith; souls, souls, souls, everything else is unimportant.*

[Diary, 12, 19-12-1911]

*All the members of the Opera deal with the Lord's affairs and we must adopt an economic policy that is completely different from human policy. We must continually draw from the inexhaustible treasure of divine ransom that Jesus left to his Church. With this treasure we must approach souls and pull them away from sin, free them from hell, and bring them into the bosom of Holy Mother Church. In a word: we must take them away from the power of Satan and hand them over to God. This is the great reason of the Incarnation, Passion and Death of the Savior.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni, 5634, (1929)]

*Dear Lord, you continue to live and suffer through the centuries and in the midst of your beloved children. Lord, I feel that this is your House. You, you alone; souls, soul; the rest, zero, zero, mud, clay. If only we priests tried to care souls. Lord, send us holy priests.*

[Diary, 121, 20-2-1917]

**Souls** were Fr. Calabria's heartbeats and he carried them in his prayer. He prayed, therefore, with the multitudes, the suffering multitudes of the world with all their afflictions, misery and struggles...

I shall end this part with a personal recollection from the year 1949. Together with the aspirants of San Benedetto, I had set up a "missionary exhibition"; the Founder heard about it and, to my surprise, he asked me: "Are you familiar with the law of physics concerning the communicating vases?" When I told him I was, he said: "Well then, suppose that you now have your vase connected to all the vases of the world. If you pour poison into it, you contaminate the water of the entire world; if, instead, you pour perfume, you will perfume all the water of the world". Do you understand the great responsibility you bear? If you put sin into your vase, you damage the whole world, if you pour into them the perfume of your holiness, you sanctify the whole world. It is not therefore necessary to leave for the missions: remaining here, and becoming holy, you will become a great missionary".

How often, in so many years of missionary life, did I recognize that the Founder was right!

## PART THREE

### THE CONSTITUTIVE ELEMENTS OF PRAYER

#### III. a - Prayer-will of God

We have defined prayer as **throwing ourselves into God's love, entering into his will.**

In the words of Jesus, *"It is not those who say to me 'Lord, Lord', who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven"* (Mt 7:21). Jesus is the model of God's will.

Jesus' entire life was a sole act of obedience to the Father. The following expressions of Jesus bear witness to this:

*"The Son can do nothing by himself"* (Jn 5:19; 32;36). *"My food is to do the will of the one who sent me"* (Jn 4:34). *"I have come from heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of the one who sent me"* (Jn 6:38). His entire existence, from his first breath (cf. Heb 10:8-9) until the last (cf. Lk 23:46) was a resounding **"Yes, Father!"**

The disciple must do as Jesus did.

*And so the Poor Servants of Divine Providence must die to themselves, to their own will, their own way of feeling and seeing, and abandon themselves to God through the obedience that represents his holy will: they must die to themselves like Jesus, each according to the demands of his own vocation.*

[L. a R. (written by abbot Caronti), Subiaco, 24-4-1938, p.69]

Prayer is inconceivable outside the will of God.

*“If you love me you will keep my commandments”* (Jn 14:15).

God inaugurates salvation history with an obedient man: Abraham (cf. Gen 12:1; 22:1ff.).

In the fullness of time, God chose the obedient, Jesus; *“Through his obedience we are saved”* (cf. Heb 10:10). The apostle Paul states that Adam brought ruin while salvation came through the obedience of Jesus (cf. Rom 5:19). Another obedient one chosen by God was the Virgin Mary: *“I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me”* (Lk 1:38).

An example of obedience closer to us is Fr. John Calabria. He lived his life in total abandonment to the Father, embracing his will through various mediations. How many times he confessed: *“I have never disobeyed my spiritual director”*, and never did he disobey his superiors. Fr. John appears as a true giant of obedience at the time of the diocesan approval of the Congregation. Fr. Natale, after an illuminating discernment of God’s will, gave Fr. John a clear vision of what

the Opera's charism should be and, right from the beginning, he lived it out with his brothers without the slightest hesitation.

Fr. Natale has not been well in recent days. I feel sad about this because he is twice a father to me: my spiritual father, first and foremost, and the father of this Opera which belongs to the Lord.

[Diary, 1370, 2-10-October 1941]

The bishop, following Canon Law, actually changed the features of the Congregation.

Fr. John's reaction was to recognize the bishop as a mediation of God's will and he obeyed. He also recognized his spiritual director, who told him that the Congregation was not as God wanted it to be, as a mediation of God's will.

Fr. John found himself in the middle of two different expressions of God's will: what was he to do?

In his own words:

We wanted the Constitutions to codify the Brothers' right to have a part in the Council and receive a special form of apostolate. It was this that caused the division and we had to go back and do them again, correct them and do them all over again. The bishop intervened at the last moment and in Domino (in the Lord), decided to approve the Opera, insisting however that it had to be clerical or he wouldn't approve anything. I point out that this statement about not approving the Opera of the Brothers (lay Opera) was made on the last Sunday of February, during the Spiritual Retreat in preparation to the First

Professions, whilst the Decree of approval had been promulgated on 11 February. I was very upset...and decided to leave everything entirely in the bishops' hands.

Finally, Deo adiuvante (with the help of God), the Constitutions were approved (clerical Opera) and I thanked the Lord **because I clearly saw his holy will in the bishops' approval** and I believed that the matter had been settled. However, **my spiritual director said to me every so often that the Opera was not as the Lord wanted it to be**, that we had to pray and act at the proper time, that the Brothers must have their own mission, that we had to stand by the Rules written in 1921, that as things stood the brothers did not have their own role.

The Congregation is doing well as a clerical organization, but this is for the priests. I did not know what to say: for me, the word of the Spiritual Director is the word of God; on the other hand, the approval of the bishop is the will of God too. **I groaned inwardly and prayed.**

[Memorandum, 7027, September 1933 (author's italics)]

He prayed and abandoned himself in trust like Abraham, who, when his son Isaac asked him where they would get the sacrificial victim, Abraham replied: *"My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering God"* (Gen 22:8). God was true to his word.

Fr. John obeyed the bishop, Abbot Caronti (Fr. John expressed his total dependence on the abbot in his correspondence with him, even calling him "casante of the



Opera” and “an angel sent by the Lord”). He also obeyed the Congregation for Religious, knowing that by so doing he was carrying out God’s will.

He obeyed for fifteen long years, experiencing the burden of an inner dichotomy, which caused him profound suffering. However, thanks to his obedience, Rome approved the Congregation according to its original charism. Let us never forget that, if humanity was redeemed by the obedience of Jesus, it is also true that the Opera survived its great trial on the strength of Fr. John’s obedience.

The Founder himself tells us where he drew the strength to conform to God’s will: “*I groaned inwardly and prayed*”. Prayer and the will of God were the secret of his endurance.

When Fr. John tells us that we must be *like rags, clay, ready for anything, without a will of our own*, he is telling us exactly how he lived God’s will.

### III.b - Prayer-sanctification

Fr. John Calabria, moved from the very beginning by a charismatic inspiration, gathered around him people who were willing to help him in the human and Christian formation of orphaned and abandoned boys. His first collaborators were: Bro. Gigio (Adami), Bro. Francesco Perez, Bro. Massimo Besozzi, Fr. Diodato Desenzani. Fr. John wanted to set up a social opera (charitable works): did he see these people as generous helpers, or did he dream of higher ideals for them?

Fr. John looked upon the social opera as a prophecy that would make visible God's providential fatherhood and not merely as providing social service.

*Dear brothers, the Opera must shine like the sun and reveal to all the light of God's divine providence. It must show people that God exists and thinks about us, that his divine word never lets us down.*

[L. a R., no. 32, Lent 1943, p. 129]

The prophetic nature of the charitable works had to be expressed through the sanctity of the members.

*If holiness is indispensable for every soul and for every work of God, it is extremely indispensable for our Congregation because only on this condition will the great Master fulfill his divine plans.*

[Conferences and exhortations, 1358, Undated]

From the very beginning, therefore, he dreamt of a Congregation of saints that would give life to a great army of saints. In his great desire for personal holiness, he wanted the members to be saints. Father Natale often said to him: "Become holy, sanctify the members, and the Opera will survive and flourish".

On 11 June 1948, Abbot Caronti wrote to him from Lourdes: "*I asked our Blessed Lady to send saints [referring to Fr. John] to the Church that can work for the good of humanity*".

In his correspondence with Fr. John, Cardinal Schuster continually urged him to provide the Church with saints.

Fr. Calabria, from the earliest times, watched over the world from his observatory with a prophetic eye. He foresaw the decline of the values of the faith and the plunge into materialism. He never ceased to look at the world this way and the events of history proved him to be right.

*I wish to tell you in all confidence that, from the bottom of my heart, I see the grave nature of this hour; it seems to me that we are heading for a tremendous conflict unless the Lord intervenes with special grace and assistance. We can hope to receive these graces if we practice the Gospel in our lives.*

[Letter to Bishop Migliorini of Rieti, 8098, Verona, 17-1-1948]

Like every prophet, he firmly denounced the evils of the world and the Church with strength but, at the same time, he clearly saw the remedies for these evils. His prophetic voice cried out: “*Great evils need great remedies*”. He was referring to the holiness of the clergy, religious and all Christians. Conferences, culture, pastoral plans are also necessary, but they are not enough. Either we become saints or all is lost.

The Opera has a very special mission at the present time: it must rebuild the faith that has been lost and, therefore, retrieve the values of the Gospel. The Opera can carry out this mission only with the help of saints:

*There is much talk of “a new order” and we must give our own contribution. However, let us always remember that today, just as in the past; a true new order will be brought about by saints.*

[L. a R., no. 25, Christmas 1940, p. 96]

Men, with all their strength, can never achieve this.

Where can the Opera, which is so small, draw its strength for renewing the world? Fr. Calabria saw the Opera as small, poor, insignificant in the world and in the Church, but powerful by virtue of its spirit. In his own words:

*Thus can we save the world, thus alone can we rebuild the Kingdom of God on earth; you and we are the foundations because the Lord wants us to have this spirit; it was for this reason that the Lord founded our Opera, which is made up of priests and brothers, a single body full of Jesus’ spirit that attracts the world to goodness.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni, 5653, Retreat 1934]

This was by no means the statement of a megalomaniac! Fr. John believed in the Word of God, was familiar with God’s action in history and how he always performed great things with “*what is weak by human reckoning*” (1Cor 1:28).

Jesus saved the world with twelve ignorant apostles. The power of the Opera does not lie in its houses or the number of its religious (Fr. Calabria always wanted them to be few in number), but in the holiness of its members. Fr. Calabria

presents us with a very clear choice: **either become holy or a failure**. If the Opera does not give an army of saints to the world, its reason for existence fails. When Fr. John said that *“every house of ours must be a place of prayer”*, he was actually saying that they had to be schools of holiness.

It is one thing to say that we must become holy, and we hear it often, but how can we reach holiness? I have already said that holiness is a gift and that the Holy Spirit is both Author and Agent of holiness. This can tempt us into thinking: what is our role then?

In the journey to personal holiness one often falls into the trap of the so-called “self-promotion”. We tell ourselves “I” must become a saint and others tell us to “become saints”. We think that holiness consists in moral perfection and we commit ourselves to the task through our intentions and ascetic efforts, but it often happens that, after the first failures, we abandon everything.

Fr. John’s journey of holiness certainly included an ascetic commitment, but it was characterized by an aspect of our spirituality that perhaps is not always clearly understood: being **“ready for anything”**.

On too many occasions, this *readiness for anything* has been reduced to obedience in changing houses or tasks. Abraham was truly available for anything: he left his country, everything, without knowing where he was going. The Virgin Mary was also truly available when she said: *“I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said may be done to me”* (Lk 1:38), though she did not know where the Word would take her. God is the Author of our holiness. When Fr.

John embarked on the journey of holiness in the Opera he too did not know where he would end up, but he abandoned himself with total confidence to the Heavenly Father. He was well aware that God was the Author and Agent of his holiness. As Author, God plans our holiness according to his own designs and carries it out as history unfolds. Through the example of his life, Fr. John teaches us the value of giving ourselves over to the Lord as rags and clay without any wish to know what he will do with us, or where he will lead us:

*...in the pure and genuine spirit of our Congregation, which must be a spirit of great charity, humility, obedience; rags, clay, ready for anything; not only in words but in deeds, since it is upon this foundation that the Lord has built this Opera with the purpose of fulfilling his divine plans through our humble Congregation which, though small, is great in the eyes of God. Let us never forget this.*

[L. a R., no. 29, 15-5-1942, p. 115]

Ready for anything, rags and clay, are easy things to say, but difficult to practice. In fact, they demand **self-annihilation** and this explains why so few are ready to embody these great values, along with the other value summed up in the expression “without a head”. We cannot live these values unless we fall in love with Christ. The conquest of these values demands that we embark on a long journey. They will be given to us “gratuitously” along the way because everything is gratuitous with God, including the price we have to pay, which will also be given to us without charge.

In order to respond concretely to our call to holiness, we must “embark resolutely on the journey of prayer”. This is akin to saying “the journey to holiness in perseverance”.

We refer to the intense prayer as described previously in these pages.

The second part of this book bears the title “the way to prayer” and not “the way to holiness”, for the reason that holiness, which consists in total conformity to Christ, always walks hand in hand with prayer.

Anyone who wishes to know God and fulfill his will must travel the way of prayer, embracing a journey of prayer and life that calls self-annihilation, which is an essential condition for achieving total conformity with Christ: “*I have been crucified with Christ (self-annihilation) and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me*” (Gal 2:20). This is only possible in Christ.

For Jesus, prayer meant carrying out concretely his consecration to the Father in kenosis. This is the model of prayer presented to us by Fr. John:

*May Jesus, our Lord and Master, be our model in all things and make us like him, above all in imitating his life; following his teaching, especially in his total self-giving to the Father. Jesus gave himself completely, he totally forgot himself; he offered his work, his rest, his sacrifice. We must do the same if we wish to fulfill the demands of our vocation.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni, 5612, 5-3-1930]

By living this fundamental aspect of our charism, we abandon ourselves totally to God in faith, trust and the absolute certainty that he will lead us to holiness, provided we throw ourselves into his arms like rags and clay, in a spirit of total readiness for anything.

### III. c - Prayer-purification

Fr. John Calabria often combines holiness with purification.

*My God, help me and console me in the spiritual trials you have bestowed upon me in your great goodness. Enlighten me that I may see them as your generous gifts in order to **purify** and **sanctify** my poor soul and your Opera.*

[Diary, 955, 7-4-1935]

*Lord, you have granted so much grace and mercy to my poor soul. In the time that remains, help me to begin loving and, for the sake of your love, to endure the cross you send for the welfare and the **purification** of my soul and this great Activity of yours.*

[Diary, 1146, 25-7-1938]

*How much suffering there is in doing the Lord's work, but the suffering that comes directly from God is sweet and gentle; it enriches the soul with merits for Heaven; it **purifies** and **sanctifies**.*

[Diary, 1525, 20-10-1944]



*Before the throne of God we will understand (the grace of) being Poor Servants. I hope that suffering will have **purified** me for eternal life.*

[Diary, 1881, 14-7-1950]

*My suffering and unending trials tell me of the Lord's great desire to **purify** and **sanctify** my poor soul, so near to the great call to judgment. I am so poor and wretched. How great is the Activity of the Poor Servants in the eyes of God.*

[Diary, 1957, 4-2-1952]

*Your blood has **purified** and **sanctified** my poor soul. O *santo o morto*.*

[Note e Propositi fatti negli Esercizi Spirituali, 4162, Retreat]

We must never forget that prayer means throwing ourselves into God's love, entering into his will. Love is my vocation which consists in living the Shemà: "*Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one Yahweh. You shall love Yahweh your God with **all** your heart, with **all** your soul, with **all** your strength*" (Dt 6:4). We must sincerely confess that this is the commandment we fulfill least of all: who can truly say he loves God with **all** his heart, etc?

As we recognize that this is not the case, we must accept the fact that we need a profound purification in order to attain it. Many interior evils prevent us from giving our "all"

and we must submit to treatment if they are to be cured. The cure comes in the shape of a long process of purification. During this journey, which begins with active purification and then proceeds to passive purification, we must shed layers of our ego until we lose it completely.

Fr. John, though he was aware of his spiritual illnesses, never gave in to resignation: he accepted them in a spirit of humility and willingness to accept whatever the Lord judged best in order to cure him.

Prayer and sanctity are always united but the third element, purification, is also necessary. Only thus will both prayer and holiness be authentic. In connection with purification, an aspect of our charism refers to the special mission of expiation and reparation. In the words of article 24 of our Constitutions: *“The Lord, with special kindness and mercy, calls our Activity and entrusts to us a special mission of reparation”*.

This mission is in harmony with the thought of St. Paul: *“It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that still has to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church”* (Col 1:24).

In his prayer, Fr. John suffered because he saw that souls were in danger, exposed to the world’s deceit, and well on the road to paganism. His cry *“souls, souls, souls”* reveals the suffering that often drove him to offer himself for their salvation.

He transmitted this same zeal for the salvation of souls to the members of the Activity and to all, a zeal that must also be expressed in expiation and reparation, uniting ourselves to the sufferings of Jesus. Fr. Calabria said:

*This great plan, this divine assignment, has been given to us as a special honor. The Lord wants us to be his companions in suffering and participate in his own inner experience of suffering.*

[Constitutions, N. 24]

This spirit of reparation and expiation does not only concern the sins of others, but our own sins also, since we must hold ourselves responsible for the sad events that afflict society.

Fr. John thus described this process of purification:

*The mission of reparation and expiation entails a loving acceptance of the cross and conforming ourselves to the suffering Christ as our contribution to the salvation of the world.*

[Constitutions, N. 24]

If we accept the cross it will purify us and lead us to conformity with Christ.

At this point, we could be tempted to think that we must always live in the sadness of the crucifixion if we are to attain holiness. It must be said, however, that the cause of our sadness is not the cross, but our rejection of the cross. The cross is a gift of liberation. It is true that one suffers on the cross, but in

accepting it our heart experiences freedom and the fulfillment of Christ's' words: "*Come to me all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke (my cross) and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light*" (Mt 11: 28-30).

The path of prayer is a journey of liberation and, little by little, as we make progress, we will feel the solace of an ever more intense communion with Christ, a profound liberation, until we reach the fullness of life with him.

The Lord Jesus came to bring us freedom and he desires to see us free (cf. Gal 5: 1;13;18;22;24).

*If we listen to the Lord and serve him faithfully, we shall enjoy the true freedom that is proper to the children of God. He will be with us and we shall enjoy his peace.*

[L. a R., no. 48, Lent 1946, p. 224]

Prayer is the soul and the foundation of the Christian life because it is in prayer that the Christian, relating to God in truth, freely and humbly renounces himself in order to allow Christ to take possession of him.

## PART FOUR

### PURIFICATION IN THE WAY OF PRAYER

#### IV. a - A concise look at the way of prayer

We consider prayer from the perspective of a “journey” and not simply as a doctrine. Since apostolic times, Christianity has called it a “journey”. “Paul went to the high priest and asked for letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, that would authorize him to arrest and take to Jerusalem any followers of the Way (odos)” (Acts 9). Although some translate the word “odos” as “doctrine”, it is not a good translation of the original text. Christianity is not a doctrine in the sense of rational knowledge, nor is it a philosophy, a theology, an ascetic discipline, or a series of moral norms. These are all secondary issues. Christianity is a “living person” who has brought us life. “*I am the way, the truth and the life*” (Jn 14:6). “*I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full*” (Jn 10:10). From his mother’s womb Jesus began his journey towards Jerusalem and invites all of us to follow him on that journey (cf. Mt 16:24). Paul too embodied this dynamic of Jesus when he said: “*Life to me, of course, is Christ*” (Ph 1:21),

and again, “*I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me*” (Gal 2:20). The Christian walks towards the plenitude that is “*full maturity in Christ*” (Eph 4:13); the Christian is, therefore, a “Christopher”, one who carries Christ Jesus in his flesh and holiness is a forward looking journey free from every bond. This is the kind of disciple Jesus wants and this is why he uses the language of paradox: “*If any man comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple (...) In the same way, none of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all his possessions*” (Lk 14:25;33). This language scandalizes us and we try to moderate it by using more rational expressions; but we cannot escape the fact that “to hate” means “to hate”, not persons but the false love of persons, the love that is born of selfishness, pride, possession and the promotion of one’s self-interest. By hating this love we will love as Christ loves, a gratuitous universal love that embraces enemies, a purified supernatural and human love. In the way of purification we will identify the obstacles to love.

Fr. John, imbued as he was with the spirit of Christ, always exhorted us to “*live the pure and genuine spirit*” and to be “*living Gospels*”; he was afraid of the spirit becoming limited to the rational level.

Let us therefore embark on our journey with the resolve to experience all the phases the Lord has in mind for us.

The vocation of love is wonderful and this is why the Lord enlightens us about everything that prevents us from loving. Therefore, in order to attain the love of God, our unique

and sole treasure, God Himself gives us the strength that allows us to lose everything for His sake (cf. Mt 13:44), losing even ourselves; He also gives us the strength to fight against everything that prevents us from loving. We know that we are not alone in this battle: the Lord is fighting with us and, little by little, He will purify us so that our love becomes like His:

*...to love Jesus intensely, no matter the cost, and to strive exclusively for the glory of his name and the salvation of souls.*

[Lettere collettive alle sorelle, S19, 2-7-1948]

The desire for purification must be born of love and then it will have a solid and secure foundation.

A person who falls in love with Christ understands that he must die to himself in order to love himself in an authentic manner.

Fr. Calabria entered into the heart of prayer and embodied its essence, namely, the dialogue of love. Although God in Himself is the totality of the mystery, *“Truly, God is hidden with you, the God of Israel, the savior”* (Is 45:15), In prayer Fr. John got to know God the Father (in the Bible, to know means to love) not only through the intellect but also through the heart.

The Word of God was the source from which he drew the knowledge of God as Love. Convinced that the Word fulfills what it proclaims, the Founder said: *“every word of God is a consecratory word”*.

Fr. John lived as a man in love with the Word; he embodied it until he became a “*Living Gospel*”.

How much importance we give to the words of men! There is nothing wrong with this. Yet how much more importance we should give to the Lord’s Word! Let us therefore believe in the Lord; let us trust his word. Every word of God is consecratory and sacramental: it fulfills what it promises.

[L. a R., no. 78, 18 November 1952, p. 383]

### **The existential impediments to love**

The Word of God reveals to us two main obstacles to love:

#### **The fear of death in general.**

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: “Since all the children share the same blood and flesh, he too shared equally in it, so that by his death he could take away all the power of the devil, who had power over death, and set free all those who had been held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death” (Heb 2:14-15).

We are slaves to the fear of death itself and also, as the Patriarch Bartholomew I says, of the partial experiences of death. What does this mean? With death we lose everything, whereas a partial death experience makes us lose a part of what we possess: health, possessions, esteem, power, office, home, friendships, projects, properties, protections.



The first consequence of this is that we do not want to die and we do not wish to lose anything that we possess. As long as this fear lasts we refuse anything that makes us suffer and, consequently, we are unable to accept the cross.

The second consequence is the triggering of defense mechanisms of life and the possessions related to life, which are often transformed into conflicts with every type of death and loss...

The third consequence leads to the others being considered as possible “usurpers” from whom we have to defend ourselves, and the first “Other” is God Himself. The devil, the master of death, is the great accuser of God through temptation: “God does not love you... can he love a wretch like you? God loves the good...”

This is the most horrible of temptations!

It is the fear of death and losing that transforms the image of God, the good and merciful Father, into a God who can take away life, punish, send an incurable illness and, if we embark on a journey of holiness, will send all kinds of trials; one has to defend himself and escape from such a God. A lack of trust in God springs up, making us incapable of loving Him and living the pure and genuine spirit, which is founded upon trust in and love for God. This false relationship with God spills over into our relationships with our neighbors and makes it impossible to establish loving relationships with them.

How can we be healed of this illness that prevents us from loving?

Ascetic practices, penance, the practice of Oriental techniques and psychoanalysis are of no use. Jesus Christ is the

only one who has the power to free us at the very depths of our soul. *“Since all the children share in the same blood and flesh, he too shared equally in it, so that by his death he could take away all the power of the devil, who had power over death, and set free all those who had been held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death”* (Heb 2:14-15), in other words all of us. Only Jesus can liberate us from these obstacles to love: this is the great truth contained in the words *“cut off from me you can do nothing”* (Jn 15:5).

### **There is a second obstacle to love:**

The inability to move from wanting to doing

In his letter to the Romans St. Paul says: “I cannot understand my own behavior...for though the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not... my body follows a different law that battles against the law which my reason dictates. What a wretched man I am! (Rom 7:15ff). In desperation he cries out: “who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 7:24).

Consequently, in order to love it is absolutely necessary that we be healed from the fear of death and losing and that we become capable of moving from wanting to doing. Only Jesus can do this for us, as St. Paul tells us, *“It is God, for his own loving purpose, who puts both the will and the action into you”* (Ph 1:13). We are therefore “Christ-dependent”.

After these considerations, which apply to everyone, Paul concludes: “*Jesus alone is my liberator*”. To love we must therefore be cured of the fear of losing, knowing that we can do nothing without Jesus.

We wish to love but we cannot succeed because our love is always contaminated by selfishness, defense mechanisms and conflicts of pride, attachment and self-promotion, all of which make it impossible for us to love. We must be purified of these great obstacles and Jesus is the only one who can help us; however, as we well know, this does not come about as if by magic. There is nothing magical about the spiritual life. Experience tells us that purification is a lengthy journey, during which we must strip away the layers of our ego until we have shed it entirely. This will make us conform to Christ. This is the same journey that Jesus traveled and St. Paul thus describes it in his letter to the Philippians: “*His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father*” (Ph 2:6-11).

Jesus marked the path for those who wish to follow him on the road to holiness. The way of holiness is called kenosis (self-annihilation): there is no other way. The Gospel says the same thing with other words: “*If anyone wants to be a follower*

*of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (Mt 16:24). To renounce oneself means setting off on the journey to self-annihilation. In order not to frighten us, the Lord, after a personal commitment to purification, takes over the task of our purification and brings it to fulfillment, asking us to cooperate with him in a spirit of total availability to his action which he carries out in the paschal mystery.

*Remember that to be apostle means willingness to suffer a lot and endure contradiction because no one can be greater than the Master.*

[Letter to the novices and aspirants, 6913/T, 5-10-1941]

We must reflect on this sad reality when we are making our community projects. If we ignore our inability to love, our community projects will certainly fail. Their stability will be guaranteed only if we base them on Christ, the only one who is capable of freeing us from the fear of death and enabling us to move from wanting to doing. (A more detailed presentation can be found in the appendix).

Did Fr. John enjoy such a freedom?

In the Founder this Word was fulfilled: *“The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing **fear** into your lives again. It is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out ‘Abba, Father!’* (Rm 8:15). He had such faith and trust in the Father that, by abandoning himself to Him, he felt an absolute security that drove away every shadow of fear.

In love as he was with Christ, Fr. John was free because *“Fear is driven out by love”* (1Jn 4:18). He embodied the great

gift of the Holy Spirit that is “the holy fear of God”, in the sense that he feared only one thing: to offend the Lord and break his relationship with Him through sin. Yet was he truly freed from fear and the impossibility of moving from wanting to doing? Four episodes from his life confirm this conviction.

Fr. Calabria lived the paradox of the Gospel “*For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it*” (Mk 8:35).

Fr. John embodied the verb ‘to lose’ as a fundamental condition for loving.

Here are the facts:

### 1) **Este**

At Este (Padua, Italy) a valid Will and Testament had bequeathed to him some real estate and he had founded an Activity there managed by the Poor Sisters. At some point the will was contested by people who, in order to validate their claim, not only appealed to the Bishop of Padua but also to Rome, and Rome upheld their claim. Although he had every right to pursue a claim for justice, Fr. John preferred to lose, trust his cause to the Lord and continued to love his “enemies”.

2) **A journalist** slandered Fr. Calabria in a socialist newspaper, claiming that the Founder exploited young boys for his own self-interest. Fr. John was advised to denounce the journalist, and would have been right to do so, but he preferred to lose his good

name before the public and continued to love his denigrator with a love that finally won him over.

3) **His own religious accused him before Rome of disobeying the Bishop and the Constitutions.** This affected Fr. John in the innermost part of his spirituality, which strived above all to live in obedience to the will of God. He accepted this loss in pain and tears and his only reply was to love his accusers, even pleading their case before Abbot Caronti asking that they be spared expulsion from the Activity.

4) **The offering of his life.** Fr. John had lost his possessions (Este), his good name (the accusation of the journalist) and he had accepted defeat at the hands of the Ecclesiastical Authorities in the fundamental aspect of his spirituality (the accusations before Rome). All he had left was his life and he wished to offer it for the health of the Pope. While Fr. John was dying, Pope Pius XII got better and lived for four more years. The Founder had lost everything and all he had left to do was leave this world, totally stripped off self and everything.

Fr. John accepted this as a gift and paid a high price for his acceptance, as we shall see in his long journey of purification.

#### IV.b - Résumé of the journey of prayer-sanctification-purification

These three elements are inseparable. Previously, we pointed out that prayer and holiness walk hand in hand. Now a new element enters the scene: purification, which bestows concrete value upon prayer and holiness.

In the interests of clarity, we offer a brief résumé of the stages of the prayer journey as it is described by the mystics.

Following the experiences of the giants of prayer who left us their testimony about the action of God's spirit within them, and following the school of prayer at which Fr. John learned to pray, we now offer a brief schema. It must be said, however, that in the spiritual life there is no such thing as an absolute schema. The Holy Spirit acts independently of all our plans, in ways that are ever new and surprising, because he acts in total respect towards each person, his character, education, culture, etc. What we shall say is only by way of indication and the result of experience, which also provides us with some constant elements.

The way of purification-prayer consists in the process of purifying our former self, heir of sin, losing all that prevents us from loving.

By entering into prayer we already begin to experience God's love and, often, the Lord also initially grants us true inner joy, to the extent that we can say with St. Peter: "*Master, it is wonderful for us to be here; so let*

*us make three tents ...” (Lk 9:33). Self-knowledge is also contemplated from the perspective of love and, therefore, we accept ourselves as we are because the Lord thus accepts us. However, many evils also begin to emerge, especially those of an interior nature: vanity, envy, rebellion, criticism, the quest for a comfortable life, attachment to persons, possessions and, often, sins.*

*In order to love the Lord and store up some good deeds, we must fight against our passions because they are our enemies, especially the predominant passion that each one of us carries within ones heart. Heaven help us if we do not fight them; we shall never prevail against them unless we identify and declare war on the predominant passion, the one that is most alive, strong, violent and pressing; the passion that is almost second nature to us and which reveals our true nature and character. This passion is not the same in everyone; it varies from person to person according to our inclinations, moods and nature. All our affections, designs, way of acting and working take their starting point from this passion, and heaven help us if we do not concentrate our energies on fighting it constantly, for it will direct all our other passions and lead us inevitably to ruin.*

[Pensieri – Massime – Detti, 5578, 7-5-1918]

The Holy Spirit, to whom we have entrusted ourselves, opens our eyes and makes us understand that this entire negative burden is a great impediment to love and it



drives us to search for healing, but He also reminds us that our cooperation is necessary, though it is not enough on its own.

The journey consists of the following steps:

Active purification

Passive purification

Purification in the exercise of the theological virtues;

Purification of the “dark night of the soul”

The peak of transforming union and contemplation

#### IV.c A deeper look at the journey of purification

St. John of the Cross tells us that the two wings upon which we fly are prayer and mortification. St. Theresa says that prayer and a comfortable life are incompatible. We must therefore begin with a serious commitment to the so called active purification because we must put into action our entire will and fight against the vices, the disordered passions and the predominant passion, asking the Lord to help us with his grace. In this first phase, prayer is above all a plea, a prayer that cries out: “Lord Jesus, have pity on me, a sinner!” We must, however, have the firm desire to be healed. When evil emerges, we must accept it in a true spirit of humility and bear in mind that, thanks to these sentiments of humility, there is no obstacle to the dialogue of love that constitutes the essence of prayer. But what a struggle it is!

#### IV.c.1 Active purification

We have already said that we have no written account of Fr. John's interior life from 1895, when he met Fr. Natale, until 10 November 1911. Nevertheless, under the guidance of his spiritual director, he certainly began the journey of active purification which, as we shall see, he practiced for the rest of his life. Fr. John resolutely embarked on this journey with very precise and concrete commitments, fully prepared to fight against his negativeness, with which he was all too familiar.

The Founder began his Diary with a series of resolutions, considered as means of sanctification, thereby intending to commit his own will to concretely respond to God's call to begin the journey to holiness. These resolutions are "authenticated" and blessed by Fr. Natale in his own hand.

*I made the following resolutions on 10 November 1911. Upon their observance depends the beginning of my sanctification and the stability and propagation of the Opera that Jesus has entrusted to this poor man by his special grace and favor.*

- a. *I shall bury my past, no matter how sad, in the merciful Heart of Jesus through a sincere and contrite confession.*
- b. *With the Lord's grace I promise to fulfill my timetable with regard to getting up in the morning and my religious devotions, namely*

- meditation, examination of conscience, visit to the Blessed Sacrament, etc., etc.*
- c. Whenever possible, I promise to recite the Divine Office on my knees and in the Church before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. During this prayer I shall not receive anyone except in the most urgent cases.*
  - d. I shall make my confession every eight days and prepare myself for it as if it were my last confession.*
  - e. Before and after Mass I shall spend at least a quarter of an hour in preparation and thanksgiving.*
  - f. With the Lord's grace I promise to avoid even the slightest deliberate sin.*
  - g. Except in urgent cases, I shall prepare every sermon and dedicate time daily to the study of Moral and Dogmatic Theology.*
  - h. As a Christian and a priest I shall strive to imitate Jesus closely.*
  - i. In the person of my Confessor I shall see and listen to Jesus and entrust my entire soul to him.*
  - j. I promise to be faithful to my weekly hour of adoration.*
  - k. I shall not worry about human judgments.*
  - l. After revealing to my confessor the inspirations that Jesus sends me in his mercy, I shall write them down to keep them always in mind.*

*m. I shall always keep in mind my past fault in order to have a reason for remaining humble.*

*n. I shall do nothing without prayer and counsel.*

*From the Casa Buoni Fanciulli, 10 November 1911.*

“Diligentibus Deum omnia cooperantur in bonum” (By turning everything to their good God cooperates with all those who love him) (Rm 8:20).  
Benedico in Domino (With my blessing in the Lord),  
Fr. Natale di Gesù.

[Diary - 1, 10 November 1911]

From this moment, all the personal writings of Fr. John are studded with resolutions that bear witness to his will to persevere in this path in spite of the inevitable falls and lack of fidelity to them.

*This morning I celebrated Mass in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and asked her to present me, and the entire House, to her Divine Son as she was presented in the temple. If I consider my sins, my ingratitude, and the endless graces I have received, I should give up; but considering the kindness and mercy of Jesus and Mary, I say once again: Ego dixi nunc coepi. O santo o morto.*

[Diary – 227, 21-11- 1918]

Holiness is his one thought.

*From this moment teste Deo (before God), and with His help, I promise to begin belonging entirely to Jesus and become a saint. God wants this for me and heaven help me if I do not begin. O santo o morto, o santo o morto.(either a saint or death)*

[Diary – 268, 1-9-1919]

How much strength and confidence he found in entrusting himself to divine mercy! St. Theresa used to say, “Nothing, not even the greatest sins, can halt the journey to holiness”. St. Augustine said: “Everything, even their sins, works towards the good of those who love God”.

Fr. John was never to abandon. the resolution of active purification. His was a never ending battle against all his defects, with which he never made peace, especially with his “predominant passion”, about which he wrote in his Diary on 1 January 1912: “*I made my confession today, detesting especially a predominant passion of mine*”. On 30 October 1921, among the resolutions in his Diary, he wrote: “3) *Fight the predominant passion*”, entrusting himself to God’s omnipotence without which, he knew, he would be unable to achieve anything. He was also aware that he could do nothing by his own strength and he always felt the need of a personal commitment with a firm and unshakeable certainty of God’s love. **Holiness is love** for Fr. John. How could he therefore justify defects and faults that were obstacles to “loving God with all his heart, with all his mind and with all his strength”, and love the brothers with that same love? He had defects and he did not hide them, jokingly referring to them as “the

calabrina”. Did the Lord free him from all of them? No. Who knows how many times he beseeched the Lord, like Paul, to free him from “the thorn in his flesh”, and who knows how many other times he will have heard the same reply as Paul: “*my grace is enough for you; my power is at its best in weakness*” (2Cor 12:9).

Fr. John had to accomplish the active purification in the knowledge that, with all his efforts, he would only achieve very modest results. However, he abandoned himself in trust to the Lord’s strength and grace, convinced that He would take the initiative during the so-called “passive” purification. Fr. John also had a strategy for his “active purification”, so necessary for loving: he would never pursue it through penances of affliction, but in the acceptance of all the small and large crosses he would encounter in daily life, the privileged place of personal sanctification.

*The small sacrifices we make for the love of God sanctify our souls.*

[Registro delle SS. Messe – 31-10-1936]

He cultivated the habit of recollection, the domination of the external senses, which are the entry point for creatures and the internal faculties (intelligence, will, memory), which are very often prone to distraction.

Mortification is absolutely necessary in order to conquer these misleading situations, and how Fr. John practiced it!

*Unite a never ending self-vigilance to prayer and an unceasing **spirit of mortification**, which is particularly necessary today with all the attractions and seductions of the world.*

[L. a R., no. LXXXVIII, Verona, Saturday 23-10-1954, p.426]

*Every religious must be a living Gospel, so that all may see in us Christ's humility, prayer, charity, mortification and poverty. Only thus shall the Lord approve our lives as religious, the lantern that enlightens and the salt that heals.*

[Lettera a Religiosi, 5240/B, 1934 (?)]

*Brothers, let us remember that there are only two roads to heaven: innocence or penance; if God has punished so severely those who bear the image of sin, whatever will become of the sinner? **I know that the words penance and mortification are not popular with many Christians today: they wish to indulge their weakness in every way, languish their entire life in laziness and sensuality, soft beds, rich clothes, delicate foods; they are only concerned with comfort and they flee from anything that smacks of mortification. As a minister of Christ I certainly cannot approve this wisdom of the flesh, which continues to justify all that Jesus condemned, as if mortification and the obligation of penance were nothing more than a figment of the imagination. My brothers, the spirit of Jesus Christ is a holy eagerness for suffering, an unending journey of the mortification of self-love, fighting against our will, rejecting our desires, denying the senses all their useless***

*satisfactions, and if we do not possess this spirit we will not belong to Jesus Christ, we shall not be true Christians.*

[Omèlie sui Vangeli festivi, 10735, 25-12-1902]

***Poor: detached from everything.** Poor, because Jesus Christ was born poor and lived poor. The apostles and all the other saints who were close to our Lord were poor. Poor, but also rich in the richness of the Lord. Poor because we entrust ourselves to God's word: All will be given to you!*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni, 8657, 5-3-1936]

*I exhort you once again not to seek your own interest or satisfaction, but to search only for God. **Live, therefore, detached from the world and its false principles, shun human protection; be detached from your own position and ministry, always ready to change.** When obedience moves you from one place to another, do not for any reason maintain contact with persons you knew before. Be aware that self-love often makes us think that simple pretexts are plausible reasons.*

[L. a R., no. XXIV, 1-11-1940, p.92]

*Be the first to give a good example and, in all your affairs, business and relationships, let yourselves be guided by these supernatural criteria; **show disinterest and detachment from temporal things and useless superficialities;** do all you can to serve the cause of good, the triumph of the truth and to make Our Lord Jesus Christ known and loved because in him alone can we hope for salvation, well-being and peace.*

[L. a R., no. XLVII, Epiphany 1946, p.217]



*The Gospel preaches detachment from the things of the earth, it exhorts us: “do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moths and woodworms destroy them and thieves can break in and steal. But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven”, the sole destiny for which we were created; the Gospel teaches us, therefore, that the present life is only a preparation for the future life, the eve of a great feast that will last forever.*

[L. a R., no. LXI, Lent 1949, p.284]

As we have already said, the great masters of the spiritual life believe that prayer and holiness walk hand in hand: a degree of holiness corresponds to each level of prayer. Returning to the question of prayer, we must bear in mind that we must strive right from the beginning in order to overcome the great obstacles that always present themselves before the one who prays; prayer demands effort because prayer has many enemies. It is no mean feat to create an atmosphere of silence and recollection at the end of our commitments and various activities.

This effort is absolutely necessary from the outset if we are to enter into prayer. It consists of a remote preparation made through a continual recollection of God’s presence within us throughout the day, as well as an immediate preparation; these preparations demand a commitment on the part of the will to fight against all the enemies of prayer.

*Why do so many Christians fail to make progress in their sanctification and always have the same defects, the same faults and the same sins?*

*The answer is obvious: they do not pray and, if they do, they pray badly.*

*Let us keep in mind that man can do nothing with regard to his eternal salvation without the grace of God and this grace is obtained through prayer.*

*Jesus said to his Apostles: “Cut off from me you can do nothing”. As St. Augustine commented, the Lord really means nothing.*

*Jesus also said: “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you”.*

*Dear children, dear brothers, let us give great importance to prayer because **prayer is the most powerful weapon for defeating our spiritual enemies**. Why does that brother give into the power of temptation and become a slave to passion? It is because he does not turn to God, he does not pray; if he only prayed to God, according to His infallible word, God would give him the grace to win temptation and continue along the path to holiness. **Let us remember the necessity of praying well. We must not only pray with our lips, but also with our heart.** So many Christians deserve the divine reprimand: “ You do not obtain anything because you do not ask properly”. How many sons of the “Casa Buoni Fanciulli” pray in church only with their lips whilst their minds and hearts are far from God, thinking of everything except prayer. I*

*exhort you, my dear brothers, to pray, but to pray well in a true spirit of concentration and recollection.*

Pensieri – Massime - Detti, 4186, 23-1-1920]

*Let us give importance to prayer. “Sine me nihil potestis facere” (cut off from me you can do nothing) (Jn 15:5). We are nothing, but with Christ we are everything. Christ will be with us if we remain with him in the practice of the Gospel and the interior life. Abandon. anything except prayer and devotions.*

[Audio recording “Voce che grida”, 1951 (during a retreat of the Poor Servants on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his priesthood)

We must also remember that there is no such thing as prayer without the Holy Spirit because it is the Holy Spirit who prays in us (cf. Rom 8:26). The one who prays will always therefore ask the Holy Spirit to pray in unity with him. *“If you then, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”* (Lk 11:13).

Fr. John warns us: the prayer of active purification consists in beseeching the lord to free us from all that prevents us from loving Him and the brothers.

There are many obstacles in our path.

In the process of active purification we must keep in mind the following conviction:

**The only difference between us and the saints is that the saints prayed more than we do.**

We must overcome the mistaken belief that everything can be prayer. On the contrary, we pray only when we are actually praying ... Prayer is an activity on its own and it cannot be confused with other activities, no matter how holy they may be.

When we make a mistake we must return to the right path, both at individual and community levels.

*My dear brothers, I shall never tire of repeating that the Opera of the Poor Servants must give light and life in the present hour, and never cease to remind people of the Gospel, the life of the Apostles and the first Christians. When we choose the wrong road and become aware of our error, we must immediately return to the right path, to the one that will lead us to our goal; past and present tragic events are a reminder that humanity has taken the wrong path and must turn back. There is no good in deceiving ourselves, we must start our journey again from the beginning, embark once again on the right path and the only way is through the observance of divine law. We must return to God, to Christ and to his Gospel; we must observe it to the letter because it is the living and perennial word of God that never changes and never fails us.*

[Lettere ai Fratelli Esterni, 4489/A, Lent 1946]

The call reveals God's designs to us, which consist of our possessing him: "*You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you*" (St. Augustine"). It is the vocation to the high peaks of the transforming union in

which the Lord will fulfill his design to “*become true images of his Son*” (Rom 8:29).

*May Jesus, our Lord and Master, be our model in all things, make us like himself, especially through the imitation of his example; may he make us attentive to his teachings, especially in the total gift of himself to the father. Jesus gave everything, he forgot himself completely and offered his work, his rest and his sacrifice. Let us do likewise if we wish to live up to the demands of our vocation. Jesus wants us especially to be like him and for this purpose he has called us to this House. He will give us his special favors and graces.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni, 5612, 5-3-1930]

Fr. Calabria also expresses this call to conformity with Christ in the phrase “*living Gospels*”; he often used to say that the Gospel is Jesus. This makes us understand that the goal is not at hand but, rather, that it demands a long journey. At this level of prayer – the beginning – the one who prays catches a glimpse of the summit, he is filled with wonder but he also understands that he will never make it by his own strength alone.

*During the night and until 3.30 in the day I felt terrible. Only God knows how I suffered. I am without doubt the most wretched and miserable of men, but precisely because I am so miserable, with the Lord’s help I wish to confide in his great kindness and mercy and become a saint. With the help of God, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and my saintly*

*advocates and protectors, I renew all my resolutions and say yet again: o santo o morto.*

[Diary, 395, 11-3-1922]

This conviction reveals to the one who prays his inability, fragility, impotence and the great abyss that exists between his state of imperfection and the perfection of Christ, together with the great obstacles that stem from his attachment to self and creatures ...with the risk of giving in to the temptation of discouragement, something that Fr. John greatly feared.

In the last note of his Diary he wrote:

*I was at the canonization of St. Pius X. How many thoughts went through my head! How lacking I have been in evangelical spirit during my long priesthood. Now I am at the end. Satan wants to plunge me into discouragement and misery. I entrust myself to the divine mercy under the protection of St. Pius X. Pray for me, I am so poor in everything. Jesus, have mercy on me.*

[Diary, 2035, 29-5-1954, evening]

How did he overcome these situations? In spite of his misery (“*zero and misery*”), his sins (his own words) and his defects, Fr. John never gave in to discouragement, but he overcame it by putting into practice his mottos: “*Ego dixi, nunc coepi, o santo o morto*”, and by the firm belief that God would accomplish the task of making him like Christ – *a living Gospel*.

*I am always the same. My God, I make so many promises and I end up worse than before. My God! Lord Jesus, what must I do? Humble myself, sink into the awareness of my misery, and turn with greater trust to the mercy of Jesus and begin all over again. Yes, Lord Jesus, today, once again, I resolve to be entirely yours, to be like a rag in your hands in order to fulfill your divine plans.*

[Diary, 23, 24-8-1912]

*Yesterday evening I made my confession, I humbled myself and told the Lord once again that I wish to belong entirely to him. My God, how miserable I am. My great misery gives me the courage to confide in the infinite mercy of Jesus. Yes, Lord Jesus: O santo o morto.*

[Diary, 200, 17-6-1918]

His “great misery” became the means for drawing close to the Lord.

*I keenly feel all my profound misery. The devil would like to use that to demoralize me and draw me to himself but, with the Lord’s help, I shall use this great misery to draw closer to the God of mercy.*

[Diary, 243, 8-4-1919]

*Lord, I am so poor and miserable, a great sinner; but I shall make a mountain of my misery and ascend to where you*

*are, God of kindness and mercy. With the help of your grace I made my ordinary confession.*

[Diary, 1282, 2-6-1940]

*I really want to become a great saint; my great sins offer me a solid and sound reason for humbling myself. I begin today.*

[Diary, 20, 4-6-1912]

*We need gentleness and meekness in order to be at peace with ourselves. We must never get agitated because of our defects, aridity, temptations and not even because of our sins; let us humble ourselves and ask God to forgive us and then, in peace, serenity and tranquility, continue our journey. **Let us hate our imperfections but let us also love them for they reveal to us our nothingness and misery.***

[Pensieri – Massime - Detti, 5585, 4-6-1918]

This is not discouragement, but humility!

*What are we to do if we have committed some failing? Are we to lose heart? No; with a profound act of humility, which attracts the Lord's favor and help, and the support of divine grace, we begin over again and keep traveling along the path to our sanctification.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni, 1965, (undated)]

Active purification demands that we flee from occasions of sin.



*Let us remember our fallen nature and the necessity, therefore, of fleeing from occasions of sin; we must act like doctors in our apostolate: take care of the sick but also protect ourselves from sickness. We must not become discouraged by our weaknesses, but humble ourselves, keep our heads down in humility, fight against our weaknesses and never make peace with them.*

[Lettere a Religiosi, 9373/B, 1951 (?)]

The one who prays always has two realities before his eyes: the beauty of the peak of pure contemplation and his own personal misery which he must accept and offer to God's omnipotence, who makes the impossible possible. "*Everything is possible for anyone who has faith*" (Mk 9:23).

What are we to do then? We must decide! Prayer is the sure way through which God, stage by stage, will guide us to our goal. At this point, the one who prays, aware of his misery and fragility, but full of trust in God's power, is resolved to die rather than sin, even venially.

*Today I made my confession in preparation to Easter. I profoundly humbled myself, first before God and then his minister and, with the help of divine grace, I said: Lord, I prefer to die a thousand deaths rather than offend you again with one deliberate venial sin.*

[Diary, 430, 24-3-1923]

Fr. John had already understood that God is his sole treasure and that there is no evil more tragic than sin because it is sin alone that breaks our relationship with God.

*This morning I meditated on the great evil that is mortal sin, especially in a soul consecrated to God, in a religious and in a Priest.*

*My God, how good and merciful you have been to me! Your mercy has always been waiting for me in spite of my many sins and great ingratitude!*

[Note e Propositi fatti negli Esercizi Spirituali, 2320, 21-9-1920]

Fr. Calabria abhorred tepidness and mediocrity: *“Flee from tepidness and mediocrity as you would from leprosy”*.

He never made peace with his defects, not even with the small ones.

How did he behave when he fell into sin?

- 1) he accepted the fact of the fall.
- 2) he humbled himself before the Lord and, entrusted himself to His mercy, he asked forgiveness of those he had offended by *“suffocating charity”*.
- 3) He started his journey over gain, full of confidence, saying: *“ego dixi, nunc coepi”*.
- 4) He always kept in mind his motto: *“o santo o morto”*.

With this agenda he reached, through his perseverance, the heights of holiness. Failings can be embraced as a gift and

become a school of humility. Every event in the history of each person, if interpreted in the light of God, becomes a school of life and humility. How many times during our lives have we experienced our limits, inabilities and corrupt nature, yet how many times has this experience been transformed into an instrument of salvation? The saints teach us this true wisdom.

*How many trials and tribulations, so much physical and moral suffering. These are all the result of God's great kindness and mercy; through these sufferings he is urging me to give everything to Him as a Christian and as a priest. Lord, you know the depths of my great misery, my grave sins and unceasing ingratitude. If only today were the day, the moment, of my true and lasting conversion.*

[Diary, 345, 25-1-1921]

On the other hand, every time we have been instruments of goodness, we should always recognize that this grace does not come from us, but from the Holy Spirit whose desires, as we know, are contrary to the desires of the flesh (cf. Gal 5:17). Therefore, it is always a good idea to repeat with St. Paul: “*I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me*” (2Cor 12:9).

*Let us never seek the limelight; let us be assured that God will do so if it is necessary for the glory of His name.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni, 5609, 26-11-1931]

The perceptible experience of God's love encountered in the intimacy of inhabitation, helps and strengthens the one who prays with the certainty that he loves God with his whole heart, his whole mind and with all his strength; this is the highest good and an incentive for taking courageous decisions. Nevertheless, a word of caution about these joyful interior experiences bestowed upon us by the Lord: if, on the one hand, they must stimulate us to enter into and persevere in the journey, on the other hand they can lead to attachment to personal tastes and become an obstacle in our path. It is true that the Lord gives to the initiates "*milk as to infants*" (Heb 5:12), but detachment and mortification are needed to purify us from the attachment that comes from the senses and the spirit. It must be stressed that this twofold commitment, which initially calls for great effort, cannot lead to the desired and necessary effect. Our own efforts alone cannot lead us to a profound purification. By persevering in prayer, the Lord will lead us to a new phase of purification, in which God himself will take the initiative, producing a more profound purification.

During this struggle, the devil will also intervene and we will realize that we are unable to achieve any real results with our own strength. "We shall just be able to lift a foot without even touching the first step of the ladder to holiness"; with this spirit of insufficiency and humility, the Lord will come to us and lead us into the second phase, which is the phase of passive purification.

#### **IV.c.2 - Passive purification**

This purification is called “passive purification” because it is the Lord who takes the initiative and guides the entire process.

We are prisoners of *the fear of death* (Cf. Heb 2:4) and *the inability to move from wanting to doing because we are dominated by sin* (Cf. Rom 7). As St. Paul says, only Jesus has power over death and our impotence. This is why it is He who takes us in hand and makes us climb the heights to holiness.

If the one who prays resolves to continue on the journey towards new horizons, in the certainty that his personal sanctification is the Lord’s free gift, he will entrust himself to the action of the Spirit, that He may bring to fulfilment a more profound purification than the one achieved by active purification.

Aridity is the first manifestation of the intervention of the Lord, who takes the initiative from this moment onwards.

*These are days of new sufferings that only the Lord knows. From a human point of view, I feel my strength failing. I live in the most profound darkness and in the most acute aridity. Dear Lord, where are you? I ask you to remain by my side, Lord, because you know what it means to suffer. Jesus, help me. With the help of your grace, I offer everything for the Opera and for the world, that it may return to Christianity.*

[Diary, 1871, 14-4-1950]

There are many forms of aridity: there is an aridity that is the effect of tepidness, mediocrity and sin, a guilty form of aridity that does not come from God. Nevertheless, God permits it in order to shake us out of our sluggishness. If, however, discernment with the spiritual director reveals that the aridity does come from God, then this is a gift, the first sign that the Lord is responding to our desire for holiness. This is the beginning of contemplation. Yet can this possibly come about in times of aridity? Yes, because the ways of the Lord are not our ways (cf. Is 55:8).

The following phenomena are normally experienced during times of aridity: we lose the sensitive perception of God's presence; feelings of abandonment; doubts; we experience difficulty in meditative prayer; inability to express our love for God; we wish to return to our initial experiences; we are tempted to lose heart and are exposed to the powerful temptations of the evil one.

Fr. John experienced aridity and discovered his attachment to life. In his own words:

*For some days now I have been immersed in a great aridity and the Lord is almost hidden from me. I am plagued by spiritual trials that cause me great suffering. I feel a great attachment to this miserable life, though I have many reasons for wishing to leave it. At this time I humble myself before the Lord and ask him to forgive all my sins. With the help of his divine grace, I promise to be always generous in everything I do.*

[Diary, 953, 30-3-1935]

Darkness and abandonment permitted by the Lord.

*Today is a sad day. I feel the burden of my entire misery. I live in total darkness and feel the weight of abandonment that the Lord appears to be allowing. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, make me love you more and more. May your holy will be done: this is the grace I ask of you through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary.*

[Diary, 1221, 4-8-1939]

Some rays of light then more darkness.

*This is the first entry of the new year in my diary: a new year, a new life, as we say. My God, how many times I have said this and how much I should reproach myself. Dear Lord, forgive me. This time, with the help of your grace, I want it to be so. My health is continually put to the test and I am physically and spiritually ill. Every so often I see a small ray of light and then profound darkness. I suffer everything in penance for my sins, trusting entirely in the Lord's great mercy. I always pray to him and I desire to go to heaven and glorify his name forever.*

[Diary, 233, 5-1-1919]

*In all truth I have to say that I have experienced some spiritual consolation in these days of tribulation and physical suffering. I must say that, considering my great misery, the*

*Lord wanted to console me. As I write, I am immersed in darkness and tribulations. Fiat, fiat.*

[Diary, 692, 20-3-1931]

*The Lord justly leaves me to suffer for my sins. Today, in addition to my many sufferings, I also experienced a great displeasure because some of my relatives are not following the right path.*

[Diary, 284, 3-12-1919]

Spiritual suffering and physical pain never abandoned him.

*The Lord is putting me to the test with spiritual suffering. Today I feel physically worse than usual. May God's mercy grant me the grace of enduring everything in peace and resignation so that I might acquire merits for eternal life, which I feel is drawing closer.*

[Diary, 303, 3-5-1920]

In his sufferings and trials he saw a sign of growth in holiness.

The Opera is sowing a great seed and blessed are those who will inherit it. **Suffering, trials and the cross must surely be the only things that will make it grow.** Lord, forgive my sins and grant me the grace that everyone will live according to your will.

[Diary, 515, 17 April 1926]

He also saw purification as an expiation of his sins.



*My trials continue. May the Lord watch over me and grant me his mercy and **the grace to suffer in expiation of my sins and for the good of souls and the Opera.***

[Diary, 739, 11-11-1931]

In suffering he discovered new forms of self-attachment.

In his infinite goodness and mercy, the Lord is putting me to the test; he permits that the people who should be source of comfort for me do not understand me. I feel so much darkness and a great (selfish) attachment to myself. I humble myself and say once again: hic ure hic secas, hic parcas, ut in aeternum non parcas (burn here, cut there, show no mercy now, as long as I find mercy in eternity).

[Diary, 749, 8-1-1932]

*From some days now I have been enduring indescribable pain and anguish. I have an extreme need of prayers and divine mercy. The Opera is great. God has great designs to carry out. May the Lord always find us faithful. Today I made my ordinary confession.*

[Diary, 806, 21-9-1932]

The Lord wanted him to be holy in the way of the cross.

*I made my ordinary confession. **Darkness, trials and suffering are my companions.** Lord, be my Savior.*

[Diary, 1110, 21-1-1938]

Fr. John was aware that his trials were a sign of the Lord's active presence to lead him to holiness.

*I made my ordinary confession. Jesus is working through my trials. Fiat, fiat, Deo gratias.*

[Diary, 1117, 15-2-1938]

### **Fr. John abandoned himself to God.**

The Lord puts us to the test. The Lord is putting me to the test. I abandon myself entirely to Him and, with the help of his grace, I say: Lord, not my will, but yours be done, no matter the cost. For the glory of your name, the good of my poor soul and the good of souls, for the good of your Opera.

[Diary, 1172, 12-11-1938]

### **The active work of Jesus continued.**

In different periods I have spent almost a month at S. Mattia searching for some physical and spiritual relief and, through the grace of God, I have obtained some benefit, though my health is not stable; I have moments of suffering and I suffer even more because the Lord has taken away his consolation, leaving me in the midst of great trials and almost total darkness. I hope that with his help I may draw some benefit from this for the salvation of my soul and as penance for my sins. Lord Jesus, make me entirely yours and, through your great mercy, grant me entry to Heaven.

[Diary, 234, 19-1-1919]

**He asked for the grace to treasure his trials.**

*Fr. Luigi is keeping better, Deo gratias, Deo gratias. The trials, sufferings, crosses, contradictions, and illnesses are all great treasures that God in his great mercy sends in order to purify and sanctify souls, to give life and stability to the Opera of the Poor Servants and the Poor Sisters. Lord, grant me the grace of treasuring my trials in expiation of my sins and for the good of this Opera which is exclusively yours.*

[Diary, 609, 19-2-1930]

*I feel my strength is failing under the weight of unceasing physical, moral and spiritual trials. Lord, you who scrutinize our hearts, help me to fulfill your divine will until the very end. Light, light, light.*

[Diary, 627, 14-6-1930]

Fr. John searched for God's will always and in everything.

*I feel bad and in a total state of abandonment: a great void, great trials. Lord, have pity on me and grant me the grace of doing your will in everything.*

[Diary, 724, 5-9-1931]

*I need the Lord's help so much, how many trials and sufferings I endure. I feel, and I am, completely miserable! Holy Mother Mary, pray to Jesus for me.*

[Diary, 726, 14-9-1931]

*Yesterday I made a partially extraordinary confession. During the night I suffered. Today I am also afflicted by old and new sufferings. May it all serve as expiation for my sins and for this great Opera. Jesus is making me look at my nothingness and the nullity of all that I have done. Satan would like to use this to discourage me. With the grace of God I humble myself. I take courage and have great trust in the merits of Jesus and I promise, with the help of divine grace, to offer what remains of my life and then, through the kindness and mercy of God, enter Heaven.*

[Diary, 523, 4-8-1926]

We therefore need to make a great effort, a prayer that cries out in order to overcome the voices that would reduce us to silence (cf. the blind man of Jericho, Mk 10:46-52). The purpose of this painful state is to lead the one who prays to detachment from everything that stands in the way of love for God and the brothers. Practically, these obstacles are: creatures, to whom we look for our own satisfaction, and the spiritual goods we pursue for the same reason. God's gift of aridity, which desires to help us make authentic progress in our journey towards holiness, will detach us from these impediments if we accept it and live it in conformity with his will.

In addition to aridity the Lord will also allow the evil one to tempt us:

*Let us remember that the devil always works on the natural plane and he cannot do any harm to those who do not want it, unless they give him the chance; in order to succeed he needs our cooperation, our weakness, our rationality, a favorable inclination, attachment to things, roles, work, persons, etc.*

[L. a R., no. LXIX, Verona, 18-11-1951, p. 322]

...and He will send us some crosses that we don't have to look for, just accept them when they come and, if we are attentive, we will find them in our daily life. To fight the evil one with Him and accept the cross from Him are very valid means for making progress in prayer and sanctification. The saints saw the cross as a purifying gift for progress in personal sanctification. St. Theresa of the Child Jesus used to complain: "Lord, you neglected Theresa today because you did not send her the gift of a cross". Some would say that this is "masochism". This is certainly the case of those who reason according to psychology, but holiness speaks another language. The cross is called "purification" in view of the death of our former self so that we can put on the new self (cf. Eph 4:24).

Anyone who hears the call to holiness and encounters the cross will say that the Lord is purifying him and, consequently, the cross will be easier to accept.

*My dear sons, our life comes to an end, death comes to us and the curtain falls on our life and thus everything ends. Let us detach ourselves from the things of the world before death separates us from them. We must not value that which*

*ends, but store up for ourselves the treasures and happiness that last forever.*

[Pensieri, Massime, Detti, 5602, 15-3-1919]

*Dear Sisters in Jesus Christ, if you wish God to be in your lives, always remember that you must go to Him with a heart that is detached from earthly things and, in all your actions look only for Jesus, and remember that any attachment to the world, no matter how small, is an obstacle between you and Jesus.*

[Lettere collettive alle Sorelle \* S34, Retreat, May 1914]

In prayer we understand that life is an existence “for” someone: in other words, it means we live our specific vocation according to God’s plan. He did not create us to live closed in upon ourselves, but for Him and the brothers.

At this stage of the journey, the Lord will give us the light we need in order to carry out the decisions required by the spirit of the Opera seeking the glory of God, the good of souls, especially the most abandoned ones, those that Fr. John called “**pearls**”, the sanctification of the Church and the renewal of the world, feeling the necessity of doing God’s will in a hidden manner (“buseta e taneta”).

*The Opera of the Buoni Fanciulli is a great work because it was born of God’s great love and of his divine will. Let us always remember that it is destined to do great things for the glory of God and the good of souls, for the benefit of the*

*whole of humanity. We are the fortunate ones, chosen for this Opera; the apostles were fortunate and we, in certain aspects, have nothing to envy them. The Lord who called them founded this Opera to call us to its service.*

*My brothers, it is up to us to do as the apostles did, in other words to respond to this call in such a way that we become true and suitable tools for this great task.*

[Conferenze ed Esortazioni, 2293/M, 14-8-1926]

The purification carried out by the Lord, and whose price is aridity, obtains the first effect of leading us into humility, so that we may seek the Lord for the Lord's sake. Fr. Calabria reminds us of the absolute necessity of being small and humble so that the Lord can accomplish his designs.

*Let us be humble. Humility is the foundation of holiness, the salvation of the sinner. Pride, on the other hand, is the root of all evil, even in this world; the proud man is the direct collaborator of Satan, spirit of pride and arrogance; the proud man is worse than the idolater: the latter adores another, whilst the proud man adores himself.*

[L. a R., no. XL, \*6008/A, Palm Sunday (25-3) 1945, p.177]

My brothers, do we want to save our soul and go to heaven? Indeed, we do. Yes, let us save our souls! Every one of us in Heaven after this earthly pilgrimage because we have all been created for our heavenly homeland; yet, let us remember that humility is the first necessary condition. As our

Lord once said: “Unless you become like little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven”. When St. Augustine was asked what was the main religious, answered: “the first of all virtues is humility, the second is humility, the third is humility”, and this amounts to saying that humility must be the foundation on which all the duties and virtues of the Christian are based. All of these are just various forms of humility.

I also recommend you to avoid excessive talk about self; continual self-humiliation is often just pride clothed in humility. “I am good for nothing, I am a wretched creature”, one woman says. Yet, see how she reacts when she realizes that you agree with her! A man looks for the last place but hopes to be called forward. This, my brothers, is the most refined form of pride.

Let us apply ourselves, from this moment onwards, to striving for true humility, the humility taught and practiced by Jesus Christ. Humility of heart: may it be born in our hearts out of the sincere conviction of our nothingness and misery; may it make us love a life that is despicable and hidden from the eyes of the world, and make us cheerful in humbling ourselves before everyone for the love of Jesus. My brothers, great as our humiliations may be, they are nothing compared with the ones that Jesus embraced out of love of us. He is the God who humbled Himself whilst we are mere creatures; He is Holy whilst we are miserable sinners, we owe Him all honor and glory; what do we deserve on account of our many sins? My brothers, with the Lord’s grace, let us resolve this evening to be truly and profoundly humble. Let us never despise anyone, let us love everyone, let us not desire the deceitful praise of men,



let us never speak about ourselves, neither in good nor in evil. Let us humble ourselves for the love of Jesus, and let us remember his words: “Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted”.

[Esercizi Spirituali – Omelie – Ritiri – Esortazioni – 3839, Undated]

As time passes we shall discover the greatness of the Opera, our love for the Opera, which Fr. John felt with a spirit of detachment. The Opera too was “pro-existent” and he therefore did not look out for its financial interests, propaganda or vocations. In his mind the Opera was completely oriented and committed to the glory of God, the salvation of souls and the good of the Church. Everything was for the Church and he wanted the Church to be uppermost in our minds.

*Let the Church be above all our ideals; let all that we do, suffer and desire be oriented to the coming of God’s holy Kingdom and the glorification of the Church, which is the true ark of salvation in the tempestuous sea of life.*

[L. a R., no. LXXXVI, Verona, 11-2-1954, p. 419]

The cry, “**My Church, my Church!**” still rings in our ears. How many times I heard this cry!

The way of praying changes here. The efforts to move the intellect with meditative prayer are useless and the same applies to our efforts to engage in dialogue with the Lord.

If we insist in this endeavor in a voluntaristic manner, we could come face to face with its negative effects. In this

inability to pray, we should accept to remain in silence and interior calm, **look lovingly upon the Lord** present in the Eucharist, represented in a holy image or contemplated within our heart. This was how Fr. John prayed in times of aridity.

*My God, how many sorrows and trials assail me from all sides; those who should assist and comfort me are allowed by the Lord to be a source of suffering for me. There are times at which only faith and contemplation of the crucifix sustain me. For the last week I have felt the Lord's help and mercy more keenly. In everything may I live and die entrusted to the heart of Divine Providence.*

[Diary, 346, 26-2-1921]

This silent prayer is in conformity with the will of God who wants to give us solid food (cf Heb 5:14), a sign that we are heading towards our goal, searching for God alone. We have already entered into the way of contemplation, which begins here and lasts until the very end of our journey.

Aridity, which is a phenomenon of the dark night of the soul, aims at purifying the senses, purifying us from our attachment to inner joys and then we can begin to search for God for His own sake.

Aridity will then be accepted as an act of love. The lack of any feeling causes profound suffering, but if aridity gives birth to the life of contemplation then it is welcome indeed!

In this stage of passive purification, the Lord purifies us through the cross, which we once refused but now we begin to accept as a gift. It is not necessary to go and look for this cross

because God Himself will give it to us in proportion to our ability to carry it. Did he not promise the cross to those who wished to follow him? *“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me”* (Lk 9:23).

Every day is marked by the cross: humiliations, misunderstandings, struggles, aches and pains, sorrow, loss of possessions, detachment from places and persons that we love.

### **Fr. John did not want painful penances**

*Let us therefore do our penance and mortify, above all, our “reason”, as St. Philip used to say; let us obey our Superiors in a spirit of faith and we will have made our contribution to the Opera and the entire world. Let us also strive to feel the need for penance, including bodily penance, for ourselves first and foremost, for our sins, and out of charity towards the brothers who suffer so much in this time of trial for all.*

[L. a R., no. XXXII, 8-12-1943, p.132]

*In his own words he was living a bodily penance and, in his daily life, he applied the teaching of St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians: “I treat my body hard and make it obey me, for, having been an announcer myself, I should not want to be disqualified”* (1Cor 9:27).

Fr. John taught us to accept the cross each day as a purification sent by the Lord:

*I feel that my suffering, united to the suffering of Jesus, is purifying my soul and helping to accomplish the great designs of the present hour, the Lord's hour.*

[Diary, 2023, 7-4-1954]

He saw purification as the price of his sanctification and the salvation of souls.

*My dear and beloved children of Rome.*

*May the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus be with you always. I am here in front of my Crucifix, thinking and meditating on the infinite love of Christ, who loved us until his total immolation on the cross and redeemed us with his most precious blood. My God, how high is the price of souls, how much we have to struggle and suffer in order to save them!*

[L. a R., no. LXVIII, Verona, 30-1-1950, p. 311]

At this level the Lord will give us the great gift of seeing our crosses clearly. Normally, they are veiled and we, from our side of the veil, perceive them in a rational manner, condemning ourselves to a spiral of rejection and, therefore, of suffering. On the contrary, if our faith gives us a glimpse of the other side of the veil, we will discover the mystery of love because God is love and everything He does is love.

It is the rejection of the cross, not the cross itself, that makes us suffer.

In this phase, the price we pay consists in suffering, but the Lord also gives us the gift of being able to pay this price, making the yoke easy and the burden light (cf. Mt 11:29).

Of the purification of the senses, which are the entry point of creatures to whom we are so easily attached as a result of the world's deception, Fr. John wrote:

*Unfortunately, we live in a world that is more pagan than Christian; people only think of and live for the world, the satisfaction of the senses and the passions; they deceive themselves by thinking they will find happiness in these things. We all naturally long for happiness, we were made for happiness, but men do not find what they are looking for and find only unhappiness.*

[L. a R., no. LXIII, Feast of the Precious Blood 1949, p. 292]

The Lord proceeds with the process of purification: after the purification of the external senses, He begins the purification of the faculties and He does this through the theological virtues.

#### **IV.c.3 - Purification in the exercise of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity**

*This is the special task of the Poor Servants: to carry faith in God into the world, that living and industrious faith that generates trust in God and in His paternal Providence; we must enlighten the dark night of the world, we must irradiate*

*the pure light of Christ and his Gospel, which is the divine law for all men, and especially for us.*

[L. a R., no. XLVIII, Lent 1946, p.223]

With these lapidary words, the Founder sums up the mission of the Opera, which is lived out in the exercise of the theological virtues, a very precious gift that must be transmitted to the whole world.

The new phase into which the Lord leads us is one of great luminosity, transferring us into the heart of the pure and genuine spirit. The exercise of the theological virtues is not the fruit of our efforts, or the result of our human virtues, sustained though they are by God's grace: it is a gift because it belongs to the supernatural order.

Faith, hope and charity make us participate in the divine nature. The inner transformation it accomplishes makes us capable of living them not only as moral virtues, but of living them in all their potential, which comes from the supernatural strength they infuse in us. "There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength" (Ph 4:13).

The characteristic of the life of faith, which consists in faith, trust and abandonment to God the Father, and to which we must bear witness to the world through our charism, is made visible in our absolute security in situations of absolute precariousness and uncertainty, as we saw in the choices made by Fr. John in living the "Quaerite". We can do this only if they are given to us.

Dear brothers, you are going to Rome. Remember that you are being sent by the same Jesus who one day sent his Apostles into the world to preach and, above all, practice the Gospel. I assure you that I as soon as I became a priest, upon reading the Gospel passage that describes how the Apostles were sent out by the Redeemer without a staff or haversack and with only a great trust in God, those words made a profound impression on me and I have always carried them engraved upon my heart. Now I understand why they so impressed me; it was the sign of God's will that those of us who belong to this Opera were to possess this spirit. Go, therefore, but go as the Apostles did: without any concern for temporal things and with no worries. This is the uniform you must wear.. God will never abandon you and you will always be rich in your poverty; if you ever find yourselves in need, the Lord will also perform miracles for you.

Take to Rome the spirit of the Opera. Let your one and only thought be for the Kingdom of God and the salvation of souls. Be a living Gospel and practice before preaching. Live the Gospel to the letter and may this be your only fortune, the secret by which you accomplish great things.

[L. a R., no., 1, 24-2-1932, p.2]

The experience of aridity brings us face to face with our fragility and, therefore, we would deceive ourselves if we were to trust in ourselves alone. The same would be true if we to look for human protection and worldly support.

*I recommend a spirit of special faith; let us not be worried about our needs: these do not concern us. Our task is to search for the Kingdom of God, search for souls and observe the Rules; let us be very certain that the Lord will do the rest. Jesus has told us that those who believe in him will perform the same works, and even greater works. Let us remember that this is the special purpose of the Opera.*

[L. a R., no. VII, Christmas A.S., p. 30]

Faith purifies the intellect from rationality and illuminates it in discovering the active presence of God in our personal life history and in the history of the Opera. When this is marked by the cross, we are given a taste of its wisdom (1Cor 1:24). Here one is given knowledge of God and self-knowledge in God.

Fr. Calabria wrote:

*The cross, a delightful, dear and tender name: how eloquent is this precious word! Before Jesus was nailed to the cross, it was a sign of disgrace and ignominy and, afterwards, it became the sign of honor and glory. It was made precious and bathed in the blood of the Man-God and was no longer an instrument of horror, worthy only of the last breath and curses of slaves and assassins. It became a sign of consolation and comfort, a holy instrument; kings and emperors are proud to wear it shining on their crowns, as are the great heroes whose breasts it adorns. Yes, my dear brothers, the cross is, and always will be, the mirror and the hope of the Christian people.*



[Santi – Novene – Tridui – 5677, Exaltation of the Holy Cross]

At the same time, faith brings to light any residue of rationality and causes a certain degree of dissatisfaction.

*You said you belong to “Divine Providence”: you should, therefore, have abandoned yourself to it without seeking any human support. God alone was to be your only support; why, then, your lack of trust and the discouragement in times of trial; why do you govern your behavior more with the light of reason than the principles of faith?*

[L. a R., no. XXIV, 1-11-1940, p. 90]

*...do not seek human support and protection because the Lord is jealous; we must have total and steadfast trust in Him; we must not lose that trust even in the difficult and critical moments that will inevitably come our way.*

[L. a R., no. LXIX, Verona, 1-7-1951, p.321]

Love our Lord Jesus Christ; cultivate practical faith in his active presence among us. He is close to us, not distant; indeed, he dwells within us. Let us allow ourselves to be guided by Him; let us try to imitate his example and absorb his doctrine and divine precepts.

How many times, my dear brothers, have I exhorted you to have faith! We must have a practical faith in God and in his Providence that takes care of all things, but which shows us a very special care and attention. God does not contradict

himself nor does he go back on his promises; let us look for his Kingdom always and above all else and he will give us everything we need for our material life.

[L. a R., no. LXXXIII, Verona, 31-8-1953, p. 406]

The theological virtue of hope, which is synonymous with trust, was always associated by the Founder with faith:

Faith in God's paternal love and, therefore, unlimited trust and filial abandonment to Divine Providence, which is the typical characteristic of our Opera, one of the teachings that the Lord wants to give to the world through it.

[L. a R., no. LVIII, Feast of the Precious Blood 1949, p.293]

What is the purifying function of hope?

The virtue of hope purifies the memory of the recollection of events, experiences, situations, humiliations and resentment that lead the one who prays to close in upon himself; it does the same with the nostalgic memories of joyful spiritual experiences that cause the same effect when one takes possession of them instead of welcoming them as gifts of the Spirit. In addition, hope frees the mind of fear for the future, instilling within us trust in the faithful God. Just as the intellect has some residue of rationality after purification, so, too, the memory still has some residue of fear, that fear which is caused by the fear of death and loss.

The theological virtue of charity purifies the will from the attachments to one's own projects, which turn us away

from God's plans, and makes the one who prays aware of all that is still tied to his own will, not loving totally the Loved One. Unless our abandonment to the Father's loving Providence for all that concerns our earthly life (spiritual and material) is sustained by a trusting faith, it hinders the one who prays from a blind trust in the adventure of sanctification.

*Let us enter with great trust into God's kindness, with full and total abandonment to Him, ready to do anything in order to carry out his will.*

[L. a R., no. IV, 11-9-1933, p.13]

During this phase the Lord will free us from the fear of death and loss, and we will begin to savor the simplicity and the unity so desired by those who pray; we will enter the spiritual infancy given to the little ones, to whom God grants knowledge of his mysteries (cf. Mt 11:25). The secret of the spiritual life consists in becoming ever more little (cf. Mt 18:3) and in full awareness of being little. The little one entrusts himself to the Father and becomes his witness. The little fulfils the condition for living the pure and genuine spirit of the Opera, which is the spirit of littleness.

*Dear brothers, let us be little and we shall become great; let us be poor and we shall become rich; let us shun human protection, indeed, let us fear it, and we shall enjoy God's protection.*

[L. a R., no. VII. Christmas A.S., 1933, p.30]

The distinctive characteristic of the Opera (and we are the Opera) consists in being little in order to become great, in being poor in order to become rich, in being the last in order to become the first.

*The Opera is great, whilst all of us, priests and brothers, should be very small and then God will accomplish great things through us.*

[Diary, 842, 19-7-1933]

The little one believes and accepts the paradoxes of the Gospel, which Fr. John lived and was therefore able to speak of living the Gospel “to the letter”.

Prayer during this phase is quiet, the prayer of one who has abandoned himself at the father’s knees, the prayer of one who trusts:

*I am worried and disturbed by a thought that does not concern me, but which concerns Jesus, the absolute Master of this House. Doubt alone is a great offence against God. There can be no doubt whatsoever that Divine Providence will take care of everything, on the sole condition that we truly seek the kingdom of God, that we are humble, like rags, and that in times of trial we have more faith. Lord Jesus, I throw myself into your arms and I abandon myself entirely to your Divine Providence.*

[Diary, 114, 16-1-1917]

Fr. John knew no “*anxiety, preoccupation and concern*” (cf. Mt 6:25). He has his loving Father (Abbà) by his side:

*Let us trust in the Lord; I say to you once again: let us believe in the Lord with a firm, unshakeable and simple faith. An episode of many years ago comes to my mind. There was a ship in the grip of a storm, the passengers in fear and trepidation because of the imminent danger of sinking. In the midst of the terrified passengers there was a young child playing in the corner of the ship without any fear. When he was asked why he was not afraid, the child told them that his father was at the helm and that he was not afraid. Dearly beloved brothers, the Heavenly Father is at the helm of our ship ...*

[L. a R., no. LXXVIII, 18-11-1952, p.385]

What a stupendous freedom one experiences at this level! It is the freedom of the little child who, even when he makes some mistakes, does not get bitter; he humbles himself, repents and, as St. Theresa of the Child Jesus says, jumps onto his father’s knees and asks for his embrace. Jesus came to make the Father known to us (cf. Jn 17:6;26), so that we might always remain little at heart in the profound humility, and the Spirit gives us this gift (cf. Rom 8:15).

We have seen how Fr. John loved littleness, the essential condition for the Father to make himself known. Unfortunately it often happens that we become adolescents in our pride and begin to dream of independence; as a result, God “our dad” becomes God “our Father”. If pride increases and

the desire for autonomy becomes adult, the “father” dies and becomes the “master”. Since we cannot bear being subject to the master, we escape from him, as did the “prodigal son” (cf. Lk 15:11-38). The same thing happens to many young people and adults who abandon religious practice, but the same thing can also happen to consecrated people.

What can we do from within the misery of autonomy and profound dissatisfaction?

*We must turn back because we have taken a wrong road. We must awake from our lukewarm life, which is so distant from the purpose of the Opera; we must live the life of faith and abandonment as required by our project, so that this life may be sanctified.*

[L. a R., no. III, 19-3-1933, p.10]

To turn back and become “little” once again in order to retrieve the relationship “loving dad-little child”. Once the poor servant has become little, even though he finds himself in a condition of great uncertainty, he will be capable of living in abandonment to God in total certainty, without any anxiety, because he trusts exclusively in God, his rock. The poor servant must never forget that “*it is necessary to be born again*” (Jn 3:3) in order to become little; he must also preserve this littleness, overcoming the temptation of autonomy from God and looking for security far from Him.

Prayer in the purification of the theological virtues transforms the Poor Servant, giving him the charism of

abandonment to the Father, making him an authentic witness of God's fatherhood through his life.

*Lord, sustain my faith. I suffered today because some people, who ought to have a lot of faith and pass it on to the faithful in their sacred ministry, said that it was all right to look after souls but that we had to take care of the means to do so. My God, either we believe in the Divine Providence that supports this House in a very special way, or we don't. If we do believe, then we must abandon ourselves totally and always to God, especially in the most difficult moments, and glorify His name. If we don't believe, we should close the house and leave.*

[Diary, 121, 20-2-1917]

The three theological virtues also need further purification and the one who prays also feels the same need. This desire makes him ready to enter into the most purifying phase of the journey.

#### **IV.c.4 - Purification in the dark night of the Soul**

*"I am the one who reproveth and disciplines all those he loves"* (Ap 3:19). This is the purification reserved by the Lord for the ones He loves. Freed from the fear of death and loss, we enter into the decisive phase of ultimate purification, abandoning ourselves in confidence to God's initiative, as Fr. John did.

The dark night of the Soul is the phase that prepares us for the transforming union, as does contemplation true and

proper. St. Theresa of Jesus says: *“The Lord gives the gift of contemplation to those he wants, when he wants and as he wants”*. It is a gift, therefore, but it is also generally the mature fruit of the contemplation as we have described it until now in these pages. It must be said that the purification of the spirit of the one who prays can be quite painful and may cause fear in anyone who has witnessed it in the saints, a fear made worse by the evil one. However, we know that the Lord never tests us beyond our strength (cf. 1Cor 10:13). The experience of the “dark night of the soul” will not be the same for everyone; we need to have full trust in the One who is the Author and the Agent of holiness. The Lord always acts in full respect of the person, giving him the internal and external trials that are proportionate to the mission to which he is called. Fr. Calabria, who was called to a great mission in the Church and in the world, paid a very high price in trials and extraordinary suffering, as Fr. Natale had predicted.

His inner trials began as long ago as 1923.

*Through God’s grace and mercy I have no longer experienced certain painful trials; unfortunately, I have had others of a different kind. They are very distressing trials of a pure spiritual nature, something I had never experienced until now. I hope that the Lord will help me to overcome them and I may thereby give him a sincere token of my faith and my love. Tomorrow is the feast of Pentecost: may the Holy Spirit descend upon me and everyone and fill our hearts with his divine Love.*



[Diary, 432, 19-5-1923]

His inner trials continued...

*My God, how distressing and painful are the trials of the spirit. No physical pain can equal them. Dear Lord, enlighten me, grant me your great love and show kindness towards me.*

[Diary, 587, 25-5-1929]

We now come to the most distressing period of Fr. John's dark night of the soul.

*My spiritual trials are so painful. Fiat, fiat.*

[Diary, 1873, 16 –4-1950]

Thanks to God's grace, I have been on retreat at S. Zeno since Monday. Will this be my last retreat? My poor soul is immersed in trials and pure suffering. I trust in Jesus. The Opera belongs entirely to him. The Lord will accomplish great things if the Opera is as He wants it to be. The present hour is now the time of God's justice. God works in his own time. Holy priests, holy religious and holy Christian people, all walking towards holiness.

[Diary, 1987, 4-9-1952]

Fr. John looked upon his sufferings as a source of great benefit for the sanctification of the Opera.

*Vigil of All Saints. I have endured days of trial as never before. My spiritual director, speaking in God's name, tells me that they are for the benefit of my sanctification and for the Opera of the Poor Servants. Jesus help me.*

[Diary, 1994, 31-10-1952]

Dark night of the spirit, but a night of love in God's will.

*How admirable are God's ways, which are visible in man's freedom, including those nearest to me. I had been at Negrar for a month and I understood many things in my stay there. I suffered greatly, I had to leave that place which is so dear to me, and on Monday 26, in obedience to dear Fr. Luigi Pedrollo, I came here to S. Zeno, where I have the impression of even greater suffering and Divine Providence appears to have abandoned me. Night of love...What a holy moment is the one that I can now offer. May the Lord Jesus open my eyes and grant me his great mercy and the strength to do his divine will, no matter the cost. What will become of me, Lord? How poor I am. May all my dear brothers help me and my poor soul. How I remember them; may they always possess the pure and genuine spirit, the only way in which we can accomplish the divine plans.*

[Diary, 2028, Verona, 29-4-1954]

Prof. Cherubino Trabucchi thus wrote about the mystery of the Founder's suffering: *"In order to understand the suffering of Fr. Calabria, we must have the courage to contemplate in faith the spectacle of Christ upon the cross. The*

*man of Golgotha who reached the extremity of suffering: without any contact with people, useless and with the sense of a failed mission. The psychological and physical sufferings of Fr. Calabria, which would have led others to selfish anguish, aroused in him an evangelical and ecumenical anguish”.*

In October 1950, Cardinal Schuster visited Fr. John in Verona. After speaking at length with him, he said to the religious he met as he came out of the room: “I see the hand of God in the sufferings of Fr. Calabria. When God wants to make use of a soul, he crushes it ....the passage of Isaiah 53:10 may be applied to him. The bare cross. When trials and tribulation come from God, he intends to put a soul seriously to the test and no human consolation brings relief. The hand of the Lord is here. It grieves me to say this about Fr. Calabria, but that is how things are, as they were with Mary and the elderly Simeon”.

In 1948 Fr. Calabria wrote to Abbot Caronti:

“I have told you on so many occasions that souls demand sacrifice; now I must add that they cause bloodshed. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to consume oneself and suffer for souls. Jesus himself was born in the most abject poverty and died in the most agonizing pain”.

[Lettera all’ Abate Caronti, 1948]

Fr. Calabria could be numbered among the martyrs because he bore witness to faith, trust and abandonment to God

as he suffered the martyrdom of the heart, just like the Blessed Virgin Mary.

What surprises is that Fr. Calabria never asked for prayers in order to find relief from his suffering. He always asked for the grace of **knowing/discovering/appreciating the great gift of suffering**. We are in the presence of a great mystic.

*We must be ready and prepared, thinking of the great gift of suffering that makes us like Our Lord Jesus Christ.*

[L. a R., no. L, Pentecost 1947, p.235]

...pray for your poor father, now so near to the great call, that I may understand the great gift of suffering and treasure it for my poor soul, first, and then for this humble and great Opera.

[L. a R., no. LXXXVIII, Verona, Saturday 23-10-1954, p.425]

This phase of the spiritual life produces self-abnegation, the stripping of self, kenosis (self-diminishment) and entrance into the journey of nothingness, all of which are essential for reaching the All (“My God, my All” [St. Francis of Assisi]). In this phase, Fr. Calabria’s unceasing exhortation to be “like rags, like clay, without a head, ready for all” are fulfilled. These virtues, which are the condition for living the poor and genuine spirit, are not the fruit of our good intentions and efforts, but a free gift of the Lord that are bestowed upon us at the high price of purification.

The virtues proposed to us by Fr. John are incomprehensible to reason, which considers them as a mutilation of the human person. Only faith, a great faith that penetrates the mystery of the cross, is capable of seeing in them the wisdom of God (cf. 1Cor 1:24). Purification in this phase is passive because it is God Himself who carries it out, as Cardinal Schuster said, and He carries it out by making us participate in the death of Christ, leading us to the cross so that we may be crucified with Christ. Then the words of St. Paul will be fulfilled: *“I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me”* (Gal 2:20).

Fr. John feels that he is associated with the sufferings of Christ.

*God alone knows my physical and spiritual suffering. Sometimes I feel that only Jesus has suffered so. Lord, I offer my sufferings for my soul and the Opera. Fiat!*

[Diary, 1879, 10-6-1950]

*My internal and external sufferings, my physical and spiritual trials, continue. May the Lord grant me the grace of seeing them in the light of God, as expiation for my sins and for the benefit and sanctification of the Opera. With God’s grace I made my ordinary confession.*

[Diary, 1668, 19-1-1947]

It is clearly a serious matter and woe betide us if we repeat lightheartedly the phrases of Fr. Calabria without thinking of the genuine meaning they express and, above all, of

the price that must be paid in order to live them concretely. Each one of us must ask himself: what does the Lord want from me in order to be a true Poor Servant? There is only one answer: he wants me to let him accomplish the work of emptying me of self; he wants to send me my daily cross, help me to carry it and say in every moment my “fiat” (may your will be done). Through this purification, He wants to conform my will to His because it is only when my will disappears totally that my transformation in Christ will come about. Fr. John wrote:

*These are days of new sufferings that only the Lord knows. From a human point of view, I feel my strength failing. I live in the most profound darkness and in the most acute aridity. Dear Lord, where are you? I ask you to remain by my side, Lord, because you know what it means to suffer. Jesus, help me. With the help of your grace, I offer everything for the Opera and for the world, that it may return to Christianity.*

[Diary, 1871, 14-4-1950]

*Divine Providence has allowed me to suffer lengthy periods of trials and suffering that only the Lord knows. How much I have learned through my trials! Thanks to a special grace of God, I am now well and I prepare myself for the great call to judgment that may arrive at any moment.*

[Diary, 1899, 17-8-1951]

#### **IV.c. 5 - The peak of transforming union and pure contemplation**

At this peak moment, man reaches the highest level of his humanity because he is transformed into the Christ-man.

*Imagine the joy of Mary, our Blessed Mother, when she sees us become like her Son: his features reproduced in us, making each one of us a miniature Jesus, in humility and poverty, in the perfect conformity of our will to the will of God, our heavenly Father, in generous and steadfast obedience even at the cost of the greatest sacrifice, the total immolation of self! How much will Mary love us, with what gifts and graces will she enrich our poor soul!*

[L. a R., no. LXXXVIII, Verona, Saturday 23-10-1954, p.427]

Purification is not a mutilation of human values, but the transformation of all that is not human, such as the slavery of fear, the psychological complexes that cause pettiness, closure, the sin of pride and, consequently, the inability to love. Anyone who knew Fr. Calabria bears witness to feeling intensely loved by him, a love that was universal, free and supernatural, the same love of Jesus.

The accomplishment of the transforming union comes about through the fusion of God's will with the will of the one who prays. This is "perfect charity", becoming "*living Gospels*". It is the fulfilment of the Word: "*I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but*

*with the life of Christ who lives in me”* (Gal 2:20). It is the fulfilment of the Paschal Mystery in us.

This transformation cannot be described because it is lived out in the profound depths of one’s being. The prayer of this phase is the prayer of contemplation, which is not necessarily accompanied by mystical phenomena. Fr. Calabria does not seem to have experienced any such phenomena, but even if he did, he never spoke of them, indeed, he even had a certain fear of them. Before accepting supernatural manifestations, he wanted to have the confirmation of very balanced and extraordinarily wise persons. The ecstasy of Fr. Calabria was very normal and stemmed from the contemplation of the great mysteries.

If only we truly lived the great truths of our faith: the ineffable mystery of the Incarnation, the Crib, Calvary, the Eucharist, God in our midst, with us, within us! These mysteries should sweep us away into the ecstasy of reciprocity and love! People no longer listen to sermons, but if they saw these truths embodied in us, they would be truly struck by them!

[L. a R., no. LXIII, Feast of the Most Precious Blood 1949, pages 292-293]

Can we say at this point: “It is good for us to be here?” No! Because no one can say he has reached the goal because there is always a seed of sin within us. Fr. John used to say: “*No age, no dignity or degree of holiness can guarantee our perseverance*”. Before him, St. Paul said: “*Work for your*



*salvation in fear and trembling*” (Ph 2:12). Woe to us if we become presumptuous! We are, and remain, “*zero and misery*”.

The transforming union in the sole will of God. This is the stage that makes us “*living Gospels*” or, as Fr. John used to say, “another Jesus” because, as he also said, “*The Gospel is Jesus*”. In this expression of the Founder, we understand that there is a gift, which is the fruit of self-purification to the point of “*losing one’s own life to find the life of Christ*” (cf. Mt 16:25). When Fr. John insisted that the salvation of this poor humanity would come about when it returned to the Gospel, he was not simply saying words: he was speaking with his entire person, imbued as he was with the Gospel. It is remarkable to see just how much coherence there is between the life and the writings of Fr. John!

*Everything in the Christian life has to be geared towards eternal life. Let us remember that the word Christian means “alter Christus” (another Christ). Let us remember what Jesus did in order to redeem us and save us: love looks for love in return.*

[Pensieri, Massime, Detti, 5604, 18-3-1919]

*Our homeland, Italy, God’s earthly Eden, must be the beacon usque ad finem terrae (to the ends of the earth), of the Gospel and, consequently, we, priests, religious and Christian people, must practice the Gospel under the infallible guidance of the Holy Father, the true Vicar of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian must be another Christ. Jesus calls us unceasingly to this. The flood we have witnessed also calls us to this. The*

*whole world looks to us and wants to see us as Jesus Christ wishes to see us. This is an awesome and terrible hour. It is our task to ensure that Satan does not triumph. The Opera of the Poor Servants has a special mission at the present time: to comply with God's call. What a great responsibility! The few will form the many. 12 Apostles! We must turn back to the right path. Only the practice of the Gospel will suffice.*

[Diary, 1935, 16-11-1951]

*5 September- With the grace of God I must place myself under the banner of Jesus, and fight bravely to conquer myself and my passions in order to become an "alter Christus", to conquer the world and establish his holy Kingdom.*

[Note e Propositi Fatti negli Esercizi Spirituali, 4163, Retreat 1943]

This is how the Founder wanted the Poor Servants to be, warning them that one cannot conform to the Gospel simply through an evangelical culture, but living the "*more apostolorum*" (as the apostles did) in practice as "*rags, clay, without a head, hidden...*", dying to oneself and to every attachment to creatures. Self-annihilation calls for a journey of holiness that God himself fulfills, asking us to cooperate in the "*via crucis*". The Lord offers us this journey and He, who is faithful, guarantees that He will fulfill it. In what way, we do not know. Not even Abraham or Mary knew and, we can say, not even Fr. John knew. What was his reply?

By this time, Fr. John was living in total abandonment to God, as his own expression clearly testified: *“I close my eyes and abandon myself”*.

*I am in a state of physical and spiritual suffering such as I have never known before. With the grace of God, I close my eyes and abandon myself to His divine mercy and kindness.*

[Diary, 1673, 22-2-1947]

Fr. John is our model of being *“ready for anything”*, in complete trust that God will fulfill His will in us in accordance with the mission to which he has called us.

My health is middling, but it doesn't matter, it is enough to do God's holy will and suffer everything for the love of God and in penance for my sins.

[Diary, 174, 11 February 1918]

The transforming union of our will with the will of God, which consists in a sole “yes” and a sole “no” to the Lord, is the means through which the union is achieved; here we have a taste of the profound peace that is experienced also in the great purifying trials, recognizing them as a gift.

On 9 April 1954, in the full darkness of the night of the soul, Fr. John wrote in his Diary: *“During this dark night of the soul, I experienced every so often a small ray of light and even some joy. Yesterday was a day of great serenity. My physical and spiritual health is good”*.

After the fusion of our own will with the will of God, the Lord accomplishes a further transforming union that invests the whole person, conforming him totally to Christ. The one who prays will then live God's eternal plan: *"Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence"* (Ep 1:4).

I recommend to you the great homily that is "good example" in the House and outside; that all may see that you are special Religious; you wear no uniform, let your uniform and emblem be virtue, visible in your behavior, conversation and the way in which you conduct your business, etc.

[L. a R., no. XXXIII, 8-12-1943, p.136]

Was this total transformation of being accomplished in Fr. John? Something supernatural truly shone forth from him, to the extent that some people said after visiting him, "I feel I have been in God's presence".

His presence was enough to make one perceive a supernatural atmosphere. His word, gaze, gestures, manifestations of affection all revealed his profound spirituality.

The goal of the Opera consists in making God's paternity visible. In Fr. John, as we have said, this was so visible that he became a living presence of God the Father.

These are all signs of the transforming union of his person in Christ, the result of a long journey in prayer, intimacy and exercise of God's Love.

In canonizing him, the Church confirmed his conformity to Christ and offers him to us as a true model of holiness. Through his life and example, Fr. John began a movement of holiness, inviting all to follow him, assuring us that holiness is possible as long as we trust in the God who does the impossible.

*I see how much Jesus is calling the Poor Servants to personal holiness in accordance with the pure and genuine spirit that the Lord has sown within the Opera, which belongs entirely to Him. Heaven help us if we, who are so privileged, do not respond to his call by becoming holy. We shall be responsible for all the terrible consequences and of the evil that will come about, as well as putting the salvation of our souls at risk.*

[Diary, 1915, 28-9-1951]

May the Lord spur us on, giving us the certainty that we can become saints and that the great enemy of holiness is discouragement, whilst its foundation consists in becoming increasingly humble. By entrusting ourselves to God, the Author and Agent of our holiness, we shall achieve our goal. The important thing is to embark on the journey of prayer, allowing God to mould us in a total purification until our former self has disappeared so that our new self, created in accordance with God's plan, may come to life.

May the grace and peace of the Lord be always with us. We are here again this year, thanks to the kindness and the

mercy of the Lord, to celebrate Easter, which must always be for all of us a true passage from a possibly guilty life to the life of grace, from a lukewarm and lax life to one that is more observant and fervent. The Church invites us to this with the moving expressions of the Liturgy, exhorting us to lay down our former self and put on the new self that has been created in God's way.

[L. a R., no. LVI, Holy Thursday 1948, 257]

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can see how, moved by the vision of faith, it is necessary to start off with the profound desire to become great saints. In spite of our misery and impotence, the Lord will accomplish our sanctification on the condition that we ask the sanctifying Holy Spirit to give us the total availability to accept beforehand anything he wishes to do with us.

*It was only the Holy Spirit that formed the Apostles and made them capable of rendering to Christ the most splendid witness through their words, example and, above all, the sacrifice of their lives.*

[L. a R., no. XLVII, Epiphany 1946, p.218]

The Lord will guide us through the various stages and ask us to give our own contribution along the way. He will lead us to the peaks of holiness.

There is no greater adventure than this. Let us always remember that **there is no greater frustration for a person than the failure to become a saint** (Léon Bloy).

This modest book was written to honor our Father and as a response to his great dream of having saintly religious and lay people.

We have rightly celebrated his canonization, but the most wonderful celebration, the most pleasing to Fr. John, will

be our decision to become saints. From his place in Heaven, may he pray for this intention.

May the Immaculate Virgin Mary, our Mother, sustain the intercession of Fr. John Calabria.



## APPENDIX

### The Community

In this section we refer to the religious community in which consecrated persons live together the charism of the evangelical counsels. The charisms of the evangelical counsels are gifts of the Holy Spirit for the edification of the Church, and the first Church is the community.

It must be said immediately that man, heir to sin, is a slave to the devil throughout his life as a result of the fear of death (cf. Heb 2:14) and, therefore, is incapable of authentic love. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul says that man wishes to love but cannot because sin dwells within him (cf. Rom 7:18), namely, that man desires to love but he cannot because sin, living within him, prevents him from loving.

In these conditions it is impossible to establish fraternal and loving relationships, which are essential for life in community.

Both the letter to the Hebrews and the letter to the Romans categorically state that only Jesus can free us from the fear of death and partial death (the fear of losing what we possess); he alone can tear down the wall of sin and make us move from wanting “to love” to being able “to love”.

It is madness to think that we can build community through our own plans and abilities. The Author and Agent of community is Jesus, “without whom we can do nothing” (Jn 15:5).

Our collaboration consists in living in Christ the charisms of chastity, poverty and obedience, with the means that Jesus left to his Church: the Word of God, Eucharist and Prayer.

By gathering around the Word to pray and share it, the brothers will become united and also be an example for others. The Word will also give life to the community projects.

The Eucharist, which makes us identify with Christ, will make “one body” of so many members.

Finally, it is prayer that gives life to the Word and the Eucharist. Those who have become Christ-like are authentic instruments for the edification of the community.

Holiness is the very first goal of one who joins a religious community; the mission comes second. A consecrated person must demand that the community help him on the road to holiness.

By giving consecrated persons the gift of chastity, the Holy Spirit gives them the new heart they need to embody it in the spirit of the Shemà, namely, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength (Dt 6:4) and “love one another just as I have loved you” (cf. Jn 13:34). The charism of chastity is the foundation of community and fulfills the desire of Fr. Calabria that we “*treat each other like brothers and help each other in the spiritual life*”. It must be said that of the three charisms of chastity, poverty and obedience, chastity is the greatest.

Poverty and obedience will come to an end, but chastity shall remain because it belongs to the sphere of the theological virtue of charity. Jesus says: “*For at the resurrection men and*

*women do not marry; no, they are like the angels in heaven”* (Mt 22:30).

With the evangelical charism of poverty in Christ, the Holy Spirit gives us the gift of “self-dispossession”, removing from our hearts all privatization, which is often the cause of conflict; he creates within us the spirit of sharing at both spiritual and material levels.

With the evangelical counsel of obedience, the Holy Spirit gives us the gift of searching for God’s will in everything, especially: “*what God wants is for you all to be holy*” (1Th 4:3), accepting the Word, interior inspirations, superiors, constitutions and events as signs of God’s will.

A community whose members live the evangelical counsels radically bears witness to “the unity and the charity” that prove that Jesus was sent by the Father (cf. Jn 17:21).

“...if I found out that a religious has no charity, I would beg him on my knees to leave the Opera for he would bring about its ruin”. These words still hold true today and I confirm them in the name of the Lord, who asks those who belong to him that they be united above all and consume themselves in charity: “*Ut unum sint*” (may they be one). We must let the divine heart of Jesus beat in our own lives, in the lives of our families, and extend it to all the brothers of the earth ...

[L. a R., no. XXVII, September 1941, p.106]

In addition to the commitments of all religious congregations to build fraternal communities, the Poor Servants and the Poor Sisters, by virtue of their charism, must

create communities that manifest the paternal love of God. If people see that we love one another, they will know that we are children of the same heavenly Father.

We must keep in mind that consecrated people are absorbed into the consecrated Christ, who lived his consecration in kenosis, namely, in a journey of self-annihilation (cf. Ph 2:6-11).

We will never be able to love unless we make this voluntary choice because the verb “to love” is always conjugated with the verb “to lose”: we must lose ourselves, our possessions and our positions when the glory of God and the salvation of souls are at stake.

After these premises, which are not hypothetical but practical, we can plan community life and sharing and the apostolate from a pedagogical, sociological and psychological perspective, all in accordance with our charism. This will acquire value provided everyone desires holiness, which consists in reaching “perfect charity” in Christ.

May the Lord enlighten us and help us not to waste time in incessant planning and finding ourselves back where we started.

Fr. Calabria used to say: “*The Opera is completely supernatural*”. We are the Opera, our communities are the Opera, therefore these too are supernatural because it is Jesus who creates them and builds them up. May Fr. John, who dreamed of communities of saints, beg for us this gift from the Holy Spirit.

## LECTIO DIVINA

St. John Calabria was a man in love with Christ and the Word of God (Christ is the Word of the living God) (Jn 1:1ff). We can safely say that he meditated “day and night” upon the Word (Ps 1:2), and the Word transformed him into a living Word of God. The late bishop of Verona, Giuseppe Carraro, said of Fr. John: “the Word of God oozed from him”. Anyone who carefully read the quotations in this book from the writings of Fr. Calabria will agree with this statement. The Founder’s incessant recommendation was: “Let us return to the Gospel and be transformed into living Gospels”. The religious devotion most recommended by Fr. John was meditation, especially meditation of the revealed Word of God. He used to say: “The Word is like a sacramental that fulfills what it proclaims”. “Meditation and sin are mutually exclusive; anyone who does not meditate is constantly in danger of sin”. Prayerful meditation of the Word of God is the surest way to reach holiness, which consists in our becoming living images of Jesus. The one who meditates also believes because God grants faith through the Word (Rm 10:17); the one who meditates also prays and receives the sacraments (Eucharist and Penance) with great profit.

The Lectio Divina is one of the best methods for ensuring that the Word of God comes alive within us. The final pages of this book describe in a simple manner how the Lectio should be done.

## LECTIO

### Introduction:

One of the obstacles to making true progress in the journey to holiness consists in stopping to contemplate our rational convictions, under the illusion that we already possess the supernatural values we have only understood with our mind. This is spiritual culture and St. Paul reminds us: “*Knowledge gives self-importance, it is love that makes the building grow*” (1Cor 8:2). We must believe from the heart (Rom 10:9). Our forefathers also used to say: “*corde intelligitur*”. The Word will then penetrate our entire person and transform us into a living Word. This is certainly a gift. Everything that belongs to the supernatural plane is a gift. Only the Holy Trinity can work in this field. It is God who creates the Word within us, it is God who fulfils the Word within us and it is He who makes it both experience and event.

### Our contribution

The Christian tradition has developed and codified a method and pedagogy for the prayerful reading of the Bible. This method is called “*Lectio Divina*”, reading the Sacred Scriptures in dialogue with God. The Word and prayer are the two pillars of the spiritual journey. Prayer without the Word can easily degenerate into sterile sentimentalism or, even worse, an intimistic monologue that deceives us into thinking that we

are in dialogue with God, whilst we are only in dialogue with ourselves. In the same way, the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, can degenerate into an experience of emotional intimacy. Vatican II called for the sacraments to be administered with the Word. This was the so-called Pentecost of Vatican II, about which Pope John XXIII spoke, namely, the move from a sacramentalizing Church to an evangelizing Church.

The method proposed here is called "*Lectio Divina*" not only because the text we read contains God's message to us; it is also because two partners are engaged in the Lectio: the one who reads and the Spirit of the Risen Lord.

The Spirit reveals to us the living presence of Jesus in the biblical text so that we may encounter him and experience him as Lord of our life.

The "*Lectio Divina*" is therefore the reading of a revealed word in such a way that it becomes prayer and transforms our life.

The Lectio is made up of four stages, all of which are important. Neglect or failure to respect their order exposes us to the risk of a sterile and even counter-productive reading.

The four stages of Lectio Divina:

*1. reading*

*2 meditation*

*3 prayer*

*4 contemplation*

## 1 – Reading

Reading should be done before retiring to bed in the evening. We begin by creating an atmosphere of silence, invoking the Holy Spirit, the Author of the Word, that He may open our hearts and create the necessary condition for hearing the Word. The main condition is humility because the Lord reveals Himself to the little ones (Mt 11:25).

Pen in hand, we open the Bible. We can choose a reading from the Mass of the following day, or engage in the continuous reading of a book of the Old Testament or the New Testament. It is important that we read the text with a pen in hand!

“Reading” means reading the text repeatedly and marking the things that strike us most.

Verbs can be underlined, for example, in red; the principal subject of a phrase can be circled in order to highlight it.

With a cross or a circle we can highlight the words that strike us most. A question mark in the margin can draw attention to something that is not clear to us.

It is important to mark the actions described by the passage, the surroundings in which they take place, the principal subject and those who are on the receiving end of what is being described.

A double underlining can highlight what we consider to be the central part of the passage. We must bear in mind that the passage is addressed to us personally and, therefore, we must place ourselves within the scene and identify with one of



the characters. We must be careful not to think of the message as being meant only for others.

This is a very easy operation but it is important to use a pen and not only use our thoughts.

This will help us to discover elements that escaped us at the first reading; we will find things that we did not expect, even though we believed that we knew the passage by heart.

We can then extend this reading to include the memory of other similar biblical passages; if necessary, we can use the footnotes to find these passages. The Jerusalem Bible is very rich in references to parallel texts.

We can ask ourselves some questions, such as: have I already found similar passages in the Gospel? Is what Jesus says here already contained in some passage of the Old Testament? If so, where? Does it recur in some writings of St. Paul or other New Testament writings? We then look for the text and compare it with the one we are reading, highlighting the similarities and differences. This all helps us to understand better the pages we are reading. We should not be discouraged when we encounter texts that we do not understand. The Holy Spirit will help us to understand later, provided we persevere in the practice of the *Lectio Divina*.

## **2 –Meditation**

The best time for meditation is the morning of the following day. Once we have started to savor the Word of God we will find it easier to rise earlier from sleep in order to meditate in the silence of the morning before beginning the

day's work. Upon awakening, we shall remember the Word we read the previous evening and begin to mull it over in our hearts, even as we are washing.

Then, in silence and after invoking the Holy Spirit, we will place ourselves at the Lord's feet, like Mary of Bethany, to reread and listen once again to the Word (Lk 10:38-42).

Meditation is reflection on the meaning of the Word, on the sentiments and permanent values contained in the text.

We try to understand the explicit and implicit judgments and values in the words, attitudes and actions contained in the passage.

If we are meditating upon a Gospel passage, we might ask ourselves questions, such as: how do the characters portrayed behave? What is their attitude towards Jesus? What are Jesus' feelings towards them? Why were these words said? What meaning do these gestures have?

Thus begin to emerge the perennial and central feelings and values: human feelings of all times and places, the fears, joys and hopes of every man, as well as the fear of abandoning himself in trust, doubts and loneliness. God's attitudes towards us: kindness, forgiveness, mercy and patience. Reflection on sentiments and values leads us to examine our own personal situation and experience: with what character of the Gospel story do I identify? Do I, like Zaccheus, desire to see Jesus? Do I experience the same need of salvation as Mary Magdalene? Do I, like the father of the epileptic boy, ask the Lord to increase my faith? Or do I identify more with the character who considers himself just and, refusing to welcome Jesus, invites him only to criticize him and put him to the test? Do I

welcome God's forgiveness? Am I perhaps afraid of what Jesus says because it disturbs me and forces me to change something in my life?

This is meditation, which is not an end in itself, but a preparation to dialogue and prayer with the Lord.

### **3- Prayer**

Prayer follows meditation. This is the moment for dialogue of the heart. St. Anthony said that prayer is the elevation of the heart to God.

This is the third moment.

The passage I have read gradually reveals to me the presence of the Lord; the Lord becomes a real "You" and I immediately sense that these words are a personal invitation addressed to me.

Prayer begins to involve me. I enter into the religious sentiments evoked by the passage: praise to God for his greatness and kindness, thanksgiving, petition for grace. I ask God to forgive my failings regarding the values proposed by the Gospel passage and humbly ask Him to help me to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus. I express faith, hope and love. Prayer then extends itself to include my friends, community, the Church, enemies and all mankind.

At a certain moment, prayer moves into contemplation almost without one noticing it.

## 4 – Contemplation

Contemplation emerges from prayer.

Contemplation is a very simple thing. The one who prays loves greatly, words almost fail us and we no longer think of the single elements of the passage we have read and what we have understood about ourselves. We only sense the need to look at Jesus alone, to let ourselves be touched by his mystery, to rest in him, to love him as the world's greatest friend and to welcome his love for us.

This is a wonderful experience available to everyone because it is part of the life of the baptized, part of the life of faith.

It is the profound and inexplicable intuition that there is an even greater horizon beyond the words, signs, facts and our understanding of the text.

It is the intuition that God's kingdom is within me, the certainty that I have touched Jesus.

The *Lectio Divina* and its four moments, therefore, is not only a school of prayer: it also becomes a school of life. My personal experience of Christ as Savior and liberator inevitably changes my life, judgments and criteria and becomes a practical profession of my faith, embodied in the daily life decisions, that He is the Lord of my life and the life of all men, indeed the Lord of the whole world.

I could offer a great deal of testimony of Christians who, after persevering in the *Lectio Divina*, have declared: "I feel I have changed: my thoughts are the thoughts of Jesus, and I can say the same about my desires and daily choice; the cross,

especially, has taken on a new meaning". We find ourselves on the road of holiness led by the Lord's Spirit.

*Ad majorem Dei gloriam.*

## SCRUTATIO

We never learn to savor the beauty of prayer from the teaching of others. Prayer is its own teacher. God gives the gift of prayer to those who pray" (John Climaco, VI-VII century).

The *Scrutatio* is a form of biblical prayer similar to the *Lectio Divina*. It is therefore an encounter with the person of the living Christ because Christ is present in the Word of God.

In the *Lectio Divina*, we ponder over a passage, read it, penetrate it, implement it, savor it, pray that it might be fulfilled in our life, produce sentiments of conversion, thanksgiving, praise (ASCENT), rest in the Lord's presence, contemplation (PEAK), fruits of consolation, discernment, decision, action (DESCENT).

The *Scrutatio* supports the *Lectio*; it takes into consideration one or two verses of Scripture and leads us deeper into them.

It means reading the Bible with the Bible.

We know where we started but we do not know where we will end up because it is the Spirit who guides each one according to his own particular condition at the time.

It is an encounter with the Lord who speaks to us face to face and responds to our current needs.

### Method of the *Scrutatio*

We begin by asking the Lord to open our hearts to listen to His voice, remove all resistance, tension, rebellion, lack of sensitivity; to free us from hypocrisy, take us into the realm of truth and make us open to conversion and capable of perceiving the things of the Spirit.

We sit down in a suitable position, remove superfluous objects and choose a silent place: external order and silence help interior order and silence.

We need pen and paper: on one side of the paper we write the verses of the *Scrutatio* and, on the other side, we write our own reflections (what the verse says to us). The exercise of copying by hand the biblical verse helps us to become aware that it is something precious, it leads to respect, love and contemplation of God's Word.

We shall need a Bible with good references (Jerusalem Bible, or another). We may start with a basic text, for example, Mt 6:9 and write on to the sheet of paper: "Our Father...may your name be held holy. Alongside we write our own reflections, for example, that God is in heaven, in a transcendent, mysterious and inaccessible dimension ...yet He is my Father, He loves me and gives me a life that triumphs over the life of the flesh and gives me security.

In the margin we find Ez 36:23 and write it down; we then write our own observations and so on (we can continue with Jn 3:5, referred to Ez 36:23, or Jn 17:6;28, referred to Mt 6:9). Each one should follow the path inspired in him by the Holy Spirit.

It is not necessary to choose many verses: when a particular verse speaks to our life we can dwell on it at greater length and enter into a dialogue with the Lord.

After a certain period of time (20-30 minutes), we get up and pray that we might conquer aridity, we thank God for enlightening us and ask Him to help us carry on and fulfill to his expectations.

We continue for an hour or an hour and a half.

At the end we gather the most significant points of the Scrutatio and attempt to answer the question: “What was the Lord trying to tell me?”

P.S. A practical piece of advice: the Scrutatio can replace the Lectio – the first part of the Lectio Divina -, or some “extra” time can be dedicated to the Scrutatio of the two or three verses that made the strongest impression on us.