



## **“Sister, pray for me...”**

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In Memory of Pope Francis

“Sister, pray for me, because it is not at all simple...,” he said when he shook my hand again before our departure and handed over a rosary. It was deeply moving to begin with, the way he greeted us at the library door - it wasn't us who came before him, but he came out to meet us, his arms outstretched, like the father in the Gospel story who welcomes his own home. And also at the end of the visit how he did not dismiss us, but, leaning on his cane and limping because of an obviously strong pain, walked us to the door to say goodbye with another handshake. The simple words of his farewell, with which he asked for my prayers, cut me to the heart; suddenly I could almost touch the enormous burden and responsibility that weighed on his shoulders. Yet in the hour we spent with him, it was as if no one existed for him but us sitting there.

It is this capacity for personal attention that I would highlight most of all in relation to Pope Francis. When I wrote to him in 2022 to ask him to receive us on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of our Society, so that we can begin our jubilee year and the next phase of our history with his blessing, everyone frowned at my naiveté. And I myself became discouraged: how could I have ever imagined that the pope had time to deal with us, when wars had just broken out and crises were ravaging the world; what does our little jubilee matter in

comparison? Then the answer came with the date of the private audience. The message of his gesture proclaimed more clearly than anything else: in God's sight, there are no little ones or big ones, no more important ones or less important ones; to God - and for that matter to His servant - everyone is equally important; everyone, "*TUTTI*." This was not a mere empty gesture on his part, but sincerely caring, thoughtful, and interested personal attention. In the light of this experience, following the density of His programs and audiences over the years, I have often wondered how he could keep up with all this energy wise. Only mystics, those who live in a very deep union with God, are able to do this.

So it is no surprise that he knew God's style from within, which is closeness, compassion and tenderness; he not only preached it, but lived it, and constantly called us to follow it (for example, in his address to the priests and religious gathered in the basilica during his visit to Hungary). He was and remained close to people's lives, paying special attention to the little ones, to the marginalized, to those who are deemed insignificant or are forgotten by the world; and he had infinite compassion for suffering in all its forms, human suffering but also the suffering of the created world endangered by unbridled human destruction, revealing to us the infinite love of God's heart, where there is a place for everyone - for everyone and everything "*TUTTI*."

The deep knowledge of the heart of Christ, which is "*ecstasy*, openness, gift and encounter," informed his social sensitivity and his vision of the future church and its place and role in the world. His teachings and encyclicals, brought back to me again and again the thoughts of our foundress, who envisioned the Sisters of Social Service as intellectual workers placed in public welfare, whose vocational task is to serve the temporal and eternal happiness of people at the center of life. Pope Francis expressed this idea in the following words: "the Church does not restrict her mission to the private sphere..., she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines" in the building of a better world, or fail to "reawaken the spiritual energy" that can contribute to the betterment of society."<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis' vision has opened up a whole new dimension for our founding charism summarized in the words of "being in the mission of God's sanctifying love." In his words, this means "to practice social charity that makes us effectively seek the good of all people, considered not only as individuals or private persons, but also in the social dimension that unites them; Social love makes it possible to advance towards a civilization of love, because only charity, with its impulse to universality, is capable of building a new world."<sup>2</sup> That is why it was so meaningful for us to meet him in person on the occasion of our centenary. His words to us rekindled in us the fire of our charism and we were able to continue our mission with renewed strength and vigor. He encouraged us to continue to be courageous witnesses like our predecessors responding to the challenges of our time as our predecessors did: "with only the weapon of charity," and emphatically reminded us that "there must be room for everyone in our love" – for everyone, "*TUTTI*."

In the world and for the world, yet in our way of acting not of this world - this was the essence of his efforts aimed at the renewal of the Church. Regarding the exercise of authority,

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<sup>1</sup> Fratelli tutti 276.

<sup>2</sup> Fratelli tutti 182. 183.

he led us back to Jesus' admonition "among you it shall not be so" (Lk 22:26), so that in our deliberations and decision makings, those in authority should be guided by paying attention to the Spirit at work in each and every member of the community. Instead of power structures shaped according to the logic of world, and instead of being stuck in fossilized, rigid and closed ways of functioning, he encouraged us to act from the spacious freedom of the Spirit, "to initiate processes rather than occupy spaces, to give priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics, to see changes with the eyes of faith, so that the direction of this change should "raise new and old questions which it is right that we should face"<sup>3</sup> and search for answers through dialogue. His insights and exhortations have been for my leadership ministry like clear, fresh spring water on the journey through the desert.

Open to the world and firmly rooted in faith, hope and love - this is what he taught me in all his manifestations. And from this deep rootedness came the prophetic power with which he constantly called the ills of the age by name, confronting believers and non-believers alike with our responsibilities as human beings and Christians.

His teaching on hope has given me the most as superior: to face all the horrors and dangers of the present age by letting all the pain caused by them come close to me, letting them touch me, shock me, upset me, while I, as a singer of sure hope, keep shouting into the world the victory of the Resurrection. In his last message to us on Easter Sunday, we saw an excellent example of this. In the introduction to his autobiography, published this year, there is a paragraph that captures the essence of what this being a singer of hope means: "*We Christians must know that hope doesn't deceive and doesn't disappoint: All is born to blossom in an eternal springtime. In the end, we will say only: I don't recall anything in which You are not there.*"<sup>4</sup> It is onto this presence that we now fix our gaze in our sadness at his passing and in the midst of the uncertainties of our fragile world.

Finally, in the closeness born in this special "Easter Week mourning", in my heart I cannot help but speak to him personally: Holy Father, you are quite right, leadership ministry is not at all simple in this world. "Blossoming in the eternal springtime" now you pray for me - for us, for all God's people, to whom you always and up to the end, up to the very last breath of your life, wanted to remain close.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/december/documents/papa-francesco\\_20191221\\_curia-romana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/december/documents/papa-francesco_20191221_curia-romana.html)

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis: Hope. The Autobiography.