



CHAPTER THREE A CHURCH FOR THE POOR

35. Three days after his election, my predecessor expressed to the representatives of the media his desire that care and attention for the poor be more clearly present in the Church: "How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!" [19]

36. This desire reflects the understanding that the Church "recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer, the likeness of its poor and suffering founder." [20] Indeed, since the Church is called to identify with those who are least, at her core "[T]here can be no room for doubt or for explanations which weaken so clear a message... We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor." [21] In this regard, we have numerous witnesses from disciples of Christ spanning almost two millennia. [22]

The true riches of the Church

37. Saint Paul recounts that among the faithful of the nascent Christian community not many were "wise according to the flesh, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor 1:26). However, despite their poverty, the early Christians were clearly aware of the necessity to care for those who were most in need. Already at the dawn of Christianity, the Apostles laid their hands on seven men chosen from the community. To a certain extent, they integrated them into their own ministry, instituting them for the service — *diakonia* in Greek — of the poorest (cf. Acts 6:1-5). It is significant that the first disciple to bear witness to his faith in Christ to the point of shedding his blood was Stephen, who belonged to this group. In him, the witness of caring for the poor and of martyrdom are united.

38. A little less than two centuries later, another deacon, Saint Lawrence, will demonstrate his fidelity to Jesus Christ in a similar way by uniting martyrdom and service to the poor. [23] From Saint Ambrose's account, we learn that Lawrence, a deacon in Rome during the pontificate of Pope Sixtus II, was forced by the Roman authorities to turn over the treasures of the Church. "The following day he brought the poor with him. Questioned about where the promised treasures might be, he pointed to the poor saying, 'These are the treasures of the Church'." [24] While narrating this event, Saint Ambrose asks: "What treasures does Jesus have that are more precious than those in which he loves to show himself?" [25] And, remembering that ministers of the Church must never neglect the care of the poor, much less accumulate goods for their own benefit, he says: "This task must be carried out with sincere faith and wise foresight. Certainly, if anyone derives personal advantage from it, he commits a crime; but if he distributes the proceeds to the poor or redeems a prisoner, he performs a work of mercy." [26]

The Fathers of the Church and the Poor

39. From the first centuries, the Fathers of the Church recognized in the poor a privileged way to reach God, a special way to meet him. Charity shown to those in need was not only seen as a moral virtue, but a concrete expression of faith in the incarnate Word. The community of the faithful, sustained by the strength of the Holy Spirit, was rooted in being close to the poor, whom they considered not just an "appendage," but an essential part of Christ's living body. For example, while he was on his way to face martyrdom, Saint Ignatius of Antioch exhorted the community of Smyrna not to neglect the duty to carry out acts of charity for those most in need, admonishing them not to behave like those who oppose God. "But consider those who are of a different opinion with respect to the grace of Christ, which has come to us, how opposed they are to the will of God. They have no regard for love; no care for the widow, or the orphan, or the oppressed; of the bond, or of the free; of the hungry, or of the thirsty." [27] The Bishop of



Smyrna, Polycarp, expressly stated that ministers of the Church should take care of the poor: "And let the presbyters be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander, visiting all the sick, and not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always 'providing for that which is becoming in the sight of God and man'." [28] From these two witnesses, we see that the Church appears as a mother of the poor, a place of welcome and justice.

40. For his part, Saint Justin, who addressed his First Apology to Emperor Adrian, the Senate and people of Rome, explained that Christians bring all that they can to those in need because they see them as brothers and sisters in Christ. Writing about the assembly gathered in prayer on the first day of the week, he underscored that at the heart of the Christian liturgy, it is not possible to separate the worship of God from concern for the poor. Consequently, at a certain point in the celebration: "they who are well-to-do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans and widows, and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need." [29] This demonstrates that the nascent Church did not separate belief from social action: faith without witness through concrete actions was considered dead, as Saint James taught us (cf. 2:17).

Saint John Chrysostom

41. Among the Eastern Fathers, perhaps the most ardent preacher on social justice was Saint John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople from the late 300s to the early 400s. In his homilies, he exhorted the faithful to recognize Christ in the needy: "Do you wish to honor the body of Christ? Do not allow it to be despised in its members, that is, in the poor, who have no clothes to cover themselves. Do not honor Christ's body here in church with silk fabrics, while outside you neglect it when it suffers from cold and nakedness... [The body of Christ on the altar] does not need cloaks, but pure souls; while the one outside needs much care. Let us therefore learn to think of and honor Christ as he wishes. For the most pleasing honor we can give to the one we want to venerate is that of doing what he himself desires, not what we devise... So you too, give him the honor he has commanded, and let the poor benefit from your riches. God does not need golden vessels, but golden souls." [30] Affirming with crystal clarity that, if the faithful do not encounter Christ in the poor who stand at the door, they will not be able to worship him even at the altar, he continues: "What advantage does Christ gain if the sacrificial table is laden with golden vessels, while he himself dies of hunger in the person of the poor? Feed the hungry first, and only afterward adorn the altar with what remains." [31] He understood the Eucharist, therefore, as a sacramental expression of the charity and justice that both preceded and accompanied it. That same charity and justice should perpetuate the Eucharist through love and attention to the poor.

42. Consequently, charity is not optional but a requirement of true worship. Chrysostom vehemently denounced excessive wealth connected with indifference for the poor. The attention due to them, rather than a mere social requirement, is a condition for salvation, which gives unjust wealth a condemnatory weight. "It is very cold and the poor man lies in rags, dying, freezing, shivering, with an appearance and clothing that should move you. You, however, red in the face and drunk, pass by. And how do you expect God to deliver you from misfortune?... You often adorn an unfeeling corpse, which no longer understands honor, with many varied and gilded garments. Yet you despise the one who feels pain, who is torn apart, tortured, tormented by hunger and cold." [32] This profound sense of social justice leads him to affirm that "not giving to the poor is stealing from them, defrauding them of their lives, because what we have belongs to them." [33]

Saint Augustine



43. Augustine's spiritual guide was Saint Ambrose, who insisted on the ethical requirement to share material goods: "What you give to the poor is not your property, but theirs. Why have you appropriated what was given for common use?" [34] For the Bishop of Milan, almsgiving is justice restored, not a gesture of paternalism. In his preaching, mercy takes on a prophetic character: he denounces structures that accumulate things and reaffirms communion as the Church's vocation.

44. Formed in this tradition, the holy Bishop of Hippo taught for his part about the preferential love for the poor. A vigilant pastor and theologian of rare insight, he realizes that true ecclesial communion is expressed also in the communion of goods. In his Commentaries on the Psalms, he reminds us that true Christians do not neglect love for those most in need: "Observing your brothers and sisters, you know if they are in need, but if Christ dwells in you, also be charitable to strangers." [35] This sharing of goods therefore stems from theological charity and has as its ultimate goal the love of Christ. For Augustine, the poor are not just people to be helped, but the sacramental presence of the Lord.

45. The Doctor of Grace saw caring for the poor as concrete proof of the sincerity of faith. Anyone who says they love God and has no compassion for the needy is lying (cf. 1 Jn 4:20). Commenting on Jesus' encounter with the rich young man and the "treasure in heaven" reserved for those who give their possessions to the poor (cf. Mt 19:21), Augustine puts the following words in the Lord's mouth: "I received the earth, I will give heaven; I received temporal goods, I will give back eternal goods; I received bread, I will give life... I have been given hospitality, but I will give a home; I was visited when I was sick, but I will give health; I was visited in prison, but I will give freedom. The bread you have given to my poor has been consumed, but the bread I will give will not only refresh you, but will never end." [36] The Almighty will not be outdone in generosity to those who serve the people most in need: the greater the love for the poor, the greater the reward from God.

46. This Christocentric and deeply ecclesial perspective leads us to affirm that offerings, when born of love, not only alleviate the needs of one's brother or sister, but also purify the heart of the giver, if he or she is willing to change. Indeed, in the words of Pseudo-Augustine: "almsgiving can be beneficial to you in erasing past sins, if you have amended your ways." [37] It is, so to speak, the ordinary path to conversion for those who wish to follow Christ with an undivided heart.

47. In a Church that recognizes in the poor the face of Christ and in material goods the instrument of charity, Augustine's thought remains a sure light. Today, fidelity to Augustine's teachings requires not only the study of his works, but also a readiness to live radically his call to conversion, which necessarily includes the service of charity.

48. Many other Fathers of the Church, both Eastern and Western, have spoken about the primacy of attention to the poor in the life and mission of every Christian. From this perspective, in summary, it can be said that patristic theology was practical, aiming at a Church that was poor and for the poor, recalling that the Gospel is proclaimed correctly only when it impels us to touch the flesh of the least among us, and warning that doctrinal rigor without mercy is empty talk.

Care of the sick

49. Christian compassion has manifested itself in a particular way in the care of the sick and suffering. Based on the signs present in Jesus' public ministry — the healing of the blind, lepers and paralytics — the Church understands that caring for the sick, in whom she readily recognizes the crucified Lord, is an important part of her mission. During a plague in the city of Carthage, where he was Bishop, Saint Cyprian reminded Christians of the importance of caring for the sick: "This pestilence and plague, which



seems so horrible and deadly, searches out the righteousness of each one, and examines the minds of the human race, to see whether the healthy serve the sick; whether relatives love each other with sincerity; whether masters have pity on their sick servants; whether doctors do not abandon the sick who beg for help." [38] The Christian tradition of visiting the sick, washing their wounds, and comforting the afflicted is not simply a philanthropic endeavor, but an ecclesial action through which the members of the Church "touch the suffering flesh of Christ." [39]

50. In the sixteenth century, Saint John of God founded the Hospitaller Order that bears his name, creating model hospitals that welcomed everyone, regardless of social or economic status. His famous expression, "Do good, my brothers!" became a motto for active charity towards the sick. At the same time, Saint Camillus de Lellis founded the Order of Ministers of the Sick — the Camillians — taking on the mission of serving the sick with total dedication. His rule commands: "Each person should ask the Lord for a motherly affection for their neighbor so that we may serve them with all charity, both in soul and body, because we desire, with the grace of God, to serve all the sick with the affection that a loving mother has for her only sick child." [40] In hospitals, on battlefields, in prisons, and on the streets, the Camillians have embodied the mercy of Christ the Physician.

51. Caring for the sick with maternal affection, as a mother cares for her child, many consecrated women have played an even greater role in providing healthcare to the poor. The Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, the Hospital Sisters, the Little Sisters of Divine Providence, and many other women's congregations have become a maternal and discreet presence in hospitals, nursing homes and retirement homes. They have brought comfort, a listening ear, a presence, and above all, tenderness. They have built, often with their own hands, healthcare facilities in areas lacking medical assistance. They taught hygiene, assisted in childbirth and administered medicine with natural wisdom and deep faith. Their homes became oases of dignity where no one was excluded. The touch of compassion was the first medicine. Saint Louise de Marillac wrote to her sisters, the Daughters of Charity, reminding them that "they have been singularly blessed by God for the service of the sick poor of the hospitals." [41]

52. Today, this legacy continues in Catholic hospitals, healthcare facilities in remote areas, clinics operating in jungles, shelters for drug addicts and in field hospitals in war zones. The Christian presence among the sick reveals that salvation is not an abstract idea, but concrete action. In the act of healing a wound, the Church proclaims that the Kingdom of God begins among the most vulnerable. In doing so, she remains faithful to the One who said, "I was sick and you visited me" (Mt 25:36). When the Church kneels beside a leper, a malnourished child or an anonymous dying person, she fulfills her deepest vocation: to love the Lord where he is most disfigured.

Care of the poor in monastic life

53. Monastic life, which originated in the silence of the desert, was from the outset a witness to solidarity. Monks and nuns left everything — wealth, prestige, family — not only because they despised worldly goods — *contemptus mundi* — but also to encounter the poor Christ in this radical detachment. Saint Basil the Great, in his Rule, saw no contradiction between the monks' life of prayer and contemplation and their work on behalf of the poor. For him, hospitality and care for the needy were an integral part of monastic spirituality, and monks, even after having left everything to embrace poverty, had to help the poorest with their work, because "in order to have enough to help the needy... it is clear that we must work diligently... This way of life is profitable not only for subduing the body, but also for charity towards our neighbor, so that through us God may provide enough for our weaker brothers and sisters." [42]



54. In Caesarea, where he was Bishop, he built a place known as *Basiliad*, which included lodgings, hospitals and schools for the poor and sick. The monk, therefore, was not only an ascetic, but also a servant. Basil thus demonstrated that to be close to God, one must be close to the poor. Concrete love was the criterion of holiness. Praying and caring, contemplating and healing, writing and welcoming: everything was an expression of the same love for Christ.

55. In the West, Saint Benedict of Norcia formulated a Rule that would become the backbone of European monastic spirituality. Welcoming the poor and pilgrims occupies a prominent place in the document: "The poor and pilgrims are to be received with all care and hospitality, for it is in them that Christ is received." [43] These were not just words: for centuries Benedictine monasteries were places of refuge for widows, abandoned children, pilgrims and beggars. For Benedict, community life was a school of charity. Manual labor not only had a practical function, but also formed the heart for service. Sharing among the monks, caring for the sick and listening to the most vulnerable prepared them to welcome Christ who comes in the person of the poor and the stranger. Today, Benedictine monastic hospitality remains a sign of a Church that opens its doors, welcomes without asking and heals without demanding anything in return.

56. Over time, Benedictine monasteries became places for overcoming the culture of exclusion. Monks and nuns cultivated the land, produced food, prepared medicines and offered them, with simplicity, to those most in need. Their silent work was the leaven of a new civilization, where the poor were not a problem to be solved, but brothers and sisters to be welcomed. The rule of sharing, working together and helping the vulnerable established an economy of solidarity, in contrast to the logic of accumulation. The monks' witness showed that voluntary poverty, far from being misery, is a path of freedom and communion. They did not limit themselves to helping the poor: they became their neighbors, brothers and sisters in the same Lord. In the cells and cloisters, they created a mysticism of God's presence in the little ones.

57. In addition to providing material assistance, monasteries played a fundamental role in the cultural and spiritual formation of the humblest. In times of plague, war and famine, they were places where the needy found bread and medicine, but also dignity and a voice. It was there that orphans were educated, apprentices received training and ordinary people were taught agricultural techniques and how to read. Knowledge was shared as a gift and a responsibility. The abbot was both teacher and father, and the monastic school was a place of freedom through truth. Indeed, as John Cassian writes, the monk must be characterized by "humility of heart... which leads not to knowledge that puffs up, but to knowledge that enlightens through the fullness of charity." [44] By forming consciences and transmitting wisdom, monks contributed to a Christian pedagogy of inclusion. Culture, marked by faith, was shared with simplicity. Knowledge, illuminated by charity, became service. Monastic life thus revealed itself as a style of holiness and a concrete way to transform society.

58. The monastic tradition teaches us that prayer and charity, silence and service, cells and hospitals form a single spiritual fabric. The monastery is a place of listening and action, of worship and sharing. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the great Cistercian reformer, "firmly recalled the need for a sober and measured life, in the refectory as in monastic clothing and buildings, recommending the support and care of the poor." [45] For him, compassion was not an option, but the true path of following Christ. Monastic life, therefore, if faithful to its original vocation, shows that the Church is fully the bride of the Lord only when she is also the sister of the poor. The cloister is not only a refuge from the world, but a school where one learns to serve it better. Where monks and nuns have opened their doors to the poor, the Church has revealed with humility and firmness that contemplation does not exclude mercy, but demands it as its purest fruit.



Freeing prisoners

59. Since apostolic times, the Church has seen the liberation of the oppressed as a sign of the Kingdom of God. Jesus himself proclaimed at the beginning of his public ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives" (*Lk* 4:18). The early Christians, even in precarious conditions, prayed for and assisted their brothers and sisters who were prisoners, as the Acts of the Apostles (cf. 12:5; 24:23) and various writings of the Fathers attest. This mission of liberation has continued throughout the centuries through concrete actions, especially when the tragedy of slavery and imprisonment has marked entire societies.

60. Between the late twelfth and the early thirteenth centuries, when many Christians were captured in the Mediterranean or enslaved in wars, two religious orders arose: the Order of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Captives (Trinitarians), founded by Saint John of Matha and Saint Felix of Valois, and the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy (Mercedarians), founded by Saint Peter Nolasco with the support of the Dominican Saint Raymond of Peñafort. These communities of consecrated persons were born with the specific charism of freeing Christians who had been enslaved, placing their own possessions at the disposal of the enslaved [46] and many times offering their own lives in exchange. The Trinitarians, with their motto *Gloria tibi Trinitas et captivis libertas* (Glory to you, O Trinity, and liberty to the captives), and the Mercedarians, who added a fourth vow [47] to the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, testified that charity can be heroic. The liberation of prisoners is an expression of Trinitarian love: a God who frees not only from spiritual slavery but also from concrete oppression. The act of rescuing someone from slavery and captivity is seen as an extension of Christ's redemptive sacrifice, whose blood is the price of our redemption (cf. *1 Cor* 6:20).

61. The original spirituality of these orders was deeply rooted in contemplation of the cross. Christ is the Redeemer of prisoners *par excellence*, and the Church, his Body, prolongs this mystery in time. [48] Religious did not see redemption as a political or economic action, but as a quasi-liturgical act, the sacramental offering of themselves. Many gave their own bodies to replace prisoners, literally fulfilling the commandment: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (*Jn* 15:13). The tradition of these orders did not come to an end. On the contrary, it inspired new forms of action in the face of modern forms of slavery: human trafficking, forced labor, sexual exploitation and various forms of dependency. [49] Christian charity is liberating when it becomes incarnate. Likewise, the mission of the Church, when she is faithful to her Lord, is at all times to proclaim liberation. Even today, when "millions of people — children, women and men of all ages — are deprived of their freedom and forced to live in conditions akin to slavery," [50] this legacy is carried on by these orders and other institutions and congregations working in urban peripheries, conflict zones and migration routes. When the Church bends down to break the new chains that bind the poor, she becomes a paschal sign.

62. We cannot conclude this reflection on people deprived of their freedom without mentioning those in various prisons and detention centers. In this regard, we recall the words that Pope Francis addressed to a group of prisoners: "For me, entering a prison is always an important moment, because prison is a place of great humanity... Humanity that is tried, sometimes worn down by difficulties, guilt, judgments, misunderstandings, suffering, but at the same time full of strength, desire for forgiveness, and a desire for redemption." [51] This desire, among other things, has also been taken up by the orders devoted to the ransom of prisoners as a preferential service to the Church. As Saint Paul proclaimed: "For freedom Christ has set us free" (*Gal* 5:1). This freedom is not only interior: it manifests itself in history as love that cares for and frees us from every bond of slavery.

Witnesses of evangelical poverty



63. In the thirteenth century, faced with the growth of cities, the concentration of wealth and the emergence of new forms of poverty, the Holy Spirit gave rise to a new type of consecration in the Church: the mendicant orders. Unlike the stable monastic model, mendicants adopted an itinerant life, without personal or communal property, entrusting themselves entirely to providence. They did not merely serve the poor: they made themselves poor with them. They saw the city as a new desert and the marginalized as new spiritual teachers. These orders, such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Carmelites, represented an evangelical revolution, in which a simple and poor lifestyle became a prophetic sign for mission, reviving the experience of the first Christian community (cf. Acts 4:32). The witness of the mendicants challenged both clerical opulence and the coldness of urban society.

64. Saint Francis of Assisi became the icon of this spiritual springtime. By embracing poverty, he wanted to imitate Christ, who was poor, naked and crucified. In his Rule, he asks that "the brothers should not appropriate anything, neither house, nor place, nor anything else. And as pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, they should go about begging with confidence, and should not be ashamed, because the Lord made himself poor for us in this world." [52] His life was one of continuous self-emptying: from the palace to the leper, from eloquence to silence, from possession to total gift. Francis did not found a social service organization, but an evangelical fraternity. In the poor, he saw brothers and sisters, living images of the Lord. His mission was to be with them, and he did so through a solidarity that overcame distances and a compassionate love. Francis' poverty was relational: it led him to become neighbor, equal to, or indeed lesser than others. His holiness sprang from the conviction that Christ can only be truly received by giving oneself generously to one's brothers and sisters.

65. Saint Clare of Assisi, who was inspired by Francis, founded the Order of Poor Ladies, later called the Poor Clares. Her spiritual struggle consisted in faithfully maintaining the ideal of radical poverty. She refused the papal privileges that could have guaranteed material security for her monastery and, with firmness, obtained from Pope Gregory IX the so-called *Privilegium Paupertatis*, which guaranteed the right to live without any material goods. [53] This choice expressed her total trust in God and her awareness that voluntary poverty was a form of freedom and prophecy. Clare taught her sisters that Christ was their only inheritance and that nothing should obscure their communion with him. Her prayerful and hidden life was a cry against worldliness and a silent defense of the poor and forgotten.

66. Saint Dominic de Guzmán, a contemporary of Francis, founded the Order of Preachers, with a different charism but the same radicalism of life. He wanted to proclaim the Gospel with the authority that comes from a life of poverty, convinced that the Truth needs witnesses of integrity. The example of poverty in their lives accompanied the Word they preached. Free from the weight of earthly goods, the Dominican Friars were better able to dedicate themselves to their principal work of preaching. They went to the cities, especially the universities, in order to teach the truth about God. [54] In their dependence on others, they showed that faith is not imposed but offered. And by living among the poor, they learned the truth of the Gospel "from below," as disciples of the humiliated Christ.

67. The mendicant orders were therefore a living response to exclusion and indifference. They did not expressly propose social reforms, but an individual and communal conversion to the logic of the Kingdom. For them, poverty was not a consequence of a scarcity of goods, but a free choice: to make themselves small in order to welcome the small. As Thomas of Celano said of Francis: "He showed that he loved the poor intensely... He often stripped himself naked to clothe the poor, whom he sought to resemble." [55] Beggars became the symbol of a pilgrim, humble and fraternal Church, living among the poor not to proselytize but as an expression of their true identity. They teach us that the Church is a light when she



strips herself of everything, and that holiness passes through a humble heart devoted to the least among us.

The Church and the education of the poor

68. Addressing educators, Pope Francis recalled that education has always been one of the highest expressions of Christian charity: "Yours is a mission full of obstacles as well as joys... A mission of love, because you cannot teach without loving." [56] In this sense, since ancient times, Christians have understood that knowledge liberates, gives dignity, and brings us closer to the truth. For the Church, teaching the poor was an act of justice and faith. Inspired by the example of the Master who taught people divine and human truths, she took on the mission of forming children and young people, especially the poorest, in truth and love. This mission took shape with the founding of congregations dedicated to education.

69. In the sixteenth century, Saint Joseph Calasanz, struck by the lack of education and training among the poor young people of Rome, established Europe's first free public school in some rooms adjacent to the church of Santa Dorotea in Trastevere. This was the seed from which the Poor Clerics Regular of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools, known as the Piarists, would later emerge and develop, though not without difficulty. Their goal was that of transmitting to young people "not only secular knowledge but also the wisdom of the Gospel, teaching them to recognize, in their personal lives and in history, the loving action of God the Creator and Redeemer." [57] In fact, we can consider this courageous priest as the "true founder of the modern Catholic school, aimed at the integral formation of people and open to all." [58] Inspired by the same sensitivity, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, realizing the injustice caused by the exclusion of the children of workers and ordinary people from the educational system of France at that time, founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the seventeenth century, with the ideal of offering them free education, solid formation, and a fraternal environment. De La Salle saw the classroom as a place for human development, but also for conversion. In his colleges, prayer, method, discipline and sharing were combined. Each child was considered a unique gift from God, and the act of teaching was a service to the Kingdom of God.

70. In the nineteenth century, also in France, Saint Marcellin Champagnat founded the Institute of the Marist Brothers of the Schools. "He was sensitive to the spiritual and educational needs of his time, especially to religious ignorance and the situation of neglect experienced in a particular way by the young." [59] He dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the mission of educating and evangelizing children and young people, especially those most in need, during a period when access to education continued to be the privilege of a few. In the same spirit, Saint John Bosco began the great work of the Salesians in Italy based on the three principles of the "preventive method" — reason, religion, and loving kindness. [60] Blessed Antonio Rosmini founded the Institute of Charity, in which "intellectual charity" was placed alongside "material charity," with "spiritual-pastoral charity" at the top, as an indispensable dimension of any charitable action aimed at the good and integral development of the person. [61]

71. Many female congregations were protagonists of this pedagogical revolution. Founded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Ursulines, the Sisters of the Company of Mary Our Lady, the Maestre Pie and many others, stepped into the spaces where the state was absent. They created schools in small villages, suburbs and working-class neighborhoods. In particular, the education of girls became a priority. The religious sisters taught literacy, evangelized, took care of practical matters of daily life, elevated their spirits through the cultivation of the arts, and, above all, formed consciences. Their pedagogy was simple: closeness, patience and gentleness. They taught by the example of their lives before teaching with words. In times of widespread illiteracy and systemic exclusion, these consecrated



women were beacons of hope. Their mission was to form hearts, teach people to think and promote dignity. By combining a life of piety and dedication to others, they fought abandonment with the tenderness of those who educate in the name of Christ.

72. For the Christian faith, the education of the poor is not a favor but a duty. Children have a right to knowledge as a fundamental requirement for the recognition of human dignity. Teaching them affirms their value, giving them the tools to transform their reality. Christian tradition considers knowledge a gift from God and a community responsibility. Christian education does not only form professionals, but also people open to goodness, beauty and truth. Catholic schools, therefore, when they are faithful to their name, are places of inclusion, integral formation and human development. By combining faith and culture, they sow the seeds of the future, honor the image of God and build a better society.

Accompanying migrants

73. The experience of migration accompanies the history of the People of God. Abraham sets out without knowing where he is going; Moses leads the pilgrim people through the desert; Mary and Joseph flee with the child Jesus to Egypt. Christ himself, who "came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (*Jn* 1:11), lived among us as a stranger. For this reason, the Church has always recognized in migrants a living presence of the Lord who, on the day of judgment, will say to those on his right: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (*Mt* 25:35).

74. In the nineteenth century, when millions of Europeans emigrated in search of better living conditions, two great saints distinguished themselves in the pastoral care of migrants: Saint John Baptist Scalabrini and Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini. Scalabrini, Bishop of Piacenza, founded the Missionaries of Saint Charles to accompany migrants to their destinations, offering them spiritual, legal and material assistance. He saw migrants as recipients of a new evangelization, warning of the risks of exploitation and loss of faith in a foreign land. Responding generously to the charism that the Lord had given him, "Scalabrini looked forward to a world and a Church without barriers, where no one was a foreigner." [62] Saint Frances Cabrini, born in Italy and a naturalized American, was the first citizen of the United States of America to be canonized. To fulfill her mission of assisting migrants, she crossed the Atlantic several times. "Armed with remarkable boldness, she started schools, hospitals and orphanages from nothing for the masses of the poor who ventured into the new world in search of work. Not knowing the language and lacking the wherewithal to find a respectable place in American society, they were often victims of the unscrupulous. Her motherly heart, which allowed her no rest, reached out to them everywhere: in hovels, prisons and mines." [63] In the Holy Year of 1950, Pope Pius XII proclaimed her Patroness of All Migrants. [64]

75. The Church's tradition of working for and with migrants continues, and today this service is expressed in initiatives such as refugee reception centers, border missions and the efforts of Caritas Internationalis and other institutions. Contemporary teaching clearly reaffirms this commitment. Pope Francis has recalled that the Church's mission to migrants and refugees is even broader, insisting that "our response to the challenges posed by contemporary migration can be summed up in four verbs: welcome, protect, promote and integrate. Yet these verbs do not apply only to migrants and refugees. They describe the Church's mission to all those living in the existential peripheries, who need to be welcomed, protected, promoted and integrated." [65] He also said: "Every human being is a child of God! He or she bears the image of Christ! We ourselves need to see, and then to enable others to see, that migrants and refugees do not only represent a problem to be solved, but are brothers and sisters to be welcomed, respected and loved. They are an occasion that Providence gives us to help build a more just society, a more perfect democracy, a more united country, a more fraternal world and a more open and evangelical Christian



community.” [66] The Church, like a mother, accompanies those who are walking. Where the world sees threats, she sees children; where walls are built, she builds bridges. She knows that her proclamation of the Gospel is credible only when it is translated into gestures of closeness and welcome. And she knows that in every rejected migrant, it is Christ himself who knocks at the door of the community.

At the side of the least among us

76. Christian holiness often flourishes in the most forgotten and wounded places of humanity. The poorest of the poor — those who lack not only material goods but also a voice and the recognition of their dignity — have a special place in God’s heart. They are the beloved of the Gospel, the heirs to the Kingdom (cf. *Lk* 6:20). It is in them that Christ continues to suffer and rise again. It is in them that the Church rediscovers her call to show her most authentic self.

77. Saint Teresa of Calcutta, canonized in 2016, has become a universal icon of charity lived to the fullest extent in favor of the most destitute, those discarded by society. Foundress of the Missionaries of Charity, she dedicated her life to the dying abandoned on the streets of India. She gathered the rejected, washed their wounds and accompanied them to the moment of death with the tenderness of prayer. Her love for the poorest of the poor meant that she did not only take care of their material needs, but also proclaimed the good news of the Gospel to them: “We are wanting to proclaim the good news to the poor that God loves them, that we love them, that they are somebody to us, that they too have been created by the same loving hand of God, to love and to be loved. Our poor people are great people, are very lovable people, they do not need our pity and sympathy, they need our understanding love. They need our respect; they need that we treat them with dignity.” [67] All this came from a deep spirituality that saw service to the poorest as the fruit of prayer and love, the source of true peace, as Pope John Paul II reminded the pilgrims who came to Rome for her beatification: “Where did Mother Teresa find the strength to place herself completely at the service of others? She found it in prayer and in the silent contemplation of Jesus Christ, his Holy Face, his Sacred Heart. She herself said as much: ‘The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love; the fruit of love is service.’ It was prayer that filled her heart with Christ’s own peace and enabled her to radiate that peace to others.” [68] Teresa did not consider herself a philanthropist or an activist, but a bride of Christ crucified, serving with total love her suffering brothers and sisters.

78. In Brazil, Saint Dulce of the Poor — known as “the good angel of Bahia” — embodied the same evangelical spirit with Brazilian characteristics. Referring to her and two other religious women canonized during the same celebration, Pope Francis recalled their love for the most marginalized members of society and said that the new saints “show us that the consecrated life is a journey of love at the existential peripheries of the world.” [69] Sister Dulce responded to precariousness with creativity, obstacles with tenderness and need with unshakeable faith. She began by taking in the sick in a chicken coop and from there founded one of the largest social services in the country. She assisted thousands of people a day, without ever losing her gentleness, making herself poor with the poor for the love of the Poorest One. She lived with little, prayed fervently and served with joy. Her faith did not distance her from the world, but drew her even more deeply into the pain of the least among us.

79. We could also mention individuals such as Saint Benedict Menni and the Sisters Hospitallers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who worked alongside people with disabilities; Saint Charles de Foucauld among the communities of the Sahara; Saint Katharine Drexel for the most underprivileged groups in North America; Sister Emmanuelle, with the garbage collectors in the Ezbet El Nakhl neighborhood of Cairo; and many others. Each in their own way discovered that the poorest are not only objects of our compassion, but teachers of the Gospel. It is not a question of “bringing” God to them, but of



encountering him among them. All of these examples teach us that serving the poor is not a gesture to be made "from above," but an encounter between equals, where Christ is revealed and adored. Saint John Paul II reminded us that "there is a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the Church to make a preferential option for them." [70] Therefore, when the Church bends down to care for the poor, she assumes her highest posture.

Popular Movements

80. We must also recognize that, throughout centuries of Christian history, helping the poor and advocating for their rights has not only involved individuals, families, institutions, or religious communities. There have been, and still are, various popular movements made up of lay people and led by popular leaders, who have often been viewed with suspicion and even persecuted. I am referring to "all those persons who journey, not as individuals, but as a closely-bound community of all and for all, one that refuses to leave the poor and vulnerable behind... 'Popular' leaders, then, are those able to involve everyone... They do not shun or fear those young people who have experienced hurt or borne the weight of the cross." [71]

81. These popular leaders know that solidarity "also means fighting against the structural causes of poverty and inequality; of the lack of work, land and housing; and of the denial of social and labor rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money... Solidarity, understood in its deepest sense, is a way of making history, and this is what the popular movements are doing." [72] For this reason, when different institutions think about the needs of the poor, it is necessary to "include popular movements and invigorate local, national and international governing structures with that torrent of moral energy that springs from including the excluded in the building of a common destiny." [73] Popular movements, in fact, invite us to overcome "the idea of social policies being a policy *for* the poor, but never *with* the poor and never *of* the poor, much less part of a project which can bring people back together." [74] If politicians and professionals do not listen to them, "democracy atrophies, turns into a slogan, a formality; it loses its representative character and becomes disembodied, since it leaves out the people in their daily struggle for dignity, in the building of their future." [75] The same must be said of the institutions of the Church.

[19] Francis, *Audience with Representatives of the Communications Media* (16 March 2013): AAS 105 (2013), 381.

[20] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

[21] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 48: AAS 105 (2013), 1040.

[22] In this chapter, some of these witnesses are being put forward. This is not being done in an exhaustive manner but rather to demonstrate that care for the poor has always characterized the presence of the Church in the world. A more in-depth reflection on the attention given to those most in need can be found in the following book: V. Paglia, *Storia della povertà*, Milan 2014.

[23] Cf. Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum* I, cap. 41, 205-206: CCL 15, Turnhout 2000, 76-77; II, cap. 28, 140-143: CCL 15, 148-149.

[24] *Ibid.*, II, cap. 28, 140: CCL 15, 148.



[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., II, cap. 28, 142: CCSL 15, 148.

[27] Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistula ad Smyrnaeos*, 6, 2: SC 10bis, Paris 2007, 136-138.

[28] Polycarp, *Epistula ad Philippenses*, 6, 1: SC 10bis, 186.

[29] Justin, *Apologia prima*, 67, 6-7: SC 507, Paris 2006, 310.

[30] John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Matthaeum*, 50, 3: PG 58, Paris 1862, 508.

[31] Ibid. 50, 4: PG 58, 509.

[32] John Chrysostom, *Homilia in Epistula ad Hebraeos*, 11, 3: PG 63, Paris 1862, 94.

[33] John Chrysostom, *Homilia II De Lazaro*, 6: PG 48, Paris 1862, 992.

[34] Ambrose, *De Nabuthae*, 12, 53: CSEL 32/2, Prague-Vienna-Leipzig 1897, 498.

[35] Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 125, 12: CSEL 95/3, Vienna 2001, 181.

[36] Augustine, *Sermo LXXXVI*, 5: CCSL 41Ab, Turnhout 2019, 411-412.

[37] Pseudo-Augustine, *Sermo CCCLXXXVIII*, 2: PL 39, Paris 1862, 1700.

[38] Cyprian, *De mortalitate*, 16: CCSL 3A, Turnhout 1976, 25.

[39] Francis, *Message for the 30th World Day of the Sick* (10 December 2021), 3: AAS 114 (2022), 51.

[40] Camillus de Lellis, *Rule of the Order of Ministers of the Sick*, 27: M. Vanti (ed.), *Scritti di San Camillo de Lellis*, Milan 1965, 67.

[41] Louise de Marillac, *Letter to Sisters Claudia Carré and Maria Gaudoin* (28 November 1657): E. Charpy (ed.), *Sainte Louise de Marillac. Écrits*, Paris 1983, 576.

[42] Basil the Great, *Regulae fusius tractatae*, 37, 1: PG 31, Paris 1857, 1009 C-D.

[43] *Regula Benedicti*, 53, 15: SC 182, Paris 1972, 614.

[44] John Cassian, *Collationes*, XIV, 10: CSEL 13, Vienna 2004, 410.

[45] Benedict XVI, *Catechesis* (21 October 2009): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 22 October 2009, 1.

[46] Cf. Innocent III, Bull *Operante divinae dispositionis – Primitive Rule of the Trinitarians* (17 December 1198), 2: J.L. Aurrecoechea – A. Moldón (eds.), *Fuentes históricas de la Orden Trinitaria* (s. XII-XV), Córdoba 2003, 6: "All things, from whatever lawful source they may come, the brothers are to divide them into three equal parts. Insofar as two parts will be sufficient, the works of mercy are to be performed from them, as well as providing for a moderate sustenance for themselves and their necessary household



members. The third part is to be reserved for the ransom of captives who are incarcerated for the faith of Christ."

[47] Cf. *Constitutions of the Mercedarian Order*, n. 14: Orden de la Bienaventurada Virgen María de la Merced, *Regla y Constituciones*, Rome 2014, 53: "To fulfill this mission, driven by charity, we consecrate ourselves to God with a special vow, called Redemption, by virtue of which we promise to give our lives, if necessary, as Christ gave his for us, to save Christians who are in extreme danger of losing their faith in new forms of slavery."

[48] Cf. Saint John Baptist of the Conception, *La regla de la Orden de la Santísima Trinidad*, XX, 1: BAC Maior 60, Madrid, 1999, 90: "In this, the poor and prisoners are like Christ, on whom the sufferings of the world are laid... This holy Order of the Most Holy Trinity summons them and invites them to come and drink the water of the Savior, which means that, if Christ hanging on the cross was redemption and salvation for men, the Order has taken this redemption and wants to distribute it to the poor and save and free the prisoners."

[49] Cf. Saint John Baptist of the Conception, *El recogimiento interior*, XL, 4: BAC Maior 48, Madrid 1995, 689: "Free will makes man free and master among all creatures, but, God help me, how many are those who, by this way, become slaves and prisoners of the devil, imprisoned and chained by their passions and lusts."

[50] Francis, *Message for the 48th World Day of Peace* (8 December 2014), 3: AAS 107 (2015), 69.

[51] Francis, *Meeting with Police Prison Officers, Detainees, and Volunteers* (Verona, May 18 May 2024): AAS 116 (2024), 766.

[52] Honorius III, Bull *Solet annuere – Regula bullata* (29 November 1223), chap. VI: SC 285, Paris 1981, 192.

[53] Cf. Gregory IX, Bull *Sicut manifestum est* (17 September 1228), 7: SC 325, Paris 1985, 200: "Sicut igitur supplicastis, altissimae paupertatis propositum vestrum favore apostolico roboramus, auctoritate vobis praesentium indulgentes, ut recipere possessiones a nullo compelli possitis."

[54] Cf. S.C. Tugwell, (ed.), *Early Dominicans. Selected Writings*, Mahwah 1982, 16-19.

[55] Thomas of Celano, *Vita Seconda, pars prima*, cap. IV, 8: *AnalFranc*, 10, Florence 1941, 135.

[56] Francis, *Address following the visit to the tomb of Don Lorenzo Milani*, (Barbiana, 20 June 2017), 2: AAS 109 (2017), 745.

[57] John Paul II, *Address to the Participants in the General Chapter of the Poor Clerics Regular of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools* (Piarists) (5 July 1997), 2: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6 July 1997, 5.

[58] Ibid.

[59] John Paul II, *Homily for the Mass of Canonization* (18 April 1999): AAS 91 (1999), 930.

[60] Cf. John Paul II, Letter *Iuvenum Patris* (31 January 1988), 9: AAS 80 (1988), 976.



[61] Cf. Francis, Address to the Participants in the General Chapter of the Institute of Charity (Rosminians) (1 October 2018): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 1-2 October 2018, 7.

[62] Francis, Homily for the Mass of Canonization (9 October 2022): AAS 114 (2022), 1338.

[63] John Paul II, Message to the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart (31 May 2000), 3: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 16 July 2000, 5.

[64] Cf. Pius XII, Papal Brief *Superior iam Aetate* (8 September 1950): AAS 43 (1951), 455-456.

[65] Francis, Message for the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees (27 May 2019): AAS 111 (2019), 911.

[66] Francis, Message for the 100th World Day of Migrants and Refugees (5 August 2013): AAS 105 (2013), 930.

[67] Teresa of Calcutta, Speech on the occasion of the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize (Oslo, 10 December 1979): *Aimer jusqu'à en avoir mal*, Lyon 2017, 19-20.

[68] John Paul II, Address to the Pilgrims who had come to Rome for the Beatification of Mother Teresa (20 October 2003), 3: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 20-21 October 2003, 10.

[69] Francis, Homily for the Mass and Canonization (13 October 2019): AAS 111 (2019), 1712.

[70] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), 49: AAS 93 (2001), 302.

[71] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (25 March 2019), 231: AAS 111 (2019), 458.

[72] Francis, Address to Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements (28 October 2014): AAS 106 (2014), 851-852.

[73] *Ibid.*: AAS 106 (2014), 859.

[74] Francis, Address to Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements (November 5, 2016): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 7-8 November, 2016, 5.

[75] *Ibid.*