



Circular Letter of the Minister General

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**CIRCULAR LETTER ON THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
BIRTH OF SAINT VERONICA GIULIANI**

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CIRCULAR LETTER ON THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF SAINT VERONICA GIULIANI

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Dear Brothers and

Dear Capuchin Sisters,

May the Lord give you peace.

1. During the General Audience last December 15th, the Holy Father announced the opening of the year dedicated to Saint Veronica Giuliani, marking the 350 years that have elapsed since her birthday on 27th December, 1660. This jubilee year was officially inaugurated at Città di Castello on December 27th with the translation of the saint's body from the monastery to the cathedral.

This saint belongs to us, she is one of our own, she comes from the Capuchin reform, and she personifies the immense and mysterious charismatic potential of the "Spirit of the Lord and his holiness at work within us", to which she was docile in the highest degree.

When we approach her through her writings she seems at first sight a difficult saint, from a different age; her language is unusual, sometimes rough, bound up with a kind of mysticism and especially an asceticism which we do not immediately understand. She is a saint whose life consists of penances, offerings, sacrifices and renunciations, either sought by herself or imposed on her, which are often incomprehensible. Incomprehensible, strange to say, even to herself, so much so that one day she exclaimed that they were "crazy things that love made me do". But if we look at her close up and understand that she did those crazy things for love, then Saint Veronica is today what she was then: a holy woman given to us by the Lord in our moments of crisis of faith, to encourage us to do

deeds of faith and to love Jesus Christ.

For fifty years she never left the small enclosure of the monastery at Città di Castello, and her life would have remained hidden had she not recounted it, under obedience, in her *Diary*. It is a set of 44 volumes in 21 thousand pages, written in a robust and simple style with disconcerting directness and rare sincerity. True to the thrust of Franciscan spirituality, the Saint relives the passion and cross of Christ with the intensity of an inner martyrdom coupled with extraordinary joy.

Yet she is a simple saint, who wishes to remain in her simplicity. She says so explicitly herself, refusing to describe her overwhelming experience of God with precise thoughts or doctrinal reflections.

In this jubilee year the saint wishes to emerge from her silence, to speak to our hearts, and tell us about her experiences of the unfathomable riches of Christ's love, in which all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God are hidden" (Col 2, 3).

2. A reminder of the principal stages in her life will help us focus on some of the key points of our Franciscan charism, as well as on the need for us to be constantly renewed, religiously and spiritually.

Born on December 27th, 1660 at Mercatello sul Metauro, in the dukedom of Urbino, of Francesco Giuliani and Benedetta Mancini, she was the last of seven sisters and was given the baptismal name of Ursula. She was a very lively little girl, entirely devoted to God. She wanted everyone to do as she did ... "everyone used to call me fire" (II, 576), she was to write in her Diary. She was determined and resolute: "I am hard-headed by nature" (VI, 186), she wrote in one of her letters. She was a born leader. In her, faith was the air she breathed, the food she ate, the sum of all she did and thought. To her, sacred images were alive. Pictures of Our Lady with the Child Jesus were objects of a constant dialogue of love. Her mother, before she died at the age of forty, called her daughters together on 28th April 1667 and, showing them the crucifix, assigned one of the Saviour's wounds to each of them. It so happened that Ursula, the youngest (she was nearly seven), was given the wound in His side. The heart. This tells us everything about Veronica. At ten years of age, on February 2nd 1670, she received her first Communion in Piacenza, where the family had moved. "As I received the sacred

Host – she declared – I felt such an intense heat flaring up inside me... it seemed to me that a fire were entering my heart ... I felt as though I were burning, there was no respite”. And she was surprised that the other girls kept still, while she felt “a burning fire that made her sing for joy” (V, 62s).

Our saint became a Capuchin Poor Clare at the age of 17, and entered the Monastery of Città di Castello on 28th April 1677. She had successfully overcome every trial and so was able to pursue her burning desire to belong totally to the Lord. When she was clothed as a nun on 28th October 1677, changing her name from Ursula to Veronica so as to become “a true likeness of Christ crucified”, the Lord revealed to her the mission that was to be hers: “I have chosen you for great things; but you will have much to suffer for love of me” (I, 29; V, 73-75).

3. When she was still a young novice, as infirmarian, she loved to look at a large crucifix hanging on the wall. She couldn't tear herself away and would often run to take a fleeting look. She would speak to it: “My Lord, you have to give me some graces; in particular I ask for the conversion of sinners, and for the return of the lukewarm to your love...”.

Saint Veronica became a teacher in this school of love. Hers was a journey of faith marked by a series of dates that became milestones: her religious profession on 1st November 1678 ; on 4th April 1681, Jesus placed on her head the crown of thorns; on September 17th 1688 she was elected novice-mistress and remained so until 18th September 1691; on December 12th 1693 she began to keep her Diary; from October 3rd 1693 until March 21st 1698 she was once again novice-mistress; on April 5th 1697, Good Friday, she received the stigmata and was denounced to the Holy Office in that same year; in 1699 she was deprived of active and passive voice, a measure which was only revoked sixteen years later, on March 7th 1716. These were the years of impressive mystical gifts.

Re-elected abbess on April 5th 1716, her life was wrapped in the glow of the miraculous. On March 25th 1727 she wrote the last page of her Diary. She was struck down by hemiplegia and after 33 days of agony, “pure and utter suffering”, she died at dawn on 9th July, but not before she had revealed to her novices and sisters the meaning of her life: “Come here, Love has let himself be found after all: this is the cause of my suffering”. Sixty-seven years of fire and faith, love and pain, lived to the full, of apostolic zeal and mystical union with the sufferings of Christ on the cross, in the mystery of His heart and in the

immaculate and sorrowful heart of Mary.

4. Saint Veronica is the great mystic of the cross and of the heart. Charity moved her to wish that all men and women could drink from the springs of divine love, all of them, excluding no-one. With her witness of prayer and communion with God she comes to our aid and to remind us that our highest occupation is to be occupied with God. Supported by grace, Saint Veronica lived to the full the heart of the Rule of St Francis, which says "Let them endeavour to have what is to be desired above all things, namely, the Spirit of the Lord and his holy power at work within us; let them strive to pray with a pure heart". She became not so much a woman who prayed, as a living prayer, like St Francis himself.

5. Saint Veronica was also a great missionary who spent herself for the Church and for the conversion of sinners. We see how the contemplation of Christ is the wellspring of her apostolic and missionary ardour. This is one of the great principles of our Capuchin charism. Here the Saint has much to say to each of us. Her theology of charity is embedded in her concept of the redemption: Christ became Man out of love, his life of poverty and work was directed by love, his gospel teaching is summed up in the word love, his sacrifice was moved by love, his grace is love, heaven is love: everything in Christ is love, because He himself is love.

The dream of converting the whole world was the essence of her mission. We are in the presence of a soul who, with extreme sensitivity, was aware of the universal aspect of her vocation as a contemplative given in sacrifice. She chose no particular people as the focus for her aspirations to be a world-embracing, "ecumenical" missionary; instead, she wanted the whole world: "Addressing the whole world, I used to say: Get up, all you creatures, come with me to Jesus. There is no end to the blessings He brings. If you want treasures, Jesus is the true treasure, without measure. If you want riches, Jesus is true wealth. If you long for tastes and pleasures, Jesus is the height of savour and contentment. In a word, if you long for every good, stay close to Jesus, because He is everything, He is the highest, the infinite Good... And you, heretics and infedels, come to the true faith! Jesus is faith, He is hope, He is charity; come to Jesus. All you men and women, come!..." (I, 777).

6. The presence of Our Lady in the life of Saint Veronica is another fundamental aspect of her spiritual message and of her experience of holiness. Here too the

Capuchin charism is very much present. It is true that the relationship between the Saint and the Virgin Mother is shrouded in the depths of mystery. Saint Veronica never did anything without first asking for the Virgin's blessing. She called on her at all hours, felt her presence constantly. She experienced the love and pain in her heart at the foot of the cross, to the point that the soul of the Saint was no longer her own, but the soul of Mary, her heart the heart of Mary. For her teaching and rule of life, Jesus gave her the way of life of His dear Mother. "I will be your teacher, do everything with me, without yourself". (IV, 306)

7. The centrality of the Eucharist. In the solitude and silence of the cloister, there was Life in the tabernacle of the little church. Saint Veronica began and ended each day with the Eucharist, preceded and followed by prayer-filled nights, full of mystical inebriation and encounters with the Living One. This is a third aspect of her spiritual experience which once again challenges our Capuchin life. Veronica enjoyed these visits to the Blessed Sacrament and Eucharistic adoration, day or night, personal and communal, particularly the celebration of Mass.

8. If we were to delve into Saint Veronica's Diary we would discover whole strata of missionary mysticism and ecumenical motivations which justify the question of evangelisation on a world-wide scale. In a historical period devastated by Jansenism the Saint conceived of the missionary movement as a movement of love: she was a forerunner of the little, great missionary Saint Thérèse of Lisieux.

The conversion of sinners and the evangelisation of the world, which Saint Veronica pursued through the austere way of penance, require the conversion of those who believe in Jesus Christ, Saviour of the world. This is the urgent need of Christians today, the same urgency Saint Veronica saw for a new evangelisation, which can only become fruitful if each of us, indeed all Christians, allow themselves to be renewed in spirit and in our way of life.

9. My dear brothers, let us revive the flame of our charism in the incandescent love of Saint Veronica. The occasion of her jubilee year is a call and a challenge to us. How then can we make Saint Veronica Giuliani up-to-date and "contemporary"? Admittedly, we are dealing with a form of sanctity which, in some aspects, cannot be imitated: the "ferocity" of Veronica's longing for the

harshest, most grievous penances as her response to a loving invitation from Christ to be his co-worker, is not one that all can share; it is not something we are used to, it is beyond our power to grasp. Our Constitutions remind us, however, that “The spirit of penance in a life of austerity is a characteristic of our Order, for we have chosen a strict life after the example of Christ and St Francis” (Const. n. 101, 5).

10. In conclusion, I would like to remind you that the jubilee year of the birth of Saint Veronica Giuliani coincides and is intertwined with another jubilee: the VIII centenary of the foundation of the Poor Sisters of St Clare. For you, my dear Poor Clare Capuchin sisters, this is yet another powerful reminder to live the charism of Holy Mother Saint Clare joyfully and in all its fullness, as Saint Veronica embraced it with total self-giving.

The two-fold jubilee year is also a reason for shared joy among all those whose lives are founded on Francis of Assisi and his charism, which has given to each one his or her own style of life. If today joy is evident between you, my Capuchin Poor Clare sisters and us, Capuchin lesser brothers, we are well aware that Franciscanism can be compared to a particularly fine triptych, made up of three panels: friars, Poor Clares and members of the Secular Franciscan Order, all equally necessary and important and which cannot be read separately. Instead, one refers to the others. It would be a disaster, in fact, if Brother Francis were ever to lack his “little plant” Clare (*TestCl* 49), and in the same way, woe to Clare, if she were ever to lack “our most blessed Father Francis” (*TestCl* 5). Woe betide us all if there were no brothers and sisters “who follow Francis according to their own condition of life” (*1 Cel* 37). We have here the reason for our profound and joyful communion.

There will certainly be plenty of joint celebrations but I believe the most beautiful aspect of our communion, of our sense of being brothers and sisters of each other in the one charism, is the intensity of the journey that the two independent Orders have undertaken together before God. How? To explain this I like to use one of my favourite images: we are tracing the course of a stream, looking for its source: you sisters are on one bank and we friars on the other! And we do it each going our own way and at the same time, but we are profoundly united because we are both on the way to God, the “heavenly Father”, to use an expression that was so dear both to Clare and Francis, who

draws us to Himself by his infinite love.

Communion in living the same form of life, in a different yet equal manner, in spiritual union and embracing a simple and poor lifestyle, is the way to bring to life the beautiful friendship that linked Francis and Clare: both were called to live their own vocation, clear about their different roles yet united in a communion of love for the same Lord. In our time, where we tend to mix up everything and where it no longer seems possible to talk about love unless roles are merged to the point of confusion, we are called to give simple and vibrant testimony to a communion that is not afraid of differences and is able to recognise complementarity.

It can and does happen that we, brothers of the First Order, look to you, dearest sisters, enclosed as you are yet free in the mystery of God, as teachers of that poverty which, in prayer, leads inevitably to contemplation.

“Gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate your Spouse!” (2LAg 20), wrote Saint Clare to Saint Agnes of Prague with reference to Christ, her beloved Spouse. We will look to you to learn not to fall into activism, a condition that entails superficiality, which is the opposite of contemplation. We may be capable of doing many things, yet incapable of imitating Christ or proclaiming him fruitfully. You, dear sisters, chosen for a life of contemplation, remind us that one cannot truly imitate unless one is also prepared to gaze, consider and contemplate. (Cf. John Corriveau, *Circular Letter* n. 27, 5).

May Saint Veronica, faithful disciple of Saint Clare, help us to repeat the same words: “United together, let us love Him who is supremely good.”

Br. Mauro Jöhri
General Minister OFMCap

Rome, June 12, 2011
Solemnity of Pentecost.

