



In the footsteps of Scalabrini

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Scalabrinian year, we have to talk about Scalabrini. But what can we say about Scalabrini that we don't already know? Actually, I believe that the right attitude when talking about Scalabrini is one of remembrance. Scalabrini is our father. And when we remember our father, one person thinks of one story, the other one of another. It is not about discovering new things but about sharing memories.

And yet, in the context of the Scalabrinian year, there is a constraint. The superiors have called the Scalabrinian year to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Scalabrini's beatification, but even more so "to follow in his footsteps". The obligatory theme then becomes: how to follow in Scalabrini's footsteps. But which footsteps?

Scalabrini is a complex figure, with many facets. Shall we follow the passionate pastor who visits his people? Or the catechist who organizes and reforms the teaching of the faith? Do we follow the educator, who reforms the life of his seminaries? Or the conciliator, who seeks to bring opposing parties into dialogue? Shall we follow the man of charity, who gives everything for the good of the poor? Or the lecturer, who draws attention to the reality of migration? Or simply the missionary, who cares about migrants? Once again, the superiors have given a precise indication. We must follow Scalabrini in his search for holiness. As we know, Scalabrini said: "if I could only sanctify myself and sanctify others!"² The theme of our reflection then will be holiness.

Some people will turn up their noses, because to speak of holiness seems to speak of something abstruse, that applies only to a few, of something unattainable while there are many other things to be done, there are more serious problems, war and violence, refugees to be welcomed, etc. But it is not a bad idea to return to the roots. The root is our consecration. We have expressed our consecration through a profession, that is, through a declaration, a public proclamation. But the word profession also indicates an occupation. So, in the declaration we have also chosen an occupation. The consecration does not end at the moment of the declaration, it must become a profession, something that is exercised daily and in public. One might ask: What is your profession? And the answer must be: I am a consecrated person. The answer does not express a doing, it expresses a way of being. Or rather, it expresses a way of being in doing. In fact, what did we say in our profession? To "achieve perfect charity in the apostolic service of migrants." It is not a matter of achieving perfect charity by doing nothing. It is achieved in the apostolic service of migrants. Translated into other words: I have declared that I am on the way to holiness but following a particular path.

There are many ways to holiness, because every baptized person must strive for holiness. For the Scalabrinian, this is achieved through perfect charity in the apostolic service of migrants. One could object: it is not necessary to be a Scalabrinian to do this: in fact, there are many other consecrated persons, others who dedicate themselves to migrants, others who dedicate themselves to an apostolic service of migrants. What distinguishes us, then, what characterizes us? What identifies us

¹ Meditation given on the day of recollection of the Scalabrinian missionaries in Rome, April 2, 2022.

² Letter to the duchess C. Fogliani Pallavicino, 29.1.1903

is the fact that, for us, the three elements are united, they are exclusive (we have no other purpose) and they are permanent (we do not do this for a few months or a few years but for a lifetime).

But something is still missing, there is another element that is essential to our consecration and to our specificity and it is Scalabrini. For us, the way to live perfect charity in the apostolic service of migrants is the one indicated by Scalabrini, of course purified and enriched by history, which requires what we always call "creative fidelity". The Scalabrinian, therefore, is one who has been fascinated by Scalabrini, because he saw in him that person who knew how to translate the following of Christ in original and involving terms and decided: I want to do like him, that is the way for me too. It is not necessary to have models in order to follow Christ. But when you meet one and he is convincing, you find a great help. Of course, each one of us has his own uniqueness, his own unrepeatable story, his own unrepeatable vocation. But through our profession in the Scalabrinian congregation, each of us has embraced some indispensable parameters: migrants, apostolic service, perfect charity, in the footsteps of Scalabrini.

Part One: Holiness

Perfect charity, that is holiness. But what is holiness? Experts in spiritual theology can certainly write a treatise on this subject. More modestly, we are content with a few indications.

1. Holiness as otherness. The first and fundamental indication is that only God is holy. "Why do you call me good," said Jesus. "No one is good except God alone" (Mk 10:8). Only God is holy because holy means "set apart", "other" and only God is the absolute Other.

But we too, in a participatory way, thanks to our consecration, have professed that we tend to bear witness to that otherness. Otherness in reference to what? In reference either to the widespread testimony of the absence of God or in reference to other testimonies of his presence. Jesus came to reveal that God is in our midst and he did it in a different way from the Pharisees. The consecrated person follows Christ, bears witness to the presence of God in a context of God's absence or bears witness to the presence of God in another way thanks to the synthesis he has reached with his life. In our case, the synthesis is perfect charity in the apostolic service of migrants.

Scalabrini was a saint because he was "other than", different, constantly calling attention to God with his way of living faith, hope, charity, and above all in his realization that the migrants were forced to become others, because they could not survive as similar: we remember the expression he quoted in the first book on migration: "Either you steal, or you emigrate."³ He was "other than", a saint, because he dedicated with all of himself so that the migrants could reach a more dignified equality. Migrants do not want to be other, to be discarded as Bauman would say and as Pope Francis is now saying: they want to be similar, equal, in the sense that they want to be treated like everyone else, to have their dignity recognized like everyone else. But Scalabrini was "other than", a saint, also because he went further. He did not limit himself to promoting the acceptance of migrants so that they could be similar, equal; he foresaw that migration could run the risk of stopping at a mediocre similarity, while instead, even through migration, one could reach a superior similarity. We recall his phrase in his address to the Catholic Club of New York: "A much vaster, nobler, and more sublime work is developing: the union in God through Jesus Christ of all people of good will."⁴

³ *The Italian migration to America*, Piacenza 1887.

⁴ Speech at the Catholic Club of New York, 15.10.1901.

Thus, the first observation is: sanctity is God's alone, because he alone is the absolute Other. But even the saints have known how to live this otherness and Scalabrini was an example of it. And we are called to do the same.

2. *Holiness as fulfillment.* There is, however, a second point to be made. Jesus, in fact, also said: "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). And he said this precisely to exhort his disciples to be others, not to be like the pagans or like everyone else. When we hear that expression, be perfect, we smile, because it seems to us an unattainable ideal. And when something is unattainable, why strive to reach it? It's a waste of time. In reality, this difficulty arises because we misinterpret the expression: to be perfect. We interpret it as if Jesus demanded from us a status of achieved perfection, finished perfection. Instead, Jesus demands that we be on the way to our fulfillment. "Perficere" means precisely to bring to completion. As living beings, we are always in the process of becoming, because there is always something lacking with respect to the plan, to the dream of God about each one of us and to the plan of God to which we are called to be a part of. Jesus invites us to always be on this path of fulfillment, so that at the end we can say as he did on the cross: it is finished. Of course, we will never get there, because only Jesus is the completely fulfilled person, the new Adam, of whom Paul speaks. But this does not exempt us from being on the journey.

Holiness as a tension towards fulfillment is insistently presented by Scalabrini, who says: "Holiness, the perfection possible in this life, is not something absolute, free from every imperfection. In fact, even the just man sins seven times a day. Holiness, instead, consists in a constant effort to attain it."⁵ And further on: "The first step or means to holiness is the ardent and generous desire for holiness itself." And in fact, he wrote to Bonomelli: "If I could sanctify myself! Make myself holy! *Hoc est omnis homo.*"⁶

Still in the second speech of the Second Synod he added: "An ordinary desire or resolution is not enough. What is needed is a will, a desire comparable to hunger and thirst."⁷ To hunger and thirst toward the fulfillment of ourselves, this we have professed and this we try to achieve through the apostolic service of migrants.

In some ways, the mission with migrants helps us to sustain our striving for holiness, because in their own way migrants are driven by a lack of fulfillment, they are driven by the need to find what they lack. Their search must support our search, but our search must direct their search toward ever greater completeness. In a sad song about migrants, Bob Dylan said: "I pity the poor immigrant... who falls in love with wealth itself." In this search, with its limits, migration remains a figure of the greatest quest, the journey of each person and of all humanity towards its own destiny.

3. *Holiness as kenosis.* Holiness as otherness, holiness as tension towards fulfillment. But we must also add a third element. Jesus reaches fulfillment through kenosis. Let us recall the Christological hymn of the letter to the Philippians: "He did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant" (Phil 2,7). Fulfillment is not achieved through filling up, but through emptying yourself, through kenosis.

Here too the parallel with migration is interesting. Migration arises from emptiness, from the lack of what is essential, from deprivation; it is a forced, suffered deprivation. But to all intents and

⁵ Second speech in the Second Synod, 3.5.1893. Synodus Dioecesis Placentina Secunda..., Piacenza 1893.

⁶ Lett. to G. Bonomelli, 24.1.1897.

⁷ Second speech in the Second Synod, 3.5.1893. Synodus Dioecesis Placentina Secunda..., Piacenza 1893.

purposes, migrants have already had their kenosis, they come from kenosis, incomplete but real, and they try to overcome it. If many achieve positive results, others face even more serious dispossessions. Perhaps they make some money and then lose their family, the family that was the reason for leaving, or lose other values, rights, dignity, faith. Starting from his own kenosis, the migrant can help others to acquire a deeper understanding of what it means that Christ has enriched us with his poverty. This is the profound sense of the migrant as a subject of mission. Starting from his own kenosis, the migrant can understand and share the path towards the fulfillment that consists in the emptiness that can be filled only by God, and this happens by living the paschal mystery.

For the Scalabrinian missionary, kenosis consists above all in embracing the condition of migrants. Scalabrini falls a bit into rhetoric when he describes the missionaries who leave, but in his words, full of enthusiasm, there is a connection with the stripping away that must be proper to the missionary. Scalabrini says of the missionaries: “These generous souls have wedded the poverty of Christ and abandoned comforts, honors, country, family joys, and whatever in this world is most human and tender and hasten breathlessly to the help of their emigrant countrymen beyond the ocean.”⁸ We have translated this thought with the expression: “to become migrants with migrants.” To experience real kenosis, however, we must identify with the migrants who are living their kenosis. This is what the Rules of Life (5) say when they talk about our preferential choice: “for those migrants who are more acutely living the drama of migration”. Scalabrini wanted to embrace that kenosis when he expressed his missionary yearning: “I gently complain to Jesus, who many years ago denied me the wooden cross of the missionary.”⁹

Therefore, to follow in Scalabrini's footsteps it means to follow him in his aspiration to holiness, a holiness that is otherness, that is fulfillment, that is kenosis.

Part Two: Essential Elements of Scalabrini's Holiness

The way of living the dimensions of holiness that we have described changes with time. Pope Francis says it in *Gaudete et Exsultate* (19): “Each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel.” At a specific moment in history, Scalabrini embodied like no one else the expression of Jesus: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25,35); like no one else because he was able to grasp that this was not a marginal, secondary issue, but a central one for the Church and society.

Cataldo Naro also underlined that “holiness belongs to a specific time, it is fully contextualized in history, because it is a human phenomenon, an experience of men and women who live in a certain period and in a certain geographical space marked by a particular culture.”¹⁰ Hence the indication that Scalabrini's holiness, like the holiness of the men and women of his time, was an ordinary, devout, popular and active holiness.

Scalabrini distinguished himself from the saints of his own time because he was able to go beyond those dimensions:¹¹ he lived in an ascetic way but emphasized the inner dimension of asceticism; he cultivated devotions but placed prayer before devotions; he cultivated above all a Christocentric spirituality, grounded on the incarnation of Christ.

⁸ Discourse to the departing missionaries, 12.7.1888.

⁹ Discourse to the departing missionaries, 24.1.1889.

¹⁰ Naro C., “La spiritualità al tempo di Scalabrini”, *Spiritualità Scalabriniana*, Direzione Generale dei Missionari Scalabriniani, Roma, 1996, p. 80.

¹¹ Zovatto P., “La spiritualità dello Scalabrini”, in Parolin G. e A. Lovatin, *L'ecclesiologia di Scalabrini*, Urbaniana University Press, 2007

He went even further because he did not limit himself to assisting the poor of his time, the migrants, but sought remedies at the political and social level. However, in following in Scalabrini's footsteps, we should not feel tied to the way in which he lived his holiness, but we should preserve its essential characteristics. Everyone can grasp the aspects of Scalabrini's holiness with which he or she feels most in tune, but in my opinion some of those aspects are essential, namely: the centrality of Christ, prayer, charity, love for migrants. We must follow him in seeking perfect charity in the apostolic service of migrants in our time.

1. The centrality of Christ. This has been emphasized by Francesconi and Fongaro, who have most studied Scalabrini's spirituality. In his pastoral letter of Lent 1878, dedicated to Jesus, defined as the invisible head of the Church, since the visible head, Pius IX, had died, Scalabrini profoundly acclaimed Christ as the culmination of everything. This Christological hymn contains every attribution imaginable: "Our Redeemer, our Teacher, our Advocate, our Exemplar, our Physician, our Leader, our Companion, our Brother, our Friend..." etc. etc.¹²

This centrality becomes operative when Scalabrini emphasizes the importance of the immanence of Christ in our lives. Christ as God-in-us: "It is necessary that Jesus Christ live in us; it is necessary that Jesus Christ work in us continually... he himself must be our life and must live in us. To live in us with his spirit, by his grace, by the impression of his mysteries".¹³ He then recommends: "Love Jesus. Keep united with Jesus because a Christian's whole perfection lies precisely in his or her union with Jesus Christ."¹⁴ And he recommends the same thing to his missionaries: "Therefore, beloved brothers and sons, first and foremost you must be united with Jesus Christ. You will realize this union by nourishing your faith with the steady exercise of piety and by persevering in the state of grace".¹⁵

Jesus must be God-with-us, and he is with us above all in the Eucharist. We know how passionately Scalabrini lived the devotion to the Eucharist and how great importance he gave to it in his pastoral work, in particular by dedicating the Third Diocesan Synod only to the Eucharist. He recommended it to priests: "You, more than anyone else, must live the Eucharistic life and delight in staying close to the tabernacle, where you will draw strength to sacrifice yourselves and to die for Jesus, for the glory of God and the good of souls. This is the only ideal of authentic priests."¹⁶

And Jesus is God-for-us, who gives himself completely by dying on the cross. He had a special devotion to the crucified Jesus. To the departing missionaries he gave the crucifix: I know you will run into great labors, serious difficulties, many tribulations, never-ending struggles and sacrifices. But fear not: the Cross accompanies you... In adversity, in despair, in disillusionment, clasp to your heart the Cross I have given you."¹⁷

2. Prayer. As we have already said, before and with devotions, Scalabrini cultivated a life of prayer. To prayer he dedicates the last of his pastoral letters, where he develops the three aspects: the obligation, the excellence and the efficacy of prayer. Prayer is a requirement of the human soul. In fact, "Prayer is for us, reasonable creatures, an innate, instinctive, irresistible need."¹⁸ For

¹² *Pastoral Letter of Monsignor Bishop of Piacenza for Holy Lent 1878 (Jesus Christ the Invisible Head of the Church)*, 16.2.1878.

¹³ *Pastoral letter of Monsignor Bishop of Piacenza for the Holy Lent of 1883*, Piacenza 17.1.1883.

¹⁴ *Pastoral letter ... 1878*, op. cit.

¹⁵ *To the Missionaries for the Italians in America*. Piacenza 1892.

¹⁶ Discourse at the Eucharistic Congress in Turin, 1894.

¹⁷ *Prayer. Pastoral Letter to the Diocese of Piacenza for Holy Lent in the Year 1905*, 6.2.1905.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

Scalabrini, the whole creation is a hymn to God and therefore the human being must participate in this praise. “The grass that sprouts, the drop that falls, the wind that blows, the bird that flies, the sea that roars, the star that twinkles, in a word, creation is ... simply an immense canticle of benediction and praise to the supreme Maker. And shall the human being ... alone be silent in the midst of such sublime harmony?”¹⁹ Prayer is the true strength of man because in prayer, “People speak and God listens. They command and God grants their requests. Let us say it boldly: people command and God obeys.”²⁰ Hence his insistence on daily meditation.

3. *Charity.* As we know, Benedict XV said that charity was Scalabrini’s main virtue. Charity which consisted above all in love for God, which he expressed through an intense pastoral life, a pure conscience that detested sin and the ability to forgive even those who had made him suffer. But also, charity that was transfused into constant concern for others. There is no need for us to repeat the many examples of Scalabrini's charity, we all know them. But it is good to remember what he thought of the poor. “The poor person is the pupil of God's eye, and what we do for the poor person we do for God himself.”²¹ He wrote about himself in his private testament: “I came poor to Piacenza and poor I leave for the other world.”²² And to the priests he recommended: “The world no longer believes in sermons or in the priesthood. But it still believes in charity. Preach the truth with charity; go out and conquer the world with love for the poor.”²³

It is good to remember that he was able to live charity not only through the sharing of goods, but even more so by implementing concrete initiatives for categories of needy people such as deaf-mutes and rice weeders. It is in these initiatives that Scalabrini practiced the "political" dimension of charity, a dimension that cannot be forgotten as we follow in Scalabrini's footsteps.

4. *Love for migrants.* This is an aspect that must remain distinct because for us it qualifies Scalabrini as a Founder but especially because in his love for migrants Scalabrini synthesized his path to holiness. Migrants are the image of Christ in us, with us and for us; migrants are the poor towards whom his merciful gaze could not remain insensitive; migrants are part of God's plan for humanity and history, the construction of Christ's body where all diversities are brought into communion.

Part Three: A Scalabrinian Way to Holiness

At this point we should be able to gather elements that can help us on our way to holiness, keeping in mind what we indicated at the beginning, namely, that consecration in the Scalabrinian congregation qualifies our way and at the same time provides us with the help we need.

As far as qualification is concerned, we are invited to follow Scalabrini and thus to cultivate a Christ-centered spirituality, nourished by prayer, which becomes love of God and neighbor and especially love for migrants. If it is true that these characteristics constitute the framework of Scalabrini's holiness, and therefore of Scalabrinian spirituality, we should find them in Scalabrinian "saints". I have not done any specific research in this regard, but I think we could conclude that this is indeed the case. If we look at Fr. Marchetti, Bishop Rinaldi, Fr. Rubin and Blessed Assunta Marchetti I imagine that, in their own way, they reflect the same characteristics we have seen in

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ Discourse to a charity association.

²² Unpublished private testament.

²³ For the 90th Anniversary of the St Vincent Conferences, 3.6.1890.

Scalabrini: the centrality of Christ in their lives and in their mission, a life of intense prayer, a life spent in love of God and others, and a specific love for migrants.

The help we need comes from our religious profession. Religious vows lived in community are witness and prophecy. This is common to all religious. For us, witness and prophecy characterize us, they make us other, that is, different, specific, in our search for fulfillment through the kenosis with migrants. In this sense, the vow of poverty helps us to witness and proclaim that in their search for improvement of living conditions, the one that migrants pursue, there is a real, greater richness to be pursued, the wealth that is obtained from the poverty of Christ. The vow of chastity helps us to witness and proclaim that all, especially those who are tried and deprived of love, those whose love has been tested by distance, can be loved with God's love. The vow of obedience helps us to witness and proclaim that to oppression and injustice, especially that of forced exodus, it is possible to oppose the justice that comes from God's will. The help of religious vows is a help that we all receive and contribute to, building a community that is an icon of the communion in Christ of which the Founder spoke to us (“a much vaster work”) and which becomes a witness and proclamation for others.

At the practical level, the way to holiness is translated into some concrete orientations which the three Institutes have recognized in the basic text of *Traditio*²⁴, but in which we find the three dimensions of holiness discussed at the beginning of this meditation.

a. Welcome, in order to collaborate in the Father's project. Through our small gestures, our willingness to welcome those who find themselves on the move, we contribute to a more fraternal world, a world that is other than the one marked by rejection and indifference. In the last few decades, welcoming initiatives have multiplied in the congregation and reinforce our creative fidelity to the way shown us by our Founder. In the different contexts in which we find ourselves, we are called to invent new signs, new ways of practicing hospitality.

b. Itinerance, in order to translate into life the Paschal Mystery of the Son. The Son became like us to make us like him. His itinerancy, which reached the point of kenosis, is a model of our capacity to encounter and allow ourselves to be encountered, aware that we are on the same path and with us is the One who is the way. This implies agility in our commitments, detachment from the acquired, a missionary spirit that is based on the conviction that I contribute better to the growth of the Kingdom where the Lord calls me rather than where I am, comfortable in a routine without surprises.

c. Communion in diversity, to welcome the new creation of the Spirit. The tension towards fulfillment is not only a personal inclination, but also a group attitude, which discovers the superabundant grace of God that makes all things new again. It is a fulfillment that is as rich as numerous are the faces of migrants that I recognize and that recognize me along the way. Rejoicing in the growing diversity that the Lord has given us in our congregation, let us allow ourselves to be led toward a growing diversity of mission, instruments of the inexhaustible richness of the Spirit who in a mysterious way, but not without us, is bringing to fulfillment the mission of the Father and the Son.

Traditio also reminds us that our spirituality, our holiness, must be fruitful. At this point, then, we might ask ourselves a few questions. For example, how do we feel about the journey toward holiness? Formulated as such, the question does not seem to make enough of an impression. We

²⁴ *Traditio* 33, June 2021.

could rephrase it by saying: do I feel the hunger and thirst of which Scalabrini spoke? Do I feel enthusiastic and open to new missionary openings? Are we helping each other to walk quickly on the path of perfect charity in the apostolic service of migrants, or are we influencing one another to go slower and slower? Is the formation we give and receive a stimulus towards fulfillment?

In this meditation, in the context of the Scalabrinian year, I have tried to derive some elements from the example of the Founder to help us walk with determination on the path of holiness. We cannot exempt ourselves from it. Let us go to the origins, and what we have professed. If we feel that we have not done enough or if we feel that the task is too great, let us not lose courage, let us not change our “profession”. Let us make our own what the great orator, Giovanni Semeria, said about Scalabrini: "He thought, and he was not mistaken, that doing is worth more than talking; he thought that not being able to do everything does not dispense us from trying to do what is possible at a given moment in history; he thought that great deeds mature and are prepared by the small circumstances"²⁵.

²⁵ Semeria G., Mons. Scalabrini. *In Memoriam*, Commemorazione tenuta il 9 luglio 1905 nella chiesa di S. Vincenzo Martire, Piacenza.