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FORMATION**

TANGAZA COLLEGE

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

**TITLE: THE COTTOLENGO CHARISM AND ITS APPLICATION
TO THE KENYAN SOCIETY TODAY**

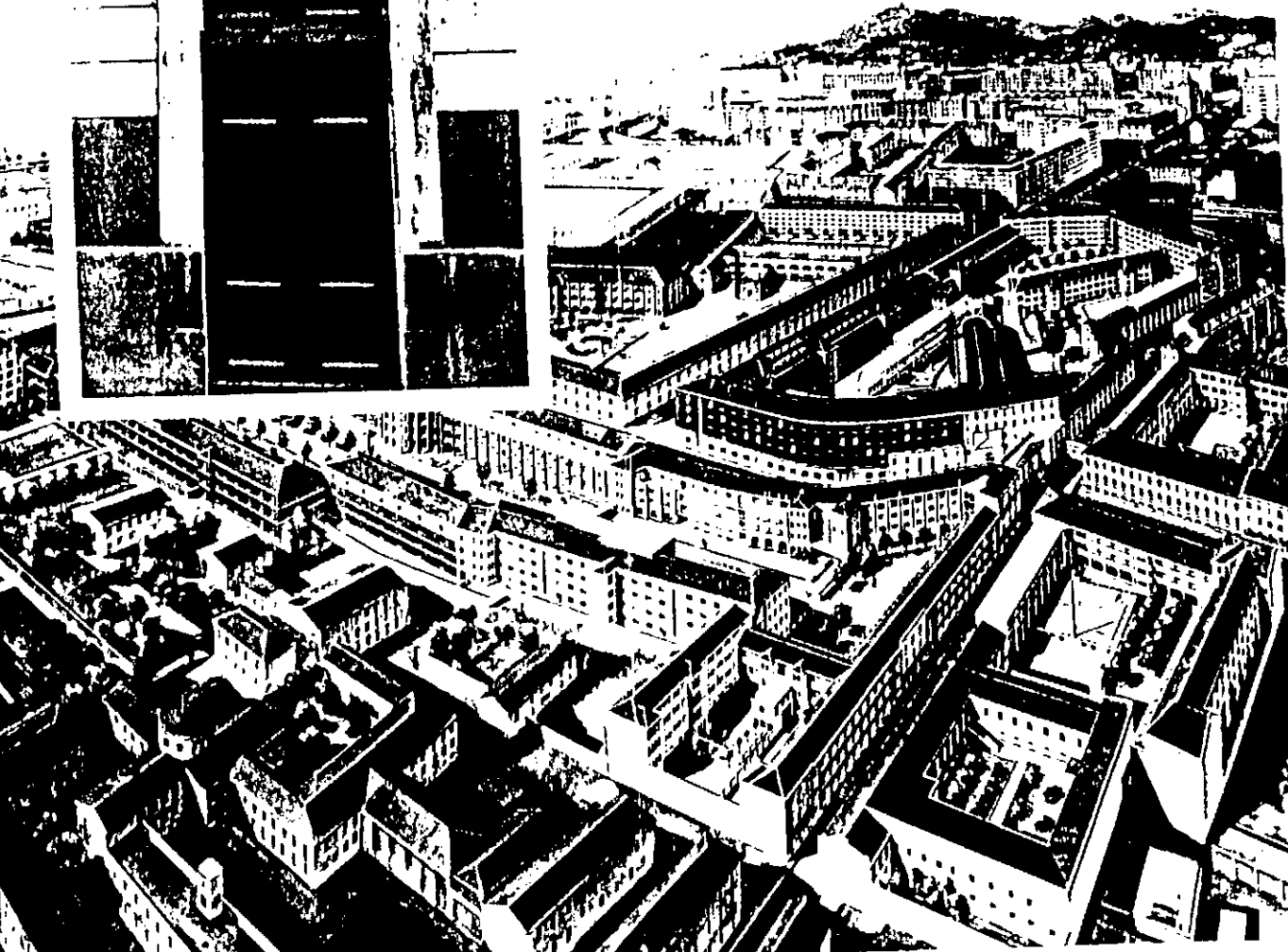
**This long Essay is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for a Diploma in Religious Formation.**

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DECLARATION.

I hereby declare this is my original work. The material used has not been submitted for academic credit to any other institute.

All the sources have been cited in full.

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To all the Cottolengo Sisters, Priests and Brothers. To the Seminarians and Novices, to the postulants and all the young people willing to know the charism of St. Joseph B. Cottolengo is. Through your charitable activities toward the poorest you continue to witness that God is our loving and tender Father.

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With joy: **DEO GRATIAS!**

ABBREVIATIONS

P. C	Perfetae charitatis
L. G	Lumen Gentium.
G. B. C	Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo.
J. B. C	Joseph Benedict Cottolengo
F.P	Fiori e Profumi. (Flowers and ascents)
C. C. U. N	Caritas Christi Urget Nos
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency syndrome
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
C. C. C	Catechism of the Catholic Church

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Charitable activities have always been a distinctive feature of the Church's life. In keeping with the teaching of Christ that every act of charity done to someone in need is done to him (Mt 25:40). It does not surprise us, therefore, that the life of the Church is filled with people, whether canonized or not, who have committed their lives to the service of the poor, the suffering, the needy and the marginalized. Among these must be counted Saint Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, the founder of the *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza* (Little House of Divine Providence),¹ whose charism we are going to examine in this essay. A turning point in his life was on September 2, 1827, when he perceived in an irrevocable way a special vocation to charity towards the poorest, the sick and abandoned people. Many people attracted by his charism joined him to share his evangelical efforts. These were lay people, Sisters, Brothers and priests.

Our essay is an attempt to discover and deepen the charism of Joseph Cottolengo in order to share it more fruitfully with others in the apostolate. My decision to study this charism more deeply grew out of the many questions I was asked about Joseph Cottolengo, his work, and about the Religious communities of the Cottolengo family. Many Christians, especially young people, asked: Is Cottolengo a place or a person? How come you live together as Cottolengo communities? What is your charism and who is Cottolengo?

¹ The name "Little House of Divine Providence" is the name that J. Cottolengo gave to the work he started for the service of the poor in Turin, Italy. "Little House" is the name used in Italy today and also for all the branches of the "Little House" in other continents where the work of Cottolengo is present. The origin of the name, "Little House," is derived from the realization that the whole universe, in itself is the big house of Divine Providence. Therefore the Little House in front of it should always consider itself just a small fraction of the whole work of God, even though in time, the same Little House could be expected to grow and increase (L. Piano, *San. Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 246).

To answer all these questions, I felt the need to study, deepen more and write something about our charism, taking into account its implementation in the Kenyan context.

This work therefore is a research into the Cottolengo charism. In an attempt to show how it helps to alleviate the new poverties in Kenyan society today, both historical and descriptive methods will be applied. The essay is divided into four chapters. The first chapter presents the history of the Cottolengo charism. We shall briefly describe the life of Joseph Cottolengo and what prompted him to start the Little House of Divine Providence. In the process we will show the uniqueness of the religious families he founded.

The second chapter introduces the charism of Joseph Cottolengo. We shall see that the Cottolengo charism is a gift given to him for the good of all and put in the service of the poor. In this chapter we will examine the biblical foundation of the Cottolengo charism and explore all its constitutive elements.

In the third chapter we will try to analyze the fundamental characteristic of the Cottolengo charism, namely, "burning charity." This chapter gives us the picture of the poor that J. Cottolengo had in mind when he started the Little House as well as the joys and the challenges of serving them.

Chapter four focuses on the application of the Cottolengo charism, that is, on how it responds to the needs of the poor in today's Kenya. Therefore, this final chapter will examine the services in which the followers of Joseph Cottolengo are involved as a result of their reading of the signs of the time in this particular social context.

CHAPTER I

HISTORY OF THE COTTOLENGO CHARISM

1. INTRODUCTION

All conscious Christian living originates from the call of Jesus to "come and follow me" (Mk 1:17). It takes its characteristic direction from the exhortation to "go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37). All Christians are called to seek God and make God known in the world. Each one however, according to his/her own gifts and duties, must advance along the way of a living faith that arouses hope and works through love (Cf. Lumen Gentium no. 41). St. Joseph Cottolengo undertook this way of seeking God and making God known especially to the poorest. The motto *Caritas Christi Urget Nos*, (The love of Christ impels us), from 2 Cor 5:14 moved him.

In this chapter of our thesis, we shall look briefly at the history of the Cottolengo charism. We shall organize our research in five points: first we shall look at Joseph Cottolengo's life and vocation which led to the foundation and prosperity of the Little House of Divine Providence and of the Cottolengo Religious family. Second, we will look at his meeting with Maria Gonnet after which the Grace was given. The third point will be on the witness of his first collaborators. Fourth, we will look at the beginning of the Cottolengo communities, and the fifth point will be on the uniqueness of the Cottolengo communities.

2. ST JOSEPH BENEDICT COTTOLENGO

St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo is the founder of the Little House of Divine Providence. He was an Italian priest with great faith in God and tender love for the poorest. He was born on May 3, 1786 in Bra, Italy. He was the firstborn of Giuseppe Antonio and Benadetta Clarotti. They had twelve children of whom six died in infancy. His parents were good Christians who educated their children in a Christian way.² One day Cottolengo visited a nearby hospital. When he returned home, his mother was surprised at seeing him take the measurements of their house. "What are you doing?" the mother asked. "I am going to bring many sick people in here. I want to see how many will fit,"³ answered the little Joseph. He was only five years old. This way of Cottolengo's thinking did not perish as he grew up, but it was concretized when he started a home to help the poorest.

The early life of Cottolengo was marked by a very difficult moment. Three years after his birth, the French Revolution began. Piedmont, his native region, tried to fight off the invasion, but succumbed to Napoleon. Those who refused to submit to the invader were subject to every kind of persecution. Both lay people and clerics were humiliated. Seminaries were closed and convents robbed. Kings were exiled and Pope Pius VII was imprisoned by Napoleon.⁴ Joseph Cottolengo grew up in a difficult time. This is what made him do all his philosophical and theological studies under private tutors. Joseph Cottolengo was ordained a priest in the chapel of the Turin Seminary on June 8, 1811.⁵

² Cf. F. Cramerì, *In the Footsteps of Christ: Joseph Cottolengo*, 5

³ P. P. Gastaldi, *San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo. Joseph B. Cottolengo*, 7.

⁴ Cf. D. Carena, *Joseph Cottolengo Who Are You?* 9.

⁵ Cf. T. Bosco, *San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, 19.

In 1813, he was appointed curate in the parish of Corneliano D'Alba.⁶ Here he generously offered his help to the parish priest. Joseph Cottolengo left Corneliano for Turin, where again he took up his theological studies. He graduated on May 4, 1816 and then went back to Bra. Two years later, Cottolengo joined the community of the "canons"⁷ of the church of *Corpus Domini* in Turin. The ministry of these priests was to care for the parish of *Corpus Domini* and to teach in the university in Turin. Being the assistant parish priest, Joseph Cottolengo was working in the parish and he took particular interest in the poor. Because of his unique love for God and for the poor he soon became known as 'the good canon.'

3. COTTOLENGO MEETS MARIA GONNET - "THE GRACE IS GRANTED"

On September 2, 1827, Cottolengo was called to witness the death of a young French woman, Maria Gonnet, wife of Pietro Ferrario and mother of five children. In spite of the fact that Gonnet was in desperate need of immediate care, she was not admitted in any of the local hospitals of Turin because of some complex laws and regulations in existence at that time. In the major hospital of Turin, Gonnet was not accepted because of her pregnancy. Hospitalization of women close to childbirth was forbidden. She was referred to the maternity hospital where she was similarly rejected because other rules forbade taking in patients with diseases. Maria Gonnet found no help anywhere. She died far from home, leaving her husband and children in great distress.⁸

⁶ Cf. T. Bosco, *San G. B., Cottolengo*, 22.

⁷ "Canon" is a title like monsignor

⁸ Cf. Sisters of St. J. B. Cottolengo, *The fullness of Christian Life in St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 8.

Joseph Cottolengo, who witnessed that sad event, was deeply shocked by this event and decided to do something to avoid the repetition of such cases. From that moment he kept on asking: "How can we talk of the goodness of God, our Provident Father, to people who are dying so miserably?" And again, "Why did God allow me to witness such a sad event and what does God want from me?" With unusual restlessness, he called the sacristan by name, *Luigi None*, and ordered him to ring the bells and to light the candles on the altar of Holy Mary of Grace.⁹ The bell rang at an unusual time and people came, wondering what it meant. They prayed the Litany to our Lady.¹⁰ The Blessed Mother listened to his request. Seeing in his heart that burning spark of divine love, she assured him that his thoughts and desires were true. This filled his heart with such a great joy that he exclaimed: "The Grace is granted, the Grace is granted, blessed be the Holy Mother of God."¹¹ The exclamation the "Grace is granted" implied a charism, a gift given by God, a prophecy for the church.

In 1827, Cottolengo, inspired by the above experience, opened a small home with the intention of providing assistance to the most needy, the poorest, those discriminated against by unjust regulations and laws, and those neglected by society. Strengthened by the words of our Lord, "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers (and sisters), you do to me" (Mt 25:40), he opened the first two rooms and prepared them for the sick in a house called "Red Arch" in Turin. On January 17, 1828, the first sick person called Margherita, a

⁹ It is a picture of Our Lady of Grace in the Church of Corpus Domini in Turin.

¹⁰ Cf. T. Bosco, *San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo*, 36.

¹¹ E. Cramerì, *In the Footsteps of Christ, St. J. Cottolengo*, 8.

paralysed woman in need of permanent care, was accepted; others followed her shortly afterwards.¹²

4. THE WITNESS OF THE COLLABORATORS OF JOSEPH COTTOLENGO (THE VOLUNTEERS)

After opening the 'Red Arch,' Canon Cottolengo was challenged by the growing and pressing problem of providing the staff for his work. Volunteers were the first collaborators of Cottolengo. The forerunner of the numberless throng of these Volunteers has been a certain Tommaso Rolando. He was the first one to know Cottolengo's project and collaborated for the establishment of the Red Arch. The best doctors offered their service to the poor of Cottolengo. One of them was Doctor Lorenzo Granetti. There was a pharmacist, Paolo Anglesio, and many others.¹³ Then he found a group of pious ladies who, feeling the attraction of the Canon's charism, got involved in his venture and offered their help. However, the service to the poor was not as continuous as Cottolengo desired. In August 1830, Joseph Cottolengo, decided to gather some young girls who were full of good will and love for God to take over this service, thus starting the community of Sisters.¹⁴

5. GRACE IS TESTED

God's work always needs to be tested in order to grow and develop. In September 1831, due to an epidemic of cholera in the city, the authorities ordered the rector of *Corpus*

¹² Cf. P.P. Gastaldi, *I Prodiggi della Carità. San G. B., Cottolengo* 141.

¹³ Cf. P.P. Gastaldi, *I Prodiggi della Carità. San G. B., Cottolengo* 141.

¹⁴ Cf. L. Piano, *San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo*, 198.

Domini to have the small hospital closed. Earlier, Joseph Cottolengo had been warned not to start it. In fact, Canon Vallet, the Rector of the Congregation, received a notification of the ministry's decision. He informed Cottolengo saying: "There you are! We've got to close the hospital as soon as possible! It was to be expected, Monsieur Cottolengo, and we did warn you. Moreover the honour of the Congregation itself is at stake, and through your own fault"¹⁵ Cottolengo's trust in God was unperturbed. He answered him cheerfully: "You are not from the country, Father Rector. You do not know that cabbages have to be transplanted to shoot well. Divine Providence will transplant the small home, and it will become, you will see, quite a well large cabbage."¹⁶

Having succeeded in placing his former patients in other hospitals, he brought into the empty rooms of the "Red Arch" some girls he had picked up in the streets. He went out to a new place called Valdocco. In 1832, Cottolengo moved the small hospital to the outskirts of Turin naming it, *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza*, (Little House of Divine Providence) and put it under the protection of St. Vincent de Paul. Over the entrance, he placed the words: *Caritas Christi Urget Nos!* In order to accommodate the ever-increasing number of patients, other buildings gradually arose, bearing distinct names such as House of Faith, House of Hope, Madonna House, and Bethlehem. Cottolengo sheltered epileptics, the deaf, dumb, orphans, and distressed persons of all sorts. Two houses were devoted to the mentally handicapped whom Cottolengo called *Buoni Figli* (Good sons and daughters). These were the masters and mistresses of the Little House. Joseph Cottolengo never attributed the success of the Little House of Divine Providence to

¹⁵ F. Caldirola, et al. *The Cottolengo* 31.

¹⁶ F. Caldirola, et al. *The Cottolengo* 33.

his own powers of organization; he was entirely convinced that he was merely a tool in the hands of God.¹⁷ He once set forth his conviction to the Sisters in these graphic words:

We are like the marionettes of a puppet show. As long as a hand from above holds them they walk, jump, dance and give signs of agility and life. They represent now a king, now a pawn but as soon as the performance is over, they are dropped and huddled together ingloriously in a dusty corner. So it is with us, amid the multiplicity of our various functions, we are held and moved by the hand of Divine Providence. Our duty I would say is to enter into its designs to play the part assigned to us and respond promptly and trustfully to the impulse received from on high.¹⁸

Joseph Cottolengo laid down his life unreservedly for the most poor, the sick, and the abandoned. After dedicating his life totally to the service of the less fortunate with love and joy beyond words, Cottolengo's earthly life came to an end on April 30, 1842. Many years had already passed when on March 19, 1934, Pope Pius XI solemnly proclaimed Cottolengo a saint. Cottolengo is with interceding for his beloved ones on earth.

6. BEGINNING OF THE COTTOLENGO COMMUNITIES

The original intuition of Cottolengo, the grace of September 2, 1827, was that of starting an institution of assistance to the poor. This charism was expressed and became a reality in the Little House. For its continuation, Cottolengo founded the religious communities of Sisters, Brothers and Priests. These communities lived in the Little House to assure its stability and genuine evangelical spirit. Today the three institutes present themselves as follows: Sisters of Apostolic life and Sisters of Contemplative life, Religious Brothers and society of Priests. We will give a brief historic description of each.¹⁹

¹⁷ Cf. L. Piano, *San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, 158.

¹⁸ L. Piano, *Fiore e profumi raccolti dai detti di San G. B. Cottolengo*, 324 (212).

¹⁹ Cf. L. Piano, *San G. B. Cottolengo e la Sua Opera*, 27.

6.1 Sisters of St. Joseph Cottolengo

Between 1828 and 1830, lay people at Red Arch provided the service to the poor and the sick in the Little House.²⁰ In 1830, Joseph Cottolengo felt the need to give unity and continuity to the service offered to the poor in the Little House. Therefore, he started a community of Sisters and put them under the protection of St. Vincent de Paul. In 1833, on the feast of the Assumption, he gave the religious habit to the first Sisters and on the feast of Epiphany, in 1834, they took their religious vows.²¹ In the Cottolengo family there were twelve religious families of Sisters. These twelve families of Sisters (six of Contemplative Life and six of Apostolic Life), were acknowledged by the Apostolic See with the decree of June 20, 1959, as forming one congregation with the name "Cottolengo Sisters." They are divided in two families: Sisters of Apostolic Life and Sisters of Contemplative Life.

The mission entrusted to the "Cottolengo Sisters" extended to all aspects of human poverty. In fact, Joseph Cottolengo charged them with many different tasks concerning the assistance, care and education of all the needy people housed in the Little House. Shortly afterwards, he sent them far away to other places in order to carry out the same mission to the poor.

The Sisters of Contemplative Life commit themselves to witness in a pre-eminent and incisive way that "the Little House is founded on and is sustained only by prayer."²² With their existence, they are a silent challenge to search for what constitutes the essence of consecrated life, that is, to stay with the Lord, to fix their gaze on him only, directing

²⁰ Cf. T. Bosco, *San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, 43

²¹ Cf. L. Piano, *San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo e sua opera*, 30.

²² L. Piano, *Fiore e profumi, raccolti dai detti di San G. B. Cottolengo*, 384.

their whole life to the contemplation of God. The contemplative Sisters invites all of us to work selflessly, to contemplate Jesus hidden in the person of the poor.²³

In their service the Sisters of Apostolic Life witness the love of Christ and by so doing remain faithful to their charism. Their mission is to give glory to God and offer charity to those who have no one to care for them and those in desperate need. With prophetic daring, inspired by Christ's charity, they live a life of humility, simplicity and generosity. They, in fact, become "sisters" and "mothers" to the poor and "ministers of Divine Providence." They bear witness to the love of God, our tender and provident Father. They are sustained by joyful hope, nourished by the Eucharist and accompanied by the Holy Virgin's maternal presence, while awaiting the completion of God's reign.²⁴

6.2 Brothers of St. Joseph Cottolengo

Considering the nature and the needs of the Little House, it is logical that St. Joseph Cottolengo thought to form a religious community of men. Indeed in 1833 he founded the community of laymen: the Brothers of the Little House of Divine Providence. Thinking about them, Cottolengo organized in the Little House a group of young and good men called the Little Friars. The Brothers were chosen from this new group, devoted to special and religious cultural formation.²⁵

The religious life of Brothers achieved a remarkable level of enthusiasm and commitment. Cottolengo did not leave particular rules for the Brothers, but just something

²³ Cf. *Acts of the VII General chapter of the sisters of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, November 3-December 3, 55.

²⁴ Cf. F. Caldirola et al. *The Cottolengo*, 29.

²⁵ Cf. G. Maritati, *The Ark of charity. The Life of St. Joseph B. Cottolengo*, 78

essential for such a life of dedication. In some official documents, Cottolengo states that the Little House gave birth to Brothers, who are sons of the same house. Their consecrated life is outlined by the declaration of renouncing everything for love of God. The Cottolengo Brother's religious vocation is to bring aid to the young, and to ill-adjusted, sick or handicapped men who are bereft of help. Out of their love for God, they befriend the poor, offering free services in the Little House.

At the end of his training and studies, the Brother pronounces his vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. His mission, illuminated by grace and strengthened by daily prayer, and Eucharist, bears witness to the world of the love and the infinite goodness of God, the Provident Father.²⁶

6.3 Priests of St. Joseph Cottolengo

After engaging Brothers and Sisters in the activity that God entrusted to him, Joseph Cottolengo thought about a community of priests that would be in the service of the Little House. What we know with certitude is that, between 1832-1842, five priests became members of this community of priests. Meanwhile, considering the quick spreading of the institution, Joseph Cottolengo felt the need to prepare some young men for the priesthood. In 1836, five young men chosen from the family of Brothers of Joseph Cottolengo were initiated towards their journey to priesthood as seminarians, under the guidance of Joseph Cottolengo the founder.²⁷ Finally, on May 30, 1841 Cottolengo started a seminary called "Tommasini," placed under the protection of St. Thomas Aquinas. In this

²⁶ Cf. L. Piano, *San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, 520.

²⁷ Cf. L. Piano, *San G. B. Cottolengo*, 547.

way, a community of priests for the service of the Little House was realized. This community, which was initially known as the Congregation of the Priests of the Holy Trinity, is now called the Society of Cottolengo Priests. No particular written rules were given to them, but simply a timetable concerning the moments of prayer, which was in common. Obviously, they worked under the obedience of Joseph Cottolengo. "He founded this community of priests with two tasks. First: *custodire nel morale* (to provide for the pastoral ministry). Second, *custodire nell'economia*, (to administer the various institutions of Cottolengo)."²⁸

The Society of Cottolengo Priests is a clerical society of apostolic life under pontifical law. Its members strive to answer to the needs of the poor and the sick in the Little House. They assist the Brothers, Sisters and volunteers of the Little House in their spiritual and moral duties, liturgical celebrations, catechism, and the administration of sacraments. Together with the Sisters and Brothers, they offer food, shelter, medicines, education and all other needs to their beneficiaries.²⁹

7. UNIQUENESS OF THE COTTOLENGO COMMUNITIES

From its origins, the Cottolengo family, by the name *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza* (Little House of Divine Providence), is an "integral" body composed of Sisters, Brothers, Priests and the poor who are their masters/mistresses. The reason why these religious corporations are so unique in the Church is precisely because they are all part of the Little House. They share the same charism as well as the same spirituality. The

²⁸ I. Piano, *San G. B. Cottolengo e la sua Opera*, 53

²⁹ Cf. F. Caldirola et al, *The Cottolengo*, 33.

term "integral" means something that belongs to or forms a necessary part of a whole; something that has to be combined with another in order to make a fully completed entity.³⁰ Our three institutes are not co-proprietors or joint owners of the Little House. No, they are simply its administrators. Among the fundamental values that are basic in the life of the members of this family, sharing of goods takes a preeminent place, just as it was in the life of the early Christian communities.

Faithful to the spirit of the founder, our institutes give up the right to have their own patrimony distinct from the Little House. They are bound to the Little House with regard to the aim of their mission, which must be lived and carried out by all with the same style. Indeed these three communities form the big family of Cottolengo. They form a whole, where, if one of them is missing, the family is incomplete.³¹ In this uniqueness, the Church recognized the Little House of Divine Providence. The three institutes depend on the authority of the Father of the Little House, who has no power over the individual persons,³² but has the authority over the three Institutes within the bounds set in a decree of the Apostolic See in 1959. The Father general is the center of unity in the Little House. Together with the other General superiors of the Cottolengo Sisters and Brothers, they care and work for the continuity of the Cottolengo charism.³³

³⁰ Cf. *The Constitutions of the Sisters of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 2.

³¹ Cf. L., Piano, *I Tre Istituti di Vita Consacrata della Piccola Casa in relazione al carisma del fondatore*, 15.

³² In the congregation of Sisters and Brothers.

³³ Cf. *The Constitutions of the Sisters of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 28

8. CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have examined the life of St. Joseph Cottolengo from his childhood, his education, his priestly ordination and his work for the poor as a canon in the congregation of the priests of *Corpus Domini* in Turin. We have shown that on September 2, 1827, after he had assisted a dying mother and prayed his fervently to our Lady of Grace he perceived a special vocation to charity towards the poorest, the sick and abandoned people and he worked for them tirelessly. He obtained the Grace, from our mother Mary to start a small hospital at "Red Arch" where he could welcome all the needy people.

For the continuity of his charitable works and stability of his charism and of the Little House, he founded communities of consecrated people., These are the Cottolengo communities of Sisters, Brothers, and priests. In the chapter we analyzed also the uniqueness of the families founded by him. Joseph Cottolengo followed Christ as the model of charity. His followers are called to emulate his example today. The following chapter will examine the charism itself. It will help us know what moved Joseph Cottolengo to so a great charity towards God and the people.

CHAPTER II.

COTTOLENGO CHARISM

1. INTRODUCTION.

Joy and cheerfulness are the characteristics of those who put their trust on God and therefore they do not consider tomorrow worth worrying about. When we trust deeply that God is truly with us and holds us safe in a divine embrace, guiding every one of our steps, we can let go our anxious need to know what tomorrow will bring or what will happen next month or the future. Joseph Cottolengo, the founder of the Little House of Divine Providence, worked, loved and served God in the poorest, simply trusting in God's daily providence. His charism is based on the experience of being loved by God who is a loving and caring Father

In this chapter, we are going to discover his charism. This will be done in four points: First we will examine the general meaning of charism from the documents of the Church. Second we will concentrate on the charism of St. Joseph Cottolengo. Third, we will investigate the evangelical foundation of the Cottolengo charism, and finally, we will point out various elements that constitute the Cottolengo charism. All this will help us know better, appreciate and admire this wonderful gift of God given to Joseph Cottolengo

2. WHAT IS A CHARISM?

The Greek word "charisma" means, a free gift, a favour, a grace. It is Paul who introduced this term into religious language. The term grace has a general meaning, and

can be applied to any gift of God. Charism, instead, indicates more specifically a gift given by the Holy Spirit to an individual person for the common good. Charism implies stability and continuity. Grace can be a passing gift given for a certain moment, while charism is destined to last.³⁴ It is a gift given to certain persons for their own sanctification and for the common good. Through these gifts, God has given to the church the power to cooperate, in her own up building.³⁵ It is a gift freely given, not related to the merits of the person who receives it. In *Lumen Gentium* 12 we read: "...Allotting his gifts according as he wills, he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up the Church."

A charism becomes more evident at the time of the foundation of a religious institute, of a school of spirituality and of the charitable works, which express it. The charism with which the Holy Spirit endows a founder always implies a particular understanding and grasping of the gospel message and transforms it into a concrete experience of charity towards others. Being a gift of the Spirit it is always a dynamic reality, a source of life and activity. (*Perfectae caritatis* no. 11).

3. THE CHARISM OF JOSEPH COTTOLENGO

A founder is a person chosen by God and destined to become the bearer and channel of a special gift that is the source of a religious family. He is entrusted with the duty of sharing this gift with whomever he meets and all those who are fascinated by his

³⁴ Cf. L. Piano, *Il carisma di San G. B., Cottolengo*, 2.

³⁵ Cf. D. Michael, *The New Dictionary of the Catholic Church*, 292.

message. The charism of Joseph Cottolengo is a gift that he shared with those who followed him in the service of God and of the needy people. The Little House of Divine Providence was born from a divine initiative just as other religious communities are. Cottolengo obtained the grace on what to do for the poor and the abandoned on September 2, 1827, in deep prayer at the feet of our Lady of Grace

Joseph Cottolengo, in his life, had a particular intuition of the love of God, the provident Father for all his creatures, and especially for all human beings. Having experienced the loving providence of God the Father, he understood the urgency to provide and care for his poor brothers and sisters. He praises and celebrates with them the wonders of Divine Providence. He tried to manifest this love of God the Provident Father, in all his activities. Joseph Cottolengo calls us to exercise "*Love for God and for people and a living faith and trust in Divine Providence*"³⁶ These are the words in which the charism of Cottolengo is expressed. This charism of Joseph Cottolengo, which is the charism of the Little House of Divine Providence, is lived in the Cottolengo spirit.³⁷ Joseph Cottolengo explained it in a homily:

There is a strong connection between the love of God and the love for our brothers and sisters-(that the former cannot be separated from the latter...) No one can think to love God sincerely if he/she does not love his/her fellow brothers and sisters. We may think of these two realities of love being like two flames lighted up by one same burning fire, or two streams flowing from the same spring or two branches branching from the same trunk.³⁸

³⁶ Sisters of St. Joseph B. Cottolengo, *The fullness of Christian life in St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 13-24

³⁷ The spirituality of Joseph Cottolengo, which is the spirituality of the Little House, is a Trinitarian, Eucharistic, Ecclesial, Marian, and Christocentric spirituality. It is prayer that makes it continue (V. Di Meo *La Spiritualita' di San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo*, 147.191.278).

³⁸ G. B. Cottolengo. *Predica sulla Carità*, 2-5.

Faithful to the charism of the founder, the Cottolengo followers bear witness to the love of God, the Provident Father, by their *laus perennis*, (continuous prayer) and a loving service towards their most needy brothers and sisters, especially those who have nobody to attend to their needs. They strive towards the fulfillment of their perfection in accord with the vocation proper to the Cottolengo spirit: unbounded faith, total confidence in Divine Providence, joyful hope, fervent love for God and great charity towards their brothers and sisters, always showing preference to the most poor. The Cottolengo charism can also be defined as a charism of all embracing love. Joseph Cottolengo teaches us that: "We are here only to love God, to please Him in everything we do, in fact I tell you, we are here for this and for nothing else."³⁹

4. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE COTTOLENGO CHARISM.

Every charism comes from God. Each founder gets an insight into a particular message. This insight becomes a key for the interpretation and appreciation of the whole Gospel. The charism of Joseph Cottolengo is based and founded on the teaching of Jesus which we find in Matthew 6:25-34, and in 25:31-40. These texts express the essential principles on which the Little House rests and takes its roots.⁴⁰ God is our heavenly Father, and such a loving Father, he care and is very concerned about us. If we therefore go on worrying excessively about the future, it means that we doubt God's love and care. If God our Father feeds the birds of the air and gives flowers their beauty, how much more will

³⁹ I. Piano. *Fiori e profumi*, 363.

⁴⁰ Cf. *The Constitutions of the sisters of St. J. B Cottolengo*, no 4

God take care of us made in the divine image and redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Let us read the passage of Matthew 6:25-34

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat (or drink), or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds in the sky: they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than they? Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your lifespan? Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was clothed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? So do not worry and say, 'what are we to eat?' or 'what are we to drink?' or 'what are we to wear?' All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself.

If God is a Father who cares for us in so wonderful a way, we should love and serve God always. We must be able to see God in our needy brothers and sisters. In fact in (Matthew 25: 31-46), we conclude that every person is a son/daughter of God in Christ. God is known, loved, contemplated and served in the poor, the needy, especially the ones who do not have anybody taking care of them. We shall quote only a part of it. "...For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.... Whatever you did to one of these least brothers [sisters] of mine you did it for me..." Joseph Cottolengo was inspired by these words of Jesus to start the small home for the sick, poor and all the abandoned people. He entrusted the whole of his work to the care of God who provides everything.

Joseph Cottolengo made the above passages the programme of his life and that of his co-workers. He summarized his teaching about love in the following words, "For the love of Christ impels us" (2 Cor 5: 14). In this spirit he gave his life totally for the service

of God in the person of the poor and the abandoned. In the spirit of the Gospel inculcated by Joseph Cottolengo, the Little House day after day asks above all for God's reign and justice. "The receiving of daily bread is the constant miracle. Nourished by this word of God the life of the Little House is a life of living faith, where Christ is seen in all the poor and the abandoned."⁴¹

5. THE ELEMENTS OF THE COTTOLENGO CHARISM

Two of the elements that constitute the Cottolengo charism as we have seen above are: Love for God and for human beings, faith and trust in Divine Providence. His motto, "Caritas Christi Urget Nos," constitutes a third element.

5.1 Love for God and for human beings

Love is not an abstract but a concrete reality. Love is manifested in action. Out of love, God created everything. Out of love Jesus suffered and died for us. Out of love the Father and the Son gave us the Holy Spirit. Learning from God our Father we are called to concretize our love in humble service to our brothers and sisters. Jesus showed us this kind of love when he washed his disciples' feet and commanded them to do likewise to one another (Jn 13). This example of Jesus teaches us that our service to one another should be an imitation of Christ whose love overwhelms us.

The activities of the Little House of Divine Providence are done following the example of Christ. We receive the gift of love from God and we are invited to share it with

⁴¹ A. Bolla, *St Joseph B. Cottolengo. The Saint, His Work, His Spirit*, 12.

others. It is not the case of, "I give you so that you can repay me tomorrow". It is a service for the love of God, and love for one another. "Love is genuine when it is offered without looking for reward or gratification of any kind, with a vision of faith that is pure and gratuitous."⁴² The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) is a summary of what love for neighbour means. Our neighbour is whoever is in need. All men and women are sons and daughters of our heavenly Father created in God's image and likeness. Therefore, it is divine justice that we sincerely be concerned with each other's welfare. "Love for God is tested through the love for our fellow brothers and sisters made in His image."⁴³

God is the primary object of human love. From our love relationship with God, a fraternal relationship among us, children of the same Father, becomes possible. These truths, known through the gospel, inspired the life of St. Joseph Benedict Cottolengo and in turn, that of all his followers. He himself confirmed this when he said: "Love for God doesn't consist, as too many believe, in deep emotions or in some tender affections, but in a faithful and generous service of God."⁴⁴ We can say that love finds its clear manifestation in our steadfast adherence to the holy will of God, especially in the face of temptations. This in fact is the essential nucleus of a life totally abandoned to Divine Providence. The expression *Deo Gratias* (thanks be to God), which is frequently uttered by the followers of St. Joseph Cottolengo, is an expression that reminds us that everything that affects our life comes from the hands of our heavenly Father

⁴² Sisters of St. Joseph B. Cottolengo, *The fullness of Christian life in St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 24.

⁴³ Sisters of St. Joseph B. Cottolengo, *The fullness of Christian life in St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 8

⁴⁴ Sisters of St. Joseph B. Cottolengo, *The fullness of Christian life in St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 24.

5.2 Faith and trust in Divine Providence

Joseph Cottolengo lived in deep faith⁴⁵ and trust⁴⁶ in God. In the light of this faith, Cottolengo understood that the world is taken care of by God who shows Himself more as a loving Father than as a powerful Creator. Joseph Cottolengo was touched deeply by the teaching of Jesus and it conditioned all his behaviour. He used to say:

If God is our heavenly Father, then we are all his children and others are no longer strangers, but brothers and sisters. If God is Father, and a tender and provident Father, as Jesus pointed out over and over again, our only way to relate to him must be that of total trust and love. We have to love him and serve him always.⁴⁷

Faith and trust in Divine Providence are the pillars that constitute the spirituality of Joseph Cottolengo. Soon after starting a home for the poor, Cottolengo called it "The Little House of Divine Providence,"⁴⁸ that is, a home that depends entirely on the providence of God. Divine Providence is the name by which Cottolengo refers to God. He understands God as the loving Father who provides for everything, not only to human beings but also to all creatures. Cottolengo drew this inspiration from Mt 6:25-34. On reading this text, the man of faith could not fail to trust in the loving Father. "If God cares for everything else, God cannot fail to care for people who are the only creatures on earth that God has willed for its own sake."⁴⁹ Cottolengo loved to speak about Divine Providence, but his trust in Divine Providence is not to be found only in his words but above all in his practical life. His trust in Divine Providence was quite evident. In fact he regarded himself as merely an

⁴⁵ Faith is our yes to God. Through faith a person obeys the will of God.

⁴⁶ Trust means that one abandons everything to God who cares for all. One relies on the goodness of God.

⁴⁷ V. Di Meo, *La Spiritualità di San G. B. Cottolengo*, 151.

⁴⁸ Cf. V. Di Meo, *La Spiritualità di San G. B. Cottolengo*, 152.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24; *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1703.

instrument in the hands of Divine Providence. He frequently repeated: "I am an unskilled labourer of Divine Providence."⁵⁰

Cottolengo was not worried about the future of the Little House, for its existence and progress did not depend on him. This way of thinking is well expressed in his dialogue with the interior minister, *Count Antonio Bartolomeo Tonduti, della Scarena*, who called him in his office in Turin to get to know Cottolengo's project personally. Doctor Lorenzo Grannet, a friend and collaborator of J. Cottolengo, reconstructed the dialogue between the minister and Cottolengo. It is in this way that the discussion was made known.

Minister: I'm sorry for having disturbed you, but prudence requires that the government has the right to know if you, respected canon, are the director of the many poor people sheltered in the Little House.

Cottolengo: "Your excellency, I am not the director, but the unskilled worker of Divine Providence who entrusted them to my care. I am the least of the priests by God's grace. It is Divine Providence who forces me to take care of these poor."

The Minister added: "Where do you get the money to provide a living for them all?"

Cottolengo: "From Divine Providence whose servant I am."

The Minister went on: "But to provide for so many people you need a fixed income and some reserved funds. Where do you get them?"

Cottolengo insisted: "Sir, I have already told you that it is Divine Providence that takes care of everything."

The Minister continued: "Well, well, the government, however, has the right to find out everything about this matter. Your whole enterprise seems very questionable."

Cottolengo: "The Little House is under the care of Divine Providence that brings continuous offerings. Can you charge the Little House to have bothered anybody in order to obtain contribution and money or to have applied to you for support? You are worrying unnecessarily, sir. I am very much at peace because Divine Providence never failed and will never fail. Men will fail, but Divine Providence will not."

⁵⁰ V. Di Meo, *La Spiritualità di San G. B. Cottolengo*, 158.

The Minister: "Respected Canon, I take my leave and I wish you the assistance of Divine Providence and remember me in your prayers."⁵¹

Such was the reply the government officer received. This testifies to the faith of Cottolengo in Divine Providence. Joseph Cottolengo liked to work unnoticed. However the issue of his work is not of small importance. The Little House is already a big and complex reality. Carlo Alberto⁵², who continuously follows the affairs of the project with interest, personally confesses his worries to the founder. Lorenzo Granetti records the comments between J. Cottolengo and his earthly king. Carlo Alberto: "Haven't you thought yet of your successor? If you die what will become of the Little House?" Cottolengo replied:

Oh, your majesty doubts about the Divine Providence? What would happen is, what has happened a short time ago. The changing of the guards took place without anyone knowing, and he carries on with his duty. I am nothing: When Divine Providence will call me, another will take my place without anyone knowing and the Little House will function better than it does now.⁵³

In all the difficulties that Cottolengo faced in the realization of the project that God inspired, he kept himself calm and steady. His confessor, Father Fontana, a follower of St. Philip said, "There is more faith in Cottolengo alone than in the whole town of Turin."⁵⁴ Joseph Cottolengo confirmed it on various occasions by words such as; "We must always have faith in God. If God answers with his Divine Providence to ordinary faith, to those who trust in God with great faith, God answers abundantly."⁵⁵

⁵¹ V. Di Meo, *La spiritualità di San Giuseppe Cottolengo*, 151

⁵² He was the king of Piedmont when Joseph Cottolengo was rector of the Little House.

⁵³ G. Maritati, *The Ark of Charity. The life of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 101. Joseph Cottolengo and the king were at the palace, where he was observing at the window.

⁵⁴ V. Di Meo, *La Spiritualità di San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo*, 162.

⁵⁵ V. Di Meo, *La Spiritualità di San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo*, 163.

Indeed, Joseph Cottolengo's confidence in God remains unshakable even in front of many troubles and set-backs like the closure of the "The Red Arch" (the first small home for the sick and abandoned), the death of Mother Marianna Nasi, his first collaborator, and of some people who collaborated with him, Sisters, Brothers, Priests, and Volunteers. Firmness in action, and assurance of successes in any undertaking are the privileges of a man who trusts in God. To the mockery and scorn of many, even among his friends, Cottolengo always answered with his unbounded faith, '*Deus Providebit*', "God will provide."⁵⁶

If we look at the life of Cottolengo and his teaching about Divine Providence, vis-à-vis life in the world today, it is extremely difficult to understand Cottolengo. The world of today is so concerned about tomorrow that it tends to forget the present moment. Every discussion, whether in political, economic or even in scientific discoveries is geared towards an easy life. Of course, if God has given people intelligence, it should be utilized for people's benefit, but without forgetting that after we have done our part Divine Providence will provide. Joseph Cottolengo said: "When I speak of Providence, I speak of Divine Providence not of human Providence."⁵⁷ Thus, we can understand the abandonment of Cottolengo in Divine Providence not as an escape, but as really an authentic Christian life.

In the Little House, Divine Providence cares for everything. One day a Sister went to him saying, "Father Cottolengo! You see we have no money, we have only this coin". "Ah, what a lovely coin! Give it to me," he took it and threw it out of the window and

⁵⁶ Cf. Sisters of St. J. B., Cottolengo, *In the Fullness of Christian Life*, 28.

⁵⁷ V. Di Meo, *La Spiritualità di San G. B. Cottolengo*, 149.

exclaimed, "we will see if it is Fr. Cottolengo or Divine Providence providing for the Little House."⁵⁸ Another Sister one day came to him worried; "Father," she said, "it's already eleven o'clock; the water is boiling in the pans, but we have nothing."

Do you think Divine Providence won't provide anything? Have faith my daughter and you will see wonders. In fact at midday, many carts of pots full of food were driven there. A colonel pleased by his soldiers gave them some money as a prize to spend for a special dinner. All the food set for them that day was brought to Cottolengo's poor.⁵⁹

Joseph Cottolengo was never worried about tomorrow. Normally, whatever he had was used for that very day. He trusted in the Providence of God who provided everything.

Frequently his creditors approached him rudely. He patiently answered,

If the creditors are decent people, they convince themselves that a priest does not trick them that Divine Providence has never filed for bankruptcy and God will reward everyone who suffers for the poor. On the other hand, I doubt that anyone can complain of having lost money with the Little House; they lose with the nobles and rich, but not with the Little House.⁶⁰

We conclude by saying that Joseph Cottolengo is par excellence the saint of Divine Providence. The followers of Joseph Cottolengo are specifically challenged because their role model is J. Cottolengo himself. In other words, they cannot study Joseph Cottolengo for the sake of knowledge, but they have to follow him step-by-step emulating him. In this imitation of J. Cottolengo, they will actually be imitating Jesus Christ whom Cottolengo himself imitated. The Cottolengo charism will help them to go closer and closer to the source that is Jesus himself.

⁵⁸ G. Morero, *The Cottolengo*, 9.

⁵⁹ G. Morero, *The Cottolengo*, 10.

⁶⁰ G. Maritati, *The Ark of Charity: The Life of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 102.

5.3 Cottolengo motto: "Caritas Christi Urget Nos,"(2 Cor 5:14)

This expression "Charity of Christ " is very rich. It refers to the self-giving love of Christ for us. It is the love that burns in us and unites us to Jesus. It is the same love that through us reaches all the others and especially the poor and the least.⁶¹ Joseph Cottolengo's conviction was that when we think that Christ died for us, and he died when we were his enemies due to sin, then we cannot help but only live for him. Hence, St. Paul says:

And this is because the love of Christ overwhelms us, when we reflect that one man has died for all, then all men should be dead; and the reason he died for all was so that living men should live no longer for themselves but for Him who died and was raised to life for them...(2 Cor 5:14-17).

Cottolengo lived not for himself, but for Jesus. He could make his own the words of St. Paul: "I live now not with my own life, but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith. Faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake" (Galatians 2:19-20)

Looking at Cottolengo, it is clear and evident that he abandoned himself to God. To be able to start the Little House all alone, almost with nothing, and accepting the poor of all kinds when he did not have immediate facilities required by them, demonstrates that one is doing these things no longer living for himself.⁶² Joseph Cottolengo based his teaching and works of charity on the example and teaching of Christ. On several occasions, Jesus has taught us how to love one another. He summarized the Ten Commandments as "love of God" and "love of neighbour." He tells us, who our neighbour in the parable of the

⁶¹ Cf. P. Coda, *The Gospel of Charity and the Cottolengo Charism*, 8.

⁶² Cf. A. Bolla, *Joseph Cottolengo. The Saint, His Work and His Spirit*, 23

Good Samaritan (Lk 10:37). In his farewell discourse, Jesus once more stresses the need to love one another. "I give you a new commandment: love one another. By this love you have for one another, every one will know that you are my disciples" (Jn13:34-35). It is clear that Jesus does not give us an option. He commands us to love one another if we are to be his disciples. The early Church practiced this quite well, and the pagans impressed by the love Christians had for one another were saying: "Look how they love one another."(Tertulian, *Apology* XXXIX 8). In other words, the first followers of Jesus were distinguished, and known as Disciples of Christ due to the love they had for one another.

This was the cornerstone of Cottolengo's charity. He did not build castles in the air, but he followed the example of Christ and that of the first Christian Community. Drawing his conviction and implication from this example, J. Cottolengo wished the Little House to have that very spirit.

6. CONCLUSION

Charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit given to an individual person, for a particular purpose, and for up building of the Church and for the good of the community. It implies stability and continuity. The Cottolengo charism is based on love for God and for human beings, faith and trust in God the provident Father. This is the charism that the Cottolengo co-workers are called to carry on today in the world, praising God and serving him in his poor people.

J. Cottolengo is so sure of Divine Providence that for him it becomes compulsory to abandon himself and the difficulties he meets, totally to God. The first place in his life is for God. The human being is an instrument in the hands of God. Concern and love for the

poor is a need for his heart, because the poor are Jesus. Serving them we serve Christ. The service of the poor becomes a genuine and authentic cult of God, which will turn out to be a glory to God and a way to holiness. '*Caritas Christi urget nos*' is the principle that pushes him to give his life to the needs of his suffering brothers and sisters until death. The experiences of God's fatherhood and of the people's dignity are inseparable from the original charism of Joseph Cottolengo. He shared this beautiful experience with the poor as well as with the rich. In the next chapter we shall look at burning charity as the expression of the Cottolengo charism. It tells us about poor he served and how he served them.

CHAPTER III

BURNING CHARITY, EXPRESSION OF COTTOLENGO CHARISM

1. INTRODUCTION

Joseph Cottolengo was a man of great faith and ardent love for God and for people. Urged by this faith and love, he addressed his care to the people he met on his way: the young and the aged in the state of abandonment, the handicapped and the sick, and all cases of marginalized persons. In fact, he devoted his care to those forms of poverty not addressed by the social service programs of his time

The third chapter of our paper attempts to analyze burning charity as the expression of the Cottolengo charism. The chapter is divided in three main parts: the poor in the mind of Cottolengo, the challenges of serving the poor, and the joy of serving the poor. All this will help us understand the meaning of service in the charism of Joseph Cottolengo.

2. THE POOR IN THE MIND OF COTTOLENGO: "THE POOR ARE JESUS"

Although all people in need are the object of Cottolengo's charity, the saint shows preference towards those who lack any other human support. Therefore, we would say that he feels the need to serve always the poorest among the poor. In fact, writing to King Alberto of Piedmont, J. Cottolengo affirms that the Little House was born of an impulse of Divine Providence and that its aim was to welcome, assist and take care of the sick of

either sex, all ages, and every social condition or sickness, no matter what illness they had.⁶³

In the Little House no poor and abandoned patient should be rejected. No sick person knocking at the door of this house is in danger of being sent away, of remaining without necessary care or of dying abandoned. There is only one requirement asked of those coming to the Little House: they need to be poor and abandoned. To a servant who accompanied a sick person sent by a noble woman, Canon Cottolengo firmly said: "Tell that lady that the Little House does not receive patients having nobles as protectors. It receives only the abandoned".⁶⁴ Cottolengo's charity is based on the expression of St. Paul found in the second letter to the Corinthians: '*caritas Christi urget nos*', (1 Cor 5:14). This is the permanent seal of the Little House, its life-giving program, and its reason for existing. The urgency of Christ's charity pushes J. Cottolengo beyond the limiting boundaries of state assistance. It is this zealous charity of Christ that is the most authentic expression of his charism.⁶⁵

The special love for the poor in the Cottolengo charism is not a fruit of mere human sympathy but a gift of God, which Joseph Cottolengo experienced and wanted to share with the less fortunate. It is indeed a path that he took in imitation of Christ who gave his life for all. As Jesus identified himself with the little ones and the least, so did J. Cottolengo. Unbounded charity to the poorest for the love of God forms the core of the

⁶³ Cf. G. Maritati, *The Ark of Charity. The Life of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 46.

⁶⁴ G. Maritati, *The Ark of Charity. The Life of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 50.

⁶⁵ Cf. G. Maritati, *The Ark of Charity. The Life of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 47.

Cottolengo charism. In fact the Little House founded by him exists to care for those most in need, those whom society considers a burden.

Joseph Cottolengo got the inspiration to start the Little House for poor people after witnessing the death of Maria Gonnet who died in a desperate situation. J. Cottolengo who was shocked by this event did not want to witness the death of other poor people like Gonnet who had no assistance. Therefore the priority given in his charitable works was to those found in major problems: those who were rejected from other hospitals, public or private: those neglected by society, those with nobody to care for them in their homes: the deformed, crippled, mentally and physically handicapped, blind, orphans, and those in very sorrowful situations. In short, all who were society's laughing stock and object of mockery. Joseph Cottolengo used to tell his co-workers. "All these poor people are the 'pearls', the treasures and they are the 'masters/mistresses' of the Little House."⁶⁶

Among many good sons/daughters welcomed in the Little House there was one with whom J. Cottolengo loved to talk and to joke a little more than the others. His name was Doro, a mentally retarded man. The Archbishop of Vercelli, visiting the Little House one day and wanting to speak with J. Cottolengo had to wait until J. Cottolengo and Doro finished their game. Cottolengo simply told him. "Your Excellency! I have just begun the match with this one of my gentlemen and I cannot break it off without offending him."⁶⁷ The Archbishop, touched by this evangelical spirit, did not only watch the match, but he started to count the scores for them. Today, when it comes to giving priority, the most

⁶⁶ M. Frezzato, *Cottolengo Diary*, 15

⁶⁷ G. Maritati, *The Ark of Charity The Life of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 54.

miserable, the most poor, the one with nobody to care for are the first to be considered in the Little House.

Jesus is present in his Church in many ways. He is present in a special way in the poor who, he said, would always be with us (Jn 12:8). Joseph Cottolengo understood this fact of faith in a deep way. Since the time he received the grace (Sept 2, 1827), he spent all his life caring for the poor, the abandoned, and the sick. He served them with a lot of humility, simplicity and generosity. In them, he ministered to Jesus whose love impels us. To them he witnessed the love of God, the Provident Father, whom he himself had experienced. The motivation for serving the poor is to worship God. According to J. Cottolengo, the poor are the ones who will open the gate of heaven for us. He frequently told his followers:

Consider the poor the same person as Jesus and be assured that you will never regret any assistance and help given to them. The sick represent the divine Redeemer and you, devoting your service to them, do it to Jesus. He will reward you generously, for all the sacrifices you make.⁶⁸

From this perspective Joseph Cottolengo's statements such as, "The poor are Jesus," "In the person of the poor and the sick we must see Jesus," "While serving the poor and the sick, think that you are serving Jesus," are fully understood. On another instance, he said: "In the person of the poor you must see Jesus Christ. The most revolting ones must be the dearest to you because they represent Jesus more intensely. To do good to the poor, you must, if need be, dirty yourself up to the neck. This is the very charity you must exercise"⁶⁹. If the poor are Jesus to be called into the Little House, to serve them is an

⁶⁸ L. Piano, *Fiori e Profumi, raccolti dai detti di San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo*, 30

⁶⁹ M. Frezzato, *Cottolengo Diary*, 40.

incredible privilege, because in the court of the king, every job is noble. So as to confirm his point, to the person who praised him for having been joined by Fr. Anglesio⁷⁰ Joseph Cottolengo emphatically said that it was Anglesio who should thank Divine Providence for offering him that opportunity. The real words are:

If you could understand the gift of God, the very precious grace you are given by our heavenly Father who called you here, in His House to serve Him in the person of the poor, the true apple of His eye, you would be really proud and could give Him an endless thanksgiving with all your heart and mind.⁷¹

The Sisters, following the example of their founder, learned his teaching well and individuals are frequently heard saying: "I am going to serve Jesus". Joseph Cottolengo's charity was not limited only to the body, but the corporeal reality should be viewed as a stepping-stone to the soul of the poor person. As a complement to his words reported above, we read: "It is not enough to serve the poor in their physical pains; you must serve them chiefly in their spiritual afflictions because very often, the afflictions they bear in their heart are greater than those they endure in their body."⁷² Apart from leading the poor to God through direct service, they should be taught catechism according to their capacities, and be helped to love God. The service given to them indeed must be given promptly, carefully, tenderly, and with total love and a lot of respect.

⁷⁰ Fr. Anglesio was one of the priests of the Congregation of Corpus Domini where Joseph Cottolengo was a canon before he started the Little House.

⁷¹ M. Frezzato, *Cottolengo Diary*, 42

⁷² M. Frezzato, *Cottolengo Diary*, 23

3. CHALLENGES OF SERVING THE POOR

The project of God started by Cottolengo was developing well day by day, but not without difficulties. It is not easy to describe the amount of criticism and subsequent rumours about such an initiative. The opinions of people in regard to this undertaking of J. Cottolengo was very contradictory. Some people approved while others disapproved. He met many challenges from his family members as well as colleagues of the *Corpus Domini*.

In 1831, with the outbreak of cholera, which threatened Turin and the nearby cities, many people complained about it to the local authorities. So Joseph Cottolengo was ordered to close the small hospital for his poor immediately. Such an injunction so unexpected and peremptory was a blow for him because of his poor. For J. Cottolengo that news brought a foreboding of misfortune for the future. J. Cottolengo, even though willing to accept this sad moment, he was at the same time feeling the painful effects of that order. Meanwhile, many were making sharper and subtler complaints and mockeries about him. Almost all the people criticized Cottolengo's action, saying that he was an unwise and rash person. Everybody laughed at him and turned away from him. Even those who had helped him before the enforced closing did not defend him in this painful moment. This was a big challenge for Joseph Cottolengo, but he did not despair. He trusted in God and went on courageously to serve the poor starting a new with a bigger home for them.⁷³

Other challenges came up as he reopened the Little House for the poor people. The number of poor who implored him to enter this house increased and so he had to enlarge

⁷³ Cf. The Cottolengo Sisters, *Mother Marian Nasi*, 38-39.

the house by building new premises. For this reason, debts became excessive and creditors began to clamour to be paid. Another cholera epidemic struck and some of his collaborators died, but Cottolengo a man of faith continued to trust in Divine Providence.

J. Cottolengo teaches us that humility and respect are very important in the service of the poor. We learn to overcome our pride and assume an attitude of service towards the poor. If they are the masters/mistresses, 'servant of the poor' is the best title that a Cottolengo Sister, Brother and Priest can bear. According to the teaching of J. Cottolengo the service to the poor should be total. Total service implies being at the service of the poor at any time and ready to do any kind of service that is needed. Joseph Cottolengo reminds us that even the little ones have their reputation, and his words sound like a warning to us when he says, that they are the owners and they must be treated as such otherwise they will dismiss us. This is why he was convinced that knowing who the poor are, we should serve them kneeling. Let us quote: "If you could just think and comprehend the kind of person the poor represent, you would serve them on your knees, that is, with great respect."⁷⁴

To dedicate one's life for the poor and the weak is a challenge because one has to do what is considered useless and humiliating to others. In fact, according to J. Cottolengo service to the poorest should be understood in the light of the gospel: otherwise it may be considered a waste of time. Many people may ask questions such as, "Why waste time, money, energy and life helping useless people?" In a society where individualism and selfishness are on the rise, one needs to risk in helping the others without fear. Our world is

⁷⁴ V. Di Meo, *La Spiritualità di San G. B. Cottolengo*, 194.

fast tending towards competition and profit making; hence time and space for the weak and neglected are diminishing day by day. Virtues, such as humility, patience, respect, sympathy and tenderness, have little to do with a world that is largely consumeristic.

Jean Vanier, in his book, *The Scandal of Service*, says that those who serve people with mental disabilities and the weak should share their life with them.⁷⁵ This means to go beyond normal solidarity. Our service, as Cottolengo followers, should not be animated by other reasons, than the charity of our Lord Jesus Christ. This qualifies Cottolengo's motto, "*Caritas Christi Urget Nos*" (2 Cor 5:14). Service to the poorest becomes a genuine and authentic worship of God, which turns out to be for the glory of God and a way to holiness.

4. THE JOY OF SERVING THE POOR

Joy is a precious gift from the Holy Spirit. It is a gift for all. For a religious Cottolengo Sister, Brothers, and Priest, joy is an aspect to be practised always and especially when serving the sick and the poorest.

Humility, simplicity, serenity and joy are the ingredients of Cottolengo spirituality. To all the patients and the assistants, Joseph recommended the daily exercise of these virtues, giving always his example as a first step, even in the little things that took place every day. He is not tired of repeating to the Sisters: "You do not have to serve the Lord with bad humor. The first illness to cure is sadness. The meeting with Divine Providence was for him an endless fountain of joy."⁷⁶ Joseph Cottolengo says continuously: "Live

⁷⁵ Cf. J. Vanier, *The scandal of Service Jesus Washes Our Feet*, 2.

⁷⁶ G. Maritati, *The Ark of Charity: The Life of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 82.

cheerfully in the Lord. Serve in holy cheerfulness the good Lord in the person of his poor and sick people."⁷⁷

In his life simplicity and joy are characteristics of his holiness, as well as of that of all his sons and daughters. Poor, yes, but always joyful in the Lord. He really served the poor people with joy and serenity and he exhorts his followers to do the same in their service to their brothers and sisters in need. He encouraged them telling them: "Whenever you go to the hospital to serve the sick, or out to visit some poor and abandoned people, go always showing cheerfulness." If you cannot do much for them, do the little you can wholeheartedly and with joy."⁷⁸

From Di Meo, we read: "Your charity must be dressed with plenty of politeness and good manners so as to earn their hearts. It must be like a well-prepared dish whose appearance is appetizing."⁷⁹ For J. Cottolengo to serve the poorest was a motive of great joy. On this point one Sister recalls that when particularly distasteful patients arrived at the Little House, the servant of God gave them a special welcome from his heart, considering them the most beautiful of jewels and roses in the crown. He entrusted them in a special way to the care of the Sisters telling them that in the person of the poor they would serve Jesus and that they should serve him with great joy.⁸⁰

It is a great joy to serve the poor because from them we learn to be joyful. In fact joy and cheerfulness are two aspects we find in the Little House of Divine Providence. We learn that service given to the poor with love is a source of joy and it manifests a love that

⁷⁷ M. Frezzati, *Cottolengo Diary*, 47

⁷⁸ M. Frezzati, *Cottolengo Diary*, 46.

⁷⁹ V. Di Meo, *La Spiritualità di San G. B. Cottolengo*, 208.

⁸⁰ Cf. G. Maritati, *The Ark of Charity: The Life of St. J. B. Cottolengo*, 45.

does not seek its own interest but the good of the other person. Such a service consists in self-giving and not in self-seeking. Speaking with some of my Sisters who are directly involved in the service of sick children, one of them told me "I am very happy to serve these little ones. I enjoy being with them because they are simple and in them I know that I am serving the Lord."⁸¹ Another young Sister told me: "I am really happy to be here giving myself to Jesus through serving these little children."⁸² A Cottolengo priest was just walking around in the compound, joking and talking with the children, and I asked him: "Father, why are you so happy when you move about with these mentally handicapped children?" Replying to my question, he said: "You see Sister, when I am with them I am honoured and I am very happy."⁸³ A Cottolengo seminarian told me one day as we were working with the poor children in the school: "Sister, it is wonderful to stay with the poor. I feel at home with them and I thank God."⁸⁴

In the spiritual life God is the supreme joy and the greatest delight. Indeed to serve the poor is to participate in the mission of Christ who did not come to be served but to serve (Mat 20:28). It is the only way to live the Gospel message so that the poor are always with us. We participate in the salvific mission of Christ, serving people and helping them to carry their cross with serenity. In this way we also fulfill God's plan that of universal brotherhood/sisterhood.

⁸¹ Sister Elizabeth Nthune, a Cottolengo Sister working in Cottolengo center interviewed by the author on 18th October 2001.

⁸² Sister Ann Karimi a Cottolengo Sister, interviewed by the author on 23rd October 2001.

⁸³ A fraternal sharing with Fr. Cramerio Fiorenzo a Cottolengo priest, on 20th May 2001.

⁸⁴ Christopher Nchebere a Cottolengo seminarian, interviewed by the author on 15th Sept. 2001.

5. CONCLUSION

The experience of God's love was not a stimulus experience for Joseph Cottolengo to settle into quietism, but to open his eyes to perceive the message of God in his life. As a consequence, the death of Maria Gonnet was for him a strong call to a demanding commitment towards all those who are poor, sick and abandoned, helping them to feel that they are never abandoned by God, nor by all the people. On the contrary in the Little House, they can experience the love of God, the Provident Father. God's love flooded Cottolengo's life and he, in turn, accepted and transformed this divine gift into good deeds for others. God helped him in his initiative to serve the poor, providing him with material help through benefactors.

Joseph Cottolengo's charity welcomed all the needy people that society considered useless. In the service of the poor Joseph Cottolengo met a lot of challenges, but he continued because he trusted in God who was the initiator of his work and whose servant he was. In this chapter we have talked about the burning charity, which expresses the Cottolengo charism. In the next chapter we will examine how to read the signs of the times in our contemporary world as Joseph did in his time. We ask ourselves, Who are the poor in Kenya today? To whom should we direct our service as Cottolengo followers?

CHAPTER IV

THE COTTOLENGO CHARISM IN KENYA TODAY

I. INTRODUCTION

The charism of St. Joseph B. Cottolengo has its roots in God's fatherhood and God's providential love. Even today, we who try to live this charism are called to facilitate paths of salvation for that part of humanity that lives in terrible conditions of poverty that is oppressed as a result of selfishness and injustices of our time. In such situations many people feel wounded in their human dignity. They are badly in need of help in order to overcome their sad conditions and move towards a life really worthy of human beings made in the image of God. God calls us to continue renewing our mission in the reality of our time with the same spirit that inspired our founder, Joseph Cottolengo. Placing total confidence in Divine Providence, he was very sure that God would always be with us in our efforts to meet the challenges of history.

We are called to respond to the needs of the poor today in communion with others who, in the Church and in society, are willing to make themselves available to better the life conditions of the poor and the abandoned. In this chapter we shall see how the Cottolengo charism is expressed in contemporary Kenyan society. The chapter is divided into three main sections. These are: the Cottolengo presence in Kenya today, reading the signs of the times, and the immediate beneficiaries of the Cottolengo charism in today's Kenya. In the process, we will learn about the activities that are carried on in the Little

House in Kenya. The charism of Joseph Cottolengo continues to grow and his followers continue to witness to the love of God, the provident Father of all.

2. THE COTTOLENGO PRESENCE IN KENYA TODAY

When we speak of the Cottolengo charism we refer to a reality that has existed for more than one and a half centuries, since the death of the founder, in 1842. Today in 2002, we find ourselves as those who carry on this great charism. At the beginning of the 20th Century, the Little House of Divine Providence sent groups of Cottolengo Sisters to witness to the love of God, in France, Jerusalem, and Libya. For political and other reasons, they could not remain in those places. At the same time the Consolata Fathers asked the Little House for the Cottolengo Sisters to come and help them start the mission in Kenya.

The first Sisters of St. Joseph Cottolengo came to Kenya together with the Consolata Fathers. In the period between 1903 and 1925, forty-four Cottolengo Sisters lived as real pioneers among the Kikuyu and Meru people.⁸⁵ However, in 1925 when the Consolata Sisters came and took over the mission, the Cottolengo Sisters left Kenya and returned to Italy to continue with their service to the poor in the motherhouse⁸⁶. The Sisters who lost their lives in Kenya as a result of tropical diseases and were buried there, as well as the Sister who died on her way to Italy and was buried in the Red Sea, became hidden seeds, which sprouted again in 1972, with the return of the Cottolengo Sisters, Priests, and

⁸⁵ Cf. C. Fiorenzo, *In the Footsteps of Christ* St. J. Cottolengo, 26

⁸⁶ The Cottolengo sisters had to remain with the Consolata Fathers in the mission until the arrival of the Consolata Sisters. With the arrival of the Consolata Missionary Sisters Cottolengo sisters finished their mandate in the mission and they returned back to Italy.

Brothers to Kenya. Since then, the Little House has been present in Meru Diocese at Tuuru in Meru North, Gatunga in Tharaka, Chaaria in Meru central and lastly in Langata at the Cottolengo Center in Nairobi Archdiocese.⁸⁷

To follow the signs of the times in the spirit of Joseph Cottolengo presents a constant challenge to us. We have a strong desire to live this spirit and to make it spread always with more enthusiasm and deeper trust in Divine Providence. The people of Kenya deserve that we live as authentic Cottolengo followers who witness to the love of God not only in words, but, especially through our life.

Sisters, Brothers and Priests of Joseph Cottolengo live the Cottolengo charism in this country with enthusiasm and zeal. They witness the love of God, the provident Father, through continuous praise and loving selfless ministry to the poorest, those who have nobody to care for them. Through their example of life and their sacrifice, God has blessed the Little House with local vocations of Sisters, Priests and Brothers. They work hand in hand, faithful to the charism of Joseph Cottolengo

The services carried out in the Little House in Kenya include: care of mentally and disabled persons, orphans, persons with HIV/AIDS, as well as healing ministry through dispensaries, hospital and maternity care for mothers, physiotherapy and occupational therapy. We are also involved in education of nursery and primary school children, in parish ministry, catechesis, pastoral work and home visiting.

The Church teaches us clearly that discerning the signs of the time implies openness of heart by listening to the promptings of the Spirit in order to be able to plan

⁸⁷ Cf. C. Fiorenza, *In the Footsteps of Christ - St. J. Cottolengo*, 27.

new projects of evangelization and find new answers to the problems of today's society. Joseph Cottolengo was a man who really was able to read the signs of the time and offer his service to the people he found in desperate conditions of life. His followers try to be faithful to his vision.

3. READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIME IN KENYA TODAY

Kenya is a tropical country. It consists of many tribes with their different traditions and customs. It is a developing, agricultural country. A former British colony, Kenya became an independent country in 1963. From its independence, Kenya was ruled by a single party, KANU (Kenya African National Union), until 1992 when it embraced the multiparty political system

At the time of independence, the Kenyan government identified poverty, illiteracy, and disease as the major threats to the young and developing country,⁸⁸ and adopted a policy to fight against them. The government needed to increase school enrolment in order to fight illiteracy, to provide various health centres where curative medicine could be made available and where medical and hospital services could be provided for everyone who needed them without charge.⁸⁹ The newly independent government also had to fight against destitution for many who did not have food or other basic necessities.

It is now 2002, and these goals are far from having been achieved. Many poor people do not get help, either in education or in medical care. Schools are so expensive, that many cannot afford to educate their children. The hospitals are equally expensive, so

⁸⁸ Cf. B. A. - Ogot and W. R. Ochieng, *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya 1940-43*, 126.

⁸⁹ Cf. B. A. - Ogot and W. R. Ochieng, *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya 1940-43*, 137.

much so that many poor people die at home because they cannot meet the expenses of the medical care. Although Kenya has achieved some measures of political stability and economic growth since its independence, its prosperity has not been shared equally among all its citizens.

In such a situation we, Cottolengo followers are called to join the governmental and the non-governmental organizations to help achieve the above-named goals. We have the duty to read the signs of the time in the light of our charism, in order to serve the poor responsibly and in a liberating way. We begin by identifying the poor in today's Kenya.

In Kenya today, the poor include, the sick and dying, those mentally and physically handicapped, the aged, street children, the unemployed, those morally deprived due to broken homes, prostitution, alcoholism, all who are at risk of abuse, etc. The list is long. We also see that poverty is not only material. It touches all dimensions of the human person, moral, intellectual and spiritual. Those who lack the basic necessities of life, food, shelter, clothing, education, etc, also lack adequate moral guidance and spiritual nourishment. In Kenya, we have many people who have been marginalized by society and who live in miserable conditions. One day I talked with a young couple about their life. They said: "Sister, sometimes we go several days without food. We are not able to save money for the future schooling of our children for we live each day with the little we get without thinking of tomorrow. The price of basic commodities increases every day and people have nowhere to get money. Sometimes we go hungry with no hope of getting food and other basic things."⁹⁰

⁹⁰ *Rose Mukanyaga, and John Mbae* from Nguruki village, in Meru south. Interview by the author, on 20th August 2001.

It is unsettling to see that in Kenya, as in other countries of the world, the poor are becoming poorer while the rich are becoming richer. Hence, people speak of two tribes in Kenya today: the tribe of the poor and that of the rich,⁹¹ with a big gap between them. In great part, this is due to the high degree of corruption and bribery, both of which are at the basis of the alarming situation in our society today, with the escalation of crime, fear and insecurity. In fact corruption and bribery have formed the order of the day. They are found in public and in private sectors, in offices and streets, in the Church and in the hospitals and in the institutions of learning. They are practiced everywhere and account for the increase of poverty among the people because there is no accountability anywhere.

4. THE IMMEDIATE BENEFICIARIES OF THE COTTOLENGO CHARISM

From the beginning, the Little House has worked for the poor, the sick, the unfortunate and unhappy, the marginalized and ignorant, orphans, epileptics, the physically and mentally challenged, young mothers, and those discarded by society. The Little House continues to open its doors to all these people and offer many new services to address new problems and exigencies. It is committed to welcome all people without distinction, regardless of age, sex, culture, or religion.

As sons and daughters of Joseph Cottolengo in Kenya today, we are keen to identify and respond appropriately to the most urgent cases of poverty. At present we are paying special attention to the following areas: HIV/AIDS orphans, children in need of rehabilitation, people deprived of medical care and people who are spiritually deprived.

⁹¹ Cf. *Pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops of Kenya, "On the Present Situation in Our Country,"* 9

There is also a growing awareness among us showing us that we need to extend our services towards: the children orphaned by their parents, the mentally ill, illiterate children in need of education, and drug addicts, etc

4.1 HIV/AIDS Orphans

Following the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the footsteps of our founder, the Little House accepted the challenge of the signs of the time in trying to meet the needs of the orphaned children with AIDS. With this in mind, 1994 saw the birth of the Cottolengo Centre in Langata, Nairobi. This is a home and hospice for HIV+ and AIDS orphans. Looking at how our society rejects or ignores those who suffer from HIV-AIDS, we welcome these orphans as those most in need of our service.

4.2 Children in need of rehabilitation

In Meru, Tuuru Centre was founded to care for mentally retarded and disabled people, especially polio victims. With immunization, polio is under control and few people are affected. This situation called us to adjust and to see who were those most in need in that area. The Cottolengo Sisters and Priests working there now give now their attention to the children in need of re-habilitation. These are the mentally handicapped and spastic children who do not find help in other centres. We need also to work with their parents so that they may truly accept their sick children and participate actively in the care given to them. In the spirit of our founder we also attend to other needs of the parish as we collaborate with the parish priest and the people and by also assisting also other poor people living there.

4.3 People deprived of medical care

Joseph Cottolengo opened a hospital for the sick who were not accepted in other hospitals. In our society today, many poor sick people cannot get medical treatment in hospitals because they cannot afford it. In some places there are no hospitals, no means of transport and bad roads. Many people die of malaria and other diseases because they have no access to the treatment. The Cottolengo followers today are called to continue providing hope for such people, putting treatment within their reach.

4.4 People who are spiritually deprived

Through our example of life as Cottolengo sons and daughters, and in fidelity to our charism, we are able to help poor people come back to their faith. We do this by promoting family life, sensitizing the people in the villages to help one another, especially by involving the small Christian communities in helping the poor in their places.

Joseph Cottolengo paid a great deal of attention to the religious education. He believed that service to the poor should not be limited to the care of sick bodies but had to extend to the care of the soul. These ideas guided his way of thinking like a compass. Likewise, these should orient and guide us, his co-workers in the Little House, wherever we are and whatever we do for the less fortunate. In this way we also share in the mission of the Church. It is our answer to Jesus who calls and sends us to bring Good News to the poor. We are invited to be more open to parish activities and local people's needs. This is where we can meet young people and teach them moral behaviour, catechism and other Church teachings. In this way, we will help our Christians to deepen and be firm in their

faith so that they may not get confused or abandon their faith to follow other religions or sects. Our founder, J. Cottolengo, insisted that catechism be one of the most important forms of nourishment we could offer the people.

4.5 Children orphaned by their parents

Another category of the poor to whom we can offer our services are orphaned children who are not AIDS victims. These children also need our psychological support, our social, spiritual and moral care as well as education and the skills, which can help them to prepare for their adult life. This poses a great challenge as the number increases daily.

4.6 The mentally ill

Joseph Cottolengo offered his service to the poor most in need, those rejected by society. Inspired by his vision, the new poverties which seem to be urgent in our society and to which we can open our doors include the mentally ill. We can help them get proper medications, which are very expensive. Given the right medications, many of them would be able to lead productive lives in society. This is our hope.

4.7 The illiterate children in need of education

Many people in our society will continue to be poor because they cannot afford to pay for education. To provide education to the poorest in our society is vital because in that way we contribute to the eradication of illiteracy. For Joseph Cottolengo, the poor were those who were abandoned by society, for whose needs nobody cared. This should also be our focus. Without education some young people in Kenya are in danger of becoming

thieves or street people because the government gives them no assistance. In the same way we can also offer our help to the street children who are increasing day by day.

4.8 Drug addicts

Drug addicts pose a big challenge today. The more we familiarize ourselves with the youth, the more we come to know what drug abuse does to them. Many young people get involved in drugs due to family breakdown and alienation. This is another kind of poverty in which we feel called to offer our service in the Cottolengo spirit.

5. CONCLUSION

Joseph Cottolengo, the founder of the Little House of Divine Providence, worked unceasingly for the promotion of the human person. Every day, he was moved in his heart by the same compassion of God to do something for the poor and the abandoned in the world. In the footsteps of Joseph Cottolengo, our services to the poorest must also be aimed at human promotion.

We have seen that in every historical time new forms of poverty emerge, different from and maybe worse than the ones of previous times. We are supposed to be able to discern to whom our service has to be offered, that is, where it is needed most, always trying to ensure warmth and a sense of belonging for the poor.

Joseph Cottolengo thought of the Little House as a place open to all the needy. In a special way he desired it to be a school of charity where one could learn to love and serve, and from which one moved everywhere to spread the love of God that one already experienced.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

In this essay we have dealt with the Cottolengo charism and its constitutive elements. We have seen that Joseph Cottolengo, with his unbounded faith and love, and his confident trust in God, turned upside down the values and the common standards of life as they were usually accepted and followed by the great majority of people. In his time the enterprises and works he initiated were unthinkable in human terms, that is, according to the usual way of planning. Having had a particular intuition into the provident love of God, our Father, he started the Little House of divine Providence in order to take care of the poorest, the sick and abandoned. Through this work of charity he was convinced that he would live and bear witness to the message of Jesus calling us to trust and abandon ourselves to God our loving Father, who knows our needs and cares for us (Cf. Matt 6:25-34).

For the continuity of his charism, Joseph Cottolengo founded the community of Sisters, Brothers and Priests. These communities continue today to witness the love of God through continuous prayer and loving service to the poorest. They do this being sure that "the one who does everything in the Little House is Divine Providence whose servants they are."⁹² As servants of Divine Providence they own nothing. The peculiarity of these communities is that they form an integral body in the Little House of Divine Providence. They form a whole, where if one of them is missing, the family is incomplete. They give up the right to have their own patrimony distinct from that of the Little House. Their uniqueness lies in this belonging, sharing of everything among themselves and with the

⁹² L. Piano, *Fiori e Profumi*, raccolti dai detti di San G. B. Cottolengo, 91.

poor, who are the masters/mistresses of the Little House. They dedicate their lives equally to the service of God and of the poor.

The basic characteristic of the Cottolengo charism is a burning love for God and for all human beings, in the footsteps of Christ. That is why the motto of Joseph Cottolengo was and is for all his followers, *Caritas Christi Urget Nos* (2 Cor 5:14). God is our Father, who cares for us in a wonderful way, enabling us to love him in return and love each other as brothers and sisters. God is known, loved, contemplated and served in the most poor, the needy, especially the ones who have nobody to care for their needs. (Mt 25:31-46). In fact, according to this teaching of Jesus, Joseph Cottolengo, addressed his care to the people he met on his way: the young, the aged in a state of abandonment, the handicapped and the sick, and all cases of marginalized people. Serving the poor he served Jesus. The poor are Jesus. In them he ministered to Jesus and we today minister to Jesus whose love impels us. For Joseph Cottolengo, as for us, to serve the poor especially the most revolting and difficult ones is done out of joy.

We have seen that the Cottolengo charism is very relevant and needed in our Kenyan society today. Compelled by the love of Jesus who is in all the needy and the suffering people, the followers of Joseph Cottolengo are trying always to serve the poor, the sick, the unfortunate and unhappy, the marginalized and ignorant, the epileptic, the physically and mentally handicapped, children in need of rehabilitation, and HIV/AIDS orphans children, etc. Indeed the Cottolengo Sisters, Brothers and Priests live the cottolengo charism in today's Kenyan society with enthusiasm and zeal. They express their way of life joyfully in their meeting with the thousands of faces of human suffering. There

is also a growing awareness among us showing us that we need to extend our services to the new poverties coming up today. This awareness of the present day poverties keeps the Cottolengo followers alert and imaginative in their search for new activities so that they can offer their services in future to the orphans, the illiterate children in need of education, mentally ill, drug addicts, aged, etc.

We thank God for the gift of St. Joseph Cottolengo and the grace of his charism. This charism is a gift to the Church and as such it will continue to exist. Even though the Little House is living in a difficult moment due to diminishing numbers and the aging of the members, especially on the side of Sisters, we are exhorted to continue trusting in God, our provident Father. Indeed the weaknesses we are experiencing today must become for us the starting point for renewed faith and the deep trust like that of Joseph Cottolengo who said that the one who does everything in the Little House is Divine Providence. In our task we are not alone. The Lord is with us. The strength to look upwards in order to give hope to the people, together with the love of Christ, come from on high. For this reason, the call we share is threefold: to live a deep relationship with God, nourished by personal and community prayer, to keep our identity as Cottolengo sons/daughters and to actualize the charism, maintaining it in its authenticity and liveliness.

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