



Spirituality during Scalabrini's Time

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1. Is it possible to draw an outline of christian spirituality of an era?

1.1. Christian sanctity and historical context

To talk about Catholic spirituality, particularly the one regarding Italy at the time of Giovanni Battista Scalabrini and starting or being inspired, at least in a way, by the great bishop of Piacenza, means above all measuring oneself against the relationship between Christian sanctity in a historical-civil context and in its social-cultural situation.

Scalabrini is an eminent figure of Christian sanctity and the Church has recognized his exemplariness at the level of spiritual experience or rather, with a formula which goes back to the apostle Paul, of life in or with the Spirit. In fact, as you well know, the Church has already claimed that he has practiced the theological and moral virtues in a heroic manner. However, he is undoubtedly an eminent man of the Church, a bishop who in times of great cultural, political and social transition - from 1876, when at only 36 he was made bishop, to his death in 1905 - faced the problems which worried the Church and the society of his times not with superficiality but with depth, not in an academic way but actively. He didn't limit himself to a religious view detached from political reality, but, on the contrary, took up his own position. He took part in the dispute regarding the delicate problem of the relationship between the Church and modern civilisation which was taking place between the intransigent and the transigent, between those who advocated temporal power and those who wished a reconciliation between Church and State. Neither did he limit himself to the care of his diocese as had been done in the past, but in an original way pushed his pastoral activities outside the confines of the diocese, which had been put into his hands, and founded two religious families, one male and one female, to assist the emigrants, urged the opening of a third one which consid-

ers him its founder, in the emigration field and a fourth called Suore Sacramentine Sordomute, which is now extinct - for the deaf and dumb, joining it as a tertiary branch to the nuns of St. Ann.

So he was a spiritual person but also a man of the Church who lived through the contrasts and anxieties of his time, not hesitating to throw himself in its midst. Historians have looked into and have studied the connection between his position as a defender of the reconciliation movement and his pastoral interest for the emigrants. In fact the link between his political views and his pastoral work undoubtedly exists. It is causal, in the sense that the political-cultural view influences the kind of pastoral work and viceversa, that is to say pastoral sensitivity determines a particular approach to political questions and to the more general cultural-civil problem.

But can we say that there is an analogical connection between his pastoral life and his spirituality? Is there a relationship between his multiple pastoral commitment and his conciliatory political-cultural view, on the one hand, and the experience of his relationship with God, of his faith on the other? Is this relationship one of subordination, (the dependence of a pastoral life on spirituality or, viceversa, the dependence of spirituality on a pastoral life? In other words, did Scalabrini make certain political and pastoral choices because he lived a certain experience with God? Or, on the contrary, did his communion with God reach such heights, and became of such a nature, for the very reason that he deeply felt certain pastoral problems and had a particular political and cultural sensitivity?

This is the question which goes to the bottom of the problem of the relationship of the experience of sanctity and the influx of the context in which it's expressed. It is a question which regards the history of sanctity as a whole and, I would say, particularly that of the contemporary age, an age of great transition in which politics and the need to redefine the relationship between the Church with civilisation is of extraordinary importance.

Sanctity, without doubt, is tied to a particular age. It has a precise place in history because it is a human phenomenon, the experience of men and women who live during a particular time and in a certain geographic space, marked by a particular culture. Therefore there is no doubt that, at least in the phase of their formation, the saints - those Christians who distinguished themselves for the deep experience they had with God - were subject to the influences of their times and were marked by the cultural and social climate in which they were born and grown and in which they later worked. If, for example, we look at the figure that many historians give as the most significant example of evangelical spirituality of our contemporary age, Thérèse of Lisieux, we cannot but notice the dependence on the bourgeois background in which she was born and grew. She was middle-class in tastes, reactions, thoughts and behaviour. However, Christian sanctity always shows - especially if it has to do with an eminent sanctity - the ability to overcome the historical conditioning, a transcending of the

historical context. Studying the saints one can see how their interior experience cannot be simply and completely traced back to their cultural influences albeit they are moulded deeply by them. An eminent spiritual person is not the result of various influences. He always expresses an originality which he has been given through his relationship with God, because he has allowed himself to be led by the Spirit into a new experience which is always in some way a break not only with one's environment but also with one's own personal story. All this is documented by historical research. Going back to the case of Thérèse of Lisieux, one cannot but be impressed by the clarity of the evangelic thinking reached in the last period of her life, and which places her at the top of Christian sanctity in contemporary times. She really overcame the bourgeois mentality with which she was brought up.

To the question whether there is a link which more or less ties Christian sanctity to the historical-cultural context in which it manifests itself, I think that one can and must answer there is no link of reciprocal cause or of mutual subordination. If sanctity, in its experience of communion with God - overcomes historical conditioning, then it becomes problematic to establish a relationship of reciprocal dependence.

Does this also mean that sanctity has no real influence on historical matters, and therefore cannot determine the effects on a historical level, or be of influence in a society? But don't the saints' biographies show us that very often they have had a noticeable influence on their environment? However is it not also true that people who are known to have had a very close experience with God have remained more or less unknown to their contemporaries and don't seem to have had any influence on the matters of their time? For my part - from what I understand from my studies of Christian spirituality - I feel one can say, using the terminology of the theologian Giovanni Moio, that there isn't a reciprocal dependence but a convergence between communion with God of a specific spiritual person and his work in society and his influence on history. One may encounter the case of a spiritual person who manages to be influential either because of his apostolic work or because of his intellectual productions or even because of his work in politics. However, the greatness of his spiritual experience is not measured by his historical effectiveness, nor is the importance of his achievements on a historical level proof of the experience of spiritual greatness. There is therefore convergence and not reciprocal cause between sanctity and historical influence.

If the answer I have given on the question of the relationship between spirituality and historical context is convincing; if it is therefore true that spiritual experience implies going beyond the historical-cultural conditioning, it seems obvious that it is problematic to speak, in general terms, of a complete picture of the spirituality of a particular period (in our case: of the spirituality at the time of Scalabrini). Anyway, it is obvious that the characterisation of spirituality of a particular historical period cannot be looked for by taking into account

the influence of culture on the spiritual people, in that period. By history of Christian spirituality we don't mean the history of the spirit of a particular time (Zeitgeist, the Germans say), but the history of God's Spirit in man or rather, more modestly, the acceptance or answer that man gives to the action of the Spirit of God.

1.2 The history of Christian spirituality is the history of spiritual people

However, there is another deeper motive which is intimately connected with what has already been said, and is in fact the basis of what has been said up to now, which makes the attempt to draw a complete picture of Christian spirituality of a particular period, difficult. This reason is that Christian spiritual experience is always personal. It is a personal answer to grace. It coincides with what is currently called "faith journey". The study of the history of spirituality is, therefore, the history of the "experience" of personal spirituality which has gained a certain importance and significance, the history of the interior event of eminent Christian people, who have come to the foreground because they are an example of spiritual experience. This exemplary role stems from the fact of having realised a process of "personalization of faith" which imposes itself because of its value and meaning and which is historically noticeable and phenomenologically capable of being described through personal writings and other documentation which show the inner life (diaries, letters of spiritual direction, etc.) of these people.

It is obvious that if the situation is this, the history of Christian spirituality of a particular period is nothing more than the history of the spiritual people who lived at that time. If we have to indicate common characteristics, they are characteristics which regard the spiritual experience itself of the most significant people of a period, not simply the common traits relative to the influence or the historical presence of these people.

2. The common traits of spiritual people in the times of Scalabrini

Having made these necessary clarifications about the possibility of drawing a picture of the spirituality at the time of Scalabrini, and regarding the inevitable limitations of such a picture, I will continue by mentioning some traits which seem to unite, at least in some way, Italian relevant spiritual personalities between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, which is when Scalabrini lived.

2.1. An "ordinary" sanctity

Regarding the spirituality of this period the historian must take notice

that the number a saintly people of this period, who are now being beatified and canonised is noticeably high and ever increasing. Every day new canonisations which bring to our attention hidden figures of men and women who have distinguished themselves in a life of faith and their love for God are being examined. Undoubtedly in recent years, the streamlining of bureaucracy has favoured the increase of the processes of canonisation and has encouraged the undertaking of the long procedure for ecclesiastical recognition for one person or another who is often tied to a certain context, a certain diocese or a small religious congregation. The fact remains that these people exist. Many were under examination before this streamlining began. They are, however, people who have shown sanctity in a very ordinary life. It was brought to the notice of the late father Valentino Vacca, a scholar of the history of sanctity and consultant for the Congregation for the causes of the saints, that at that time there were hundreds of priests in the dioceses of the Lombardo-Veneto area like the nineteenth-twentieth century Giuseppe Baldo, parish priest of a village in the diocese of Verona and founder of the Congregation of the Little Daughters of St. Joseph. The observation is correct. In the sense, at least, that it cannot be said that the many canonised people of that period lived through extraordinary events. They lived through an experience of sanctity in their very ordinary everyday pastoral or civil life, in their life within the family, while caring out their duty, in every type of work, sometimes very modest. Referring to the Lombardy area and regarding the period of the nineteenth-twentieth century, Giorgio Rumi talks about the "ordinary" aspect as a characteristic of sanctity. Very often it is a sanctity which pursues evangelic radicalism in the most common forms of human condition and not according to the rules of the "heroic" type which were even somewhat spectacular like those of much of the counter-reform and Baroque Catholic sanctity (marvelous asceticism, harsh penitence, thaumaturgic power of attraction...). In the nineteenth-twentieth century there is no longer a peaceful and homogeneous Christian society which is reflected in the saint who emerges in an extraordinary way attracting the admiration of the believer. The Christian generations of today - which experiment the encounter with a society which is no longer officially Christian - prefer to live the Christian experience, even at the most perfect levels, with a discretion unknown to the former generations. Talking of the Lombard sanctity of the nineteenth - twentieth century Rumi refers to a succession of «ordinary» people, immersed as they are in an active "daily routine". The observation can be extended to the whole of Italian sanctity, at least as far as the generality of its more significant people are concerned.

However, it must be pointed out that this sanctity which is revealed in its ordinary aspect isn't a sanctity which is less radically evangelic or less demanding than that of the former centuries. It is practiced in its ordinary aspect and in very reserved forms, but it is a sanctity which is authentically Christian, firmly centred on the person of Christ, intent on following and imitating Him, and

characterised by a constant and sincere search for God's will. The theme of God's will is recurrent and dominant in almost all the personages of Italian sanctity of the nineteenth- twentieth century.

It has already been confirmed by the study of spiritual letters, formative tracts and similar material produced by these people, that the teaching of Francis of Sales on the call to holiness extended to all has been an important point of reference. The influence of the saintly bishop of Geneva in the nineteenth century was truly great. Scalabrini too read him, and quoted his maxims in his pastoral letters and treasured his advice. And don Bosco - one of the most significant spiritual figures of that time-dedicated to Sales the religious family he founded.

There were two other spiritual authors who were widely read in the nineteenth century and had great influence on many people who pursued the path to sanctity during that century: Ignatius of Loyola and Alfonso de' Liguori. So much so that some scholars when talking about the nineteenth century Italian spirituality talk about a salesian-ignatian-liguorian synthesis. Ignatius of Loyola influenced with his need to search for the will of God. But the ignatian influence meant above all the prevalence of the ascetic orientation of the Jesuit tradition which insisted greatly on the moral virtues and on the regularity of spiritual life through faithfulness in prayer. Alfonso de' Liguori too influenced in the same way by putting emphasis on the search for the will of God. But he influenced especially with his devotion directed in particular to the Eucharist and to Our Lady.

2.2 A devout sanctity

The Italian spiritual leaders of the nineteenth and early twentieth century don't usually show any reservation about popular devotions. They have no elitist prejudice. On the contrary, they often support their personal spiritual journey with an intense practical devotion. There is a great affinity between the spiritual experience of the saintly figures of this period and the ordinary life of piety of the population. However, there isn't a dispersion of devotion. Apart from the occasional person whose life of piety is full of minute devotions, the majority of spiritual people considered in this period show the need for great spiritual concentration which, obviously, is the result of a direct and rigorous rapport with the person of Christ and God's will. The correspondence and intimate letters of these people, often deeply felt, are valued as a great help in the apostolic duty in the Church: a missionary commitment to God's will and as an effort in imitating Christ.

It isn't daring to think that this sanctity, which is close to popular piety and has roots in God's will, which is centered upon Christ, and which reaches out towards Christian perfection without allowances but also without anxiety, has made no small a contribution to preparing the terrain for the renewal of prayer and the liturgical cult which distinguishes the path of today's Church up to

the liturgical reform carried out by the Vatican II. I would say that it has been a contribution connected to the characteristics of this sanctity: the need to walk along the path of Christian life with radicalism and deep commitment to Christ, through popular prayer implied a necessary purification and elevation of these very prayers.

2.3 A popular sanctity

In my opinion a third element which characterises the Italian sanctity of today seems to be tied to the first two and it is the community and, I would say, authentically popular dimension in the path towards sanctity. Many of today's saints - those already canonised and those awaiting ecclesiastical recognition - have founded religious communities, or have opened new spiritual paths in the church; although often restrained and almost keeping a low profile, they have been spiritual teachers who have been able to attract numerous disciples and have been mothers and fathers who have generated children in the faith. They have done so with their own experience of Christian life, with the same sobriety of essential attitude, not overburdening their disciples and children with demanding tasks and heavy loads. They have proposed a Christian radicalism which is generous and totalitarian but not "shouted about" or shown; I would say a sturdy but "possible" Christianity which has involved a wide popular base.

The hundreds of young women who have taken up the consecrated life of the founders of religious families, were ordinary women often with an elementary education and mainly from the peasant class. Many of the boys and girls who were involved in different ways by the educational aims, which suggested concrete models of Christian life stemming from the same founders of religious life, were from the lower classes. Later the laypeople's involvement, and primarily that of the young, in the Catholic organisations became very common with reference to the proposals on sanctity which were effective in so far as they were incarnated by people with a great spiritual attraction like Armida Barelli, whose influence was great among the young women of Catholic Action.

It was thus that between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a popular network of many sincere, serious and generous people searching for Christian sanctity grew and spread in all direction. This, I feel, represented in a certain way a novelty in the historical journey of the Italian Church. Before, in the centuries of so called Christianity, sanctity was above all to be admired; today - when we are faced with the dissolution of the old Christianity and the collapse of the protective structures of Christian society - sanctity becomes a diffused imperative, a journey proposed to all ecclesial communities. Sanctity becomes part of the people's life; not only in the sense that its most eminent representatives no longer belong to the upper classes, but also because models of sanctity, which are humbly close to the common experience prevail and are anchored to

a faithful sacramental life and the active participation to ecclesial life.

This popular aspect of today's sanctity, has still, for the most part, to come out in the historiographic production. But I believe that by widening this field of research, this aspect will emerge with always greater evidence. In this way the importance of the work diffused by the clergy of the so called spiritual direction between the nineteenth and twentieth century will be clearer. Spiritual direction was not only put into practice by the clergy in a specific form but was present in the spiritual maternal role acted out especially by the foundresses of religious congregations or secular institutes.

An example of this is the spiritual epistolary of Maria Domenica Mazzarello, the co-foundress of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, recently published in SEI in the same series as the volume of Scalabrini's pastoral letters. It offers an illuminating example of letters with a simple but very effective spiritual direction which guides and urges the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to continual prayer, joy and working without tiring or grumbling; in a word: to loyalty to our Lord and one's vocation. And all this is done paying attention to the single person and with a delicate maternal tenderness; and also with the intent of making the community sense grow, as well as the will to follow the Lord together with the sisters of the entire congregation and particularly of the house or institute in which one lives.

The letter that Mazzarello writes on 9th April 1878 from Nizza Monferrato to her sisters in Montevideo, Uruguay, is very beautiful. After having given news and recommendations to the group, she speaks to each sister in turn: "I'll begin with sister Philomena. Are you happy? Be so always, neh! Unite yourself strongly to Jesus, work to give only Him pleasure, force yourself to become more saintly every day, and you will always be joyful. Long live Jesus! Don't forget to pray for me. Sister Victoria, I have been told that you are well, I am very happy; work hard to earn paradise; never be discouraged, never say but. (...) And you, sister Josephine, do you still remember the promises made on the feast of the Immaculate? Never forget them; begin every day by being really humble, praying with your heart and working with the right intention. (...) Sister Angela Cassulo, are you always a cook? Through having to stay near the fire you must already be burning with the love of God, mustn't you? And do you always observe poverty? (...) Sister Teresina Mazzarello, are you already a saint? I hope you are getting there. Work always only to please Jesus, think of paradise and be of good example in everything. (...) Sister Giovanna, you still study, don't you? I think you are also studying how to become a saint (...). Now there is still my dear sister Laura, what can I say to you? I'll say that as you are the first American daughter of Mary Help of Christians, you will have to pray so that many other Americans will be able to have the same grace that the Lord has given you."

Such simple but insistent exhortations from a person considered mother and teacher of the faith had a sure response in the interlocutors and anyway contrib-

uted to create the climate for the search for sanctity, in the humble and common forms, which I have already mentioned. The same thing can be said about the correspondence with the spiritual sons and daughters of many other founders of religious congregations in this period or of spiritual directors. Of course they are spiritual letters manifestly poorer than those of the previous centuries, without great mystic impetus, without references to extraordinary experiences, and intent on sustaining a humble, ordinary practice of Christian virtue. And, in my opinion, they are letters which indicate the humbly popular figure of today's Italian Catholic sanctity. The confirmation of the II Vatican Council on the universal vocation of sanctity finds its nearest historical roots in this imposing phenomenon of popular sanctity.

2.4. An "active" sanctity

The fourth element which I think characterises Italian sanctity today is its active and apostolic trait. It is a sanctity which is almost always realised with great awareness in the practice of a mission inside the Church and inside society, usually a mission of charity (in the sense of assisting the needy materially but also of having the responsibility of educating, guiding and caring for them: boys and girls, young people and orphans....). The importance of this element hasn't up to now been adequately evidenced. In my opinion, it is the coherent development of that sense of mission which characterises some of the great spiritual figures of the counter-reform, foremost Ignatius of Loyola. But it's a development which marks a further development: the action is no longer seen simply as a modality in the practice of a mission but assumes a value of the place or moment of the rapport with God in so far as it is wanted by God. One would say that for today's saints there is no longer any hierarchic difference between contemplation and action. However the action isn't made absolute: it always refers to the Absolute who is God. It is this reference to the will of God - who alone establishes the mission to be undertaken - that makes the action radically relative. It doesn't find the means of measure within itself and doesn't take pride in its historical effectiveness. It receives its consistency from referring to the will of God, regardless of its effectiveness or ineffectiveness of which it is effectively capable. The spirituality of the foremost figures of nineteenth- twentieth century Catholic sanctity is a spirituality of action and not simply for the action.

The antecedent charitable work of this way to holiness - which as has been mentioned is expressed through charitable actions - is obviously the testimony of some of the great saints of the counter-reform, first and foremost Vincent de Paul. Many of the founders of active congregations in the nineteenth century refer to his teaching. But in the nineteenth century there is something more than the apostolic and charitable sensitivity of the seventeenth century saints. There is also the awareness that the Christian tradition has to be safeguarded

and sometimes the same possibility of orderly civil cohabitation of populations and especially the working classes subjected to the havoc produced by capitalist expansion and disintegrated or, at least, disturbed by the liberal conception of religion as a private affair or by the suggestions of the atheist and utopian sermons of the socialists. There is therefore the desire to return not so much to a pre-Revolutionary Christian society but to rebuild a society on a clearly Christian basis. It is on this aspiration that much of the nineteenth century political and social Catholicism was nurtured, in its diverse souls: transient and intransigent, liberal and polemic defender of the temporal power of the Pope. But although holding to what was said at the beginning about Christian sanctity overcoming social-cultural conditions, one can say that the spiritual figures in Scalabrini's time allowed themselves, to be provoked by the needs of their time, in the sense that they saw in them God's appeal for help, a particular call, the taking on of a special charitable mission.

3. The limitations of nineteenth century spirituality

We wouldn't be faithful to our role of historians if we didn't also mention some aspects of spirituality at the time of Scalabrini which to us, who have been formed by the theological sensibility matured after the Vatican II, and above all instructed by the great lesson of the transparent evangelic sanctity of Thérèse di Lisieux and of Charles de Foucauld, cannot but seem limited. I shall rapidly indicate four of these limits.

First of all spirituality in Scalabrini's time seems to have been at least in some of the leading figures will-centered, very ascetic, in the sense that it relies greatly on one's own effort to be faithful to the Lord. Sometimes this need to be faithful to the Lord, counting on one's own effort, seems to be predominant on humbly giving oneself to the Lord, asking and being sure of His help.

To make you understand what I'm saying, think of the resolutions that your founder Scalabrini took and how he gave himself to certain devotions daily, weekly and monthly. The completion of these practices (meditation, the rosary, days of recollection etc.) for him meant a pledge with God, the proof of the sincerity of his love for our Lord. These practices were experimented as a support in the faith journey in Christ. But one must remember that man's ascetic commitment was often emphasised more than the action of the grace. There are some revealing expressions in this sense. Scalabrini's biographer, Mario Francesconi, reports the *Propositi* on 24th August 1894 which conclude with the expression: "If I want to, I can" (pg. 349). There is obviously great faith in his own ascetic commitment. The voluntary asceticism is a common trait of sanctity of that period.

This ascetic accentuation undoubtedly derives also from the spiritual experience of great part of the nineteenth century figures with the life of the piety

of the population. They felt the same piety as the population. They intended, however, to educate the population and bring it to a greater essential attitude, to a greater purity. From here they aimed at a seriousness in the ascetic commitment, in the adherence to certain practices which they could use as a sure road towards God. From here derived also the fight against sin, and the avoidance of everyday defects. In this light we may recall the life of don Bosco, don Guanella, don Orione. I don't think we can be surprised if in the lesser people this ascetic accentuation could induce a certain moralism and reducing Christianity to the experience of a morally correct life. It has induced a certain individualism, devoid of real ecclesial breath, worried about saving one's soul. However, it must be said that ascetic voluntarism meant a serious commitment as an answer to the action of grace, a great sense of God, which in turn becomes a horror of sin as an offence to God. It was a voluntarism which left room for the risk of withdrawal into oneself but in substance it was nothing more than the will for a generous and totalitarian answer.

Secondly, the nineteenth century spirituality is a spirituality which is theologically rather poor, i.e. lacking in doctrinal developments, very simple and elementary in penetrating the mysteries of the faith. For example the Trinitarian dimension of Christian life is not gone into in depth. This can be seen in the centrality of the theme of Providence. It is a dominant theme not only in Manzoni, as we know, but also in spiritual figures that were very significant in that period, like for example don Orione, who called himself the son of Providence and founded a congregation called *Piccola Opera della Divina Provvidenza* (The Small Work of Divine Providence). These spiritual people saw Providence as the goodness of God who created all things and keeps everything alive and in particular intervenes on behalf of man; it is therefore also seen as a model of charitable work which must distinguish the Christian in his relationship with his neighbour. The theme of Providence is therefore very much tied to the dynamism of charity which has been expressed by many of the nineteenth century figures of sanctity. According to Francesconi, it was a theme much felt by bishop Scalabrini (pg. 466-467). But one has to admit that it is a theme which is theologically poor in so far that it means that the relationship with God is felt as a rapport with the creator of the universe and the lord of history and not specifically with the divine Persons. Christian experience is not simply an experience of dependence on God as providence, but more appropriately a filial love for the Father in union with the Son through the Holy Spirit.

But even the highest mystic figures of this period did not live a truly Trinitarian experience. Just think of Gemma Galgani who greatly felt her rapport with Jesus. She lives an extraordinary intimacy with him, but it seems - through her own confession - that she is unable to live her rapport with the Father with the same intensity.

Thirdly, the nineteenth century spirituality, generally, has little contact with Holy Scripture. The lack of theological content, which I mentioned before, as

well as the ascetic accentuation and moralistic risk, depend, at least partly, on this scarcity of contact with the Bible. This however does not mean that the nineteenth century spirituality didn't have strong evangelic substance and wasn't nourished by the word of God. But this reference seems to be differently mediated. There isn't a direct approach and a frequent reading of the Scriptures. We can see a reflection of this even in the ascetic-spiritual production of the nineteenth century which badly lacks information on Bible and doesn't refer to the rich and established biblical themes, especially from St. Paul and St. John's writings, of the life of the Spirit. It seems to me that the lack liturgical-sacramental sensitivity is tied to this lack of contact with the Bible. This does not mean, obviously, that the sacraments were not received and that the mass was not given central position. On the contrary, confession played a very important part in spiritual life and the participation in the mass was truly central. However, the great importance given to the sacraments and to the liturgy was experimented with modalities which were fundamentally devotional. In other words the practice of the sacraments was thought and lived, even by the major spiritual figures of the time, as personal super-devotion, which aimed at obtaining more merit, and not as a real participation in the mystery of Christ.

Fourthly, the spirituality of Scalabrini's time is the spirituality which seems inclined towards virginal models of Christian life. In the spiritual figures of this period there isn't only great consideration of the virginal state, which often assumes tones of polemic exaltation in front of the corruption and growing immorality in the secularised societies, but also a personal and enthusiastic Christian journey along the path of virginity. Almost all those canonised in this period are in fact virgins. This doesn't mean that married people were not asked to lead a saintly life. However, the fact remains that the models of saintliness - offered existentially by the more eminent spiritual figures and by the spiritual handbooks - were virginal and married people were asked to adapt to those models in some way.

In this unbalance there isn't simply a recognition of the most perfect way which is virginity, according to a traditional line which goes back to the apostle Paul himself, but, as has already been mentioned, a certain polemic tone regarding the sadness of present times that denies its Christian inheritance and seems to want to fight Christianity itself. Virginity was considered as the victorious answer to the corruption of the customs which was judged as a programme pursued by hostile forces to destroy the Church. So, a more general characteristic of nineteenth century spirituality, which is the convergence with the more general pastoral and cultural attitude of the Church at a time of intolerant polemics with the modern world, is made evident through the exaltation of virginity. In fact the great majority of the spiritual figures of the Italian nineteenth century took on attitude of intolerance with the modern world. With the exception of the solitary figure of Rosmini. And, in certain aspects, your very founder, Scalabrini.

But other motives converged on the exclusive and polemical exaltation of virginity, motives which a recent "female-oriented" historical interpretation in these last years brought to light: a certain romantic exaltation of the feminine role and the "feminization" of Catholicism, or as others would say, a pastoral alliance between clergy and women, which brought about an active engagement in apostolic activities and an increased appreciation for women consecrated to God in virginity according to unprecedented models of organisation. A fact that, in a historical perspective, before being a limit, is really a process of great fecundity for Catholicism today.

I have rapidly mentioned some of the limits of Christian experience which are encountered, in my opinion, by many spiritual figures at the time of Scalabrini. The fact remains that there are many exemplary spiritual people in the period considered. Even with all the obvious limits, remains the impressing fact that there is exemplary testimony of Christian life much more vast and diffused than ever before in the history of Italian Catholicism. For the believer - and in this moment I am talking to those who believe, sisters and brothers in the faith - it is a testimony which invites, even before emulation, a communion of love with many brothers and sisters who live in the light of God.

