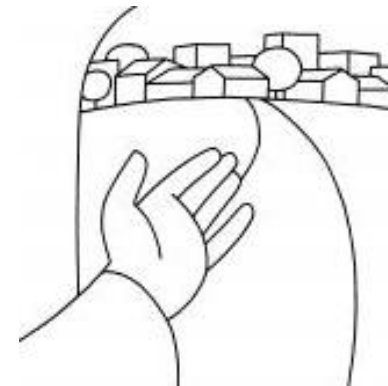


*There was once a village*

*Which is still there ...*



**Returning to Bethany ... in time of Covid-19**

**JUNE 2020**



## Introduction

*What has happened during these months?*

### Better than nothing!

Has it ever happened to you to raise up your eyes to the sky during a dark night, and in the total absence of stars you glimpse a tiny spot looming afar without figuring out what it is: a fragment of a star, a planet or a meteor? In that dark night, that tiny spot is *better than nothing!*

And imagine a fisherman in his boat in the dead of night, when the sea isn't so promising! On the far horizon, a weak light attracts his attention. Is it perhaps a port's light-house or a ship's light? In that dark sea, that small light *is better than nothing!*

Thus, in the days of Covid-19, when the Chapter remains an event which nobody knows whether it will be celebrated tomorrow or in a month's time, whether on a sure date or on an uncertain time, then *Bethany* becomes that small light which however attracts your attention, guides you, keeps you connected to an event, gives you hope and stimulates within you a dream. *Better than nothing!*

### In the midst of corona virus

For over "half a year", between September 2019 and February 2020, Bethany has guided our reflection, leading us back to the basics of the Word of God (*Worksheet 1*); to the challenge of the community and its context (*Worksheets 2 and 3*); to the new scenarios of the mission (*Worksheet 4*); especially young people (*Worksheet 5*) and ecology (*Worksheet 6*).

But in the midst of that journey and the Chapter, we are faced with the corona virus. Not only because it forced us to revise dates and

calendars, but also because we found ourselves in front of other challenges, transforming into new questions the serious results of the pandemic.

And therefore, similar to those who follow the bright light in the sky or the weak light on the sea, we focus again on Bethany and start afresh from that place. Aware that although we have already passed from there, the corona virus will perhaps suggest to us new ways of a fresh reading. We will perhaps discover new lights which will orientate the Chapter and its choices.

Therefore, this booklet intends to return to Bethany. Hence, the title: *“There was once a village which is still there”*. The village is always the same, with all its experiences and events, personages and surprises. Therefore, Bethany which we have reconsidered through the preparatory chapter Dossier.

But, this pandemic cannot remain detached from our choices. So, having postponed the Chapter to Spring 2021, it is becoming clear that it’s not simply a necessity but even an opportunity.

Consequently, revisiting Bethany today, our glance will perhaps change. Hence, the sub-title: *“Returning to Bethany... in time of corona virus”*. The village is always the same. But it’s one thing having been there six months ago. Going there now, is another! And then, are we sure that only one Bethany exists?



#### Your suspended lives

The forced living together with the pandemic, constrained us to live over three months in quarantine. And we don’t know whether we will return to it. In this long span of time - *three months are long!*

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**SMALL LIBRARY**

*I suggest you to read one or more  
of the following texts*



1. Pope Francis, «*Laudato si'*», Encyclical-Letter on the “care of our common home, 2015
2. «*Journeying to take care of the common house - Five years after the Laudato si'*», **Inter-Decastery Table** of the Holy See on integral ecology. [Will be shortly published in various languages. One finds the pre-views on Internet]
3. **Pope Francis** *Life after the pandemic* Vatican library [Already published in various languages]
4. **UISG-USG**, “*Let’s take care of each other, as the God of salvation takes care of us*”. Letter of 29 June 2020
5. [For the Italian language] **Ilaria Capua**, “*The Aftermath. The virus has forced us to change the mental vision*”, Mondadori Ed.

**N.B.** *We are sure that there are texts similar to that of Capua. Those interested, search in their own language.*

– our life has completely changed its habits, the liturgical rites, the work and the community rhythms.

In our houses, we had to stay in our rooms instead of choosing the common room; social distancing has replaced physical proximity. In the past we used to call this “isolation”. Today it’s a “necessity”.

Before, we were encouraged to participate, to be present, “*to be there*”, while during the quarantine months, digital connection has been stimulated. Staying *on-line* has replaced our being in front of each other. Even when the distances were very small : *from one room to the other; from one floor to the other of the same house*.

At a certain point it seemed that our lives were suspended between real distancing and virtual relationships. Approaching a person had almost become a fault. The fear of being infected has taken the upper hand.

We have spent Easter blocked in front of monitors – *respecting social distancing* – which projected to us only “rites celebrated in solitude”.

And while on one hand, we experienced all this inside our houses, on the other hand, outside, one not only died in solitude, but even the funerals were rites celebrated in solitude. “*For a few weeks now, it has been evening, prayed Pope Francis on St. Peter’s square. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void*”<sup>1</sup>.

And to the sorrow for the loss of many human lives, one suffered also for not being permitted to watch over his dear ones, even

<sup>1</sup> Extraordinary moment of prayer presided by the Pope on the parvis of St. Peter’s Basilica. Cf. Vatican Bulletin of 27 March 2020.

though they were not dying of corona virus but from any other underlying disease.

The pandemic has overwhelmed the most consolidated traditions and rites of our history. All the masses have been suspended, as well as the celebration of every sacrament: non least, in this time of great need, even the sacrament of extreme unction. A few exceptional visits to the dying in the Covid-19 wards, transformed the priest into an utterly weird person.

The Church has lived Easter in a way unknown to recent history. Celebrations with closed doors. Not even during the war had one experienced such things. A perfectly new situation precisely like the pandemic.

#### A time "without"

One would say that we have lived for 90 days *"without"*: without celebrations, without liturgies, without encounters. *But not without asking ourselves*: Where can we go to adore God? where can we meet him? where can we look for him?

If the Samaritan woman had to live this lockdown<sup>2</sup> with us, she would have said that the places of a new spirituality are neither the mountain nor the temple, but the heart<sup>3</sup>.

And like Teilhard de Chardin, living a full desert life, we too, who have become priests through our baptism, could have perhaps been able to pray : *"Since we have no bread, no wine, no altar, we will rise oh Lord above these symbols, in order to reach you on the altar of the total land, and offer you from there the work and the sorrows of the world"*.

<sup>2</sup> Lockdown: time of isolation, of confinement, of total closure

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jn 4,21

## **WORK SHEET**

### **Workshop- Discussion**

As it has often happened in the history of humanity, in every "breaking epochal event" [big wars, epidemics, natural disasters, falls of empires, financial cracks, etc], there always followed a time of re-birth.

After this pandemic which has messed up everything,  
even this time there will be a re-birth, according to many.

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1. *Are we convinced of it? ... yes ... No ... Why?*
2. *If yes, which "pillars" would be needed for the the construction of a new world? ... "the other Bethany"?*
3. *And we, sisters of sisters, which "bricks" could we bring forth to contribute concretely to the new construction?*

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*Let's reflect together and offer to the Chapter  
two or three ideas which we consider innovative.*

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**Those who wish can send their reflection to:**  
[segretariato.generale@suoredellacarita.org](mailto:segretariato.generale@suoredellacarita.org)

Covid-19 emerged as a virus in China, in Wuhan market, as it is supposed, the following day it could be found in the stadium of Valencia and along the roads of Bergamo.

This man has accelerated time, almost to the point of abolishing it, on behalf of a globalisation which on one hand exalts us while it scares us on the other. Here lies his power and even his weakness.

A virus was enough to send in tilt all the social, economic, political and health organisation: everywhere!. This micro, “gelatinous”, insignificant, and highly invisible organism – so invisible that one needs to enlarge it ten thousand times under the microscope to be able to see it (it is said that on a pin-point amount of covid, there are at least another ten-thousand of them!) - has laid fragility bare.

Never before, has the entire planet, “our global village”, been constrained to a “planetary confinement” since “*l’homo sapiens*” inhabits it.

We are connected, co-related and inter-dependent. With a stunning and evangelical image, Pope Francis would say: “we are all in the same boat”.

We express it in many ways. We even find its charm and beauty. But what does it really mean?

This pandemic has sort of opened a window. Is another Bethany possible? Who is going to build it? The politicians, the scientists, the soldiers, the economists or the powerful of the earth? Perhaps ...

But especially we, every single citizen of the world, with his “little brick”.



90 days, have been for us *a time without time* ... enough to find out again the relish of inner life. God granted it to us, in the hope that we too permitted it to ourselves.

### New spaces

We surely aren't the same as before. New challenges are pressing forward. And even in front of the highly criticised new-media, perhaps a reflection crops up. Do they really merit to be denigrated?

*New habitable spaces are advancing!* ... Spaces which are considered virtual, but in reality they aren't so, because in them people discover dialogue and work. Briefly, in these spaces we have learnt to find ourselves in a different form of being present to each other, thanks to the discovery or rediscovery of instruments such as skype, zoom, facebook, video-conferences, video-calls, etc.

Hence the importance to learn to digitalise, to set up relationships on line and forms of work usually called tele-working. Is it easy? Difficult? Suitable? Unsuitable?

How could our students cope without the lessons on-line when they were restrained to remain at home? Without the creativity and the resourcefulness of their teachers, expressed through these digitalised forms?

And their parents? The virus has surely swept away much work. And today it's adding more poverty to the actual poverty. But did tele-working or smart working<sup>4</sup> save at least a part of it?

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<sup>4</sup> Tele-working: work accomplished from a distance (via connection) from established premises, in pre-defined schedules. Smart working (literally: intelligent work): it's a tele-working without obliging the person to be on the spot or to follow schedules, but expects the pre-established result.

And the pastoral commitment? The Church ended up to discover the domestic dimension of faith. Somehow, a return to the origins, when instead of the altar there was the table, instead of the temple, the house, and instead of the local Church, the family.

*Will the corona virus make us perceive new dimensions of the reality ?*

*Will it make us discover new spaces of relationship?*

*Will it suggest to us new forms of living together?*



### New forms of "infection"

So, within this global experience, if everything or almost everything was under lockdown, charity surely wasn't. Interesting research carried out in these days, tells us that voluntary work has increased everywhere, both in the number of individuals and in its new descriptive forms. The attention to the poorest, remains a fixed pillar in the life of the Church, of the charisms and of many organisms including the non-confessional ones.

We have surely experienced that solidarity is more contagious than any other virus, and that there are many forms of services, of sharing and of participation which don't need big organisations but a small dose of creativity: the door to door shopping, the hanging bread-basket, the friendly-telephone, the radio-transmission to keep one company, the small sewing-places to make face masks; etc.

And if the mass from a distance has become a daily appointment, via TV or through streaming with the priests who celebrated even from the roofs and Pope Francis in worldwide broadcast, if sacramental communion has been replaced by the spiritual one ... all this has permitted to find afresh a more direct relationship with

### Is another Bethany possible?

At the time of Jesus, there were two villages, both called Bethany: the village of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, whom Jesus loved and where he often stopped. And the other Bethany: the one "*beyond the Jordan*", which is mentioned only once throughout the Gospel (cf. Jn 1,28). *The village near the river!*

But more than a place, the other Bethany is perhaps a symbol, a category of the spirit. We would like to imagine it this way at least in this booklet. A Bethany which is still to be built, within us, but also around us. The cornerstone is already there, ready. The Baptist indicates it to us: "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (cf. Jn 1,29). Jesus is the cornerstone, on which the new Bethany stands.

A new village "*on the road*", exposed to the sun, clean, welcoming and simple. Surrounded by waters, somehow like the first dwelling place of humanity: Eden!. Is it a dream or an utopia? In a world that has become so complex, fast and global ...will we perhaps manage to glimpse another Bethany on our horizon?

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The first Bethany, our first global village, perhaps needs to be recreated. Man of our societies is a sort of "half-god": very capable. Through his genius, man's feelings can become simultaneous from one extreme part of the planet to the other; therefore, if an earthquake rattles Pakistan, you can cry over its deaths in America; if a world cup takes place in Russia, the final victory can be celebrated in Sancey.

This man who has transported the sea into a completely deserted area and has built an Island in the midst of an ocean, has even managed to "planetise" a virus in a short span of 24 hours; so, if



## 2.2. The first day of a new world

*When a virus obliges you to change your mental vision*

### Let's rewind the tape

*There was once a village which is still there.* We have so far focused our attention on Bethany, the village on the road. Yesterday's Bethany. Its life, the most visible personages, Jesus' arrivals and departures. And then the disease, the healing, the grief, death: normal daily events. Alongside extraordinary ones: healed leprosy, the coming out of the tomb, the people's banquet and the utterly pure nard.

We have entered a few houses. For example, that of Simon. But not in Martha's house. We have already been there before<sup>40</sup>.

We have walked along the roads of the village. We have even visited the cemetery. Therefore, some creativity in the method and strong realism in the narration. The Word of God has guided us, while leaving much space to our human feelings.

A village of other times, therefore, where everybody knew each other and looked for each other. So far, but very close to us and to our days. *There was once ...*

*But is Bethany still there? ...* Time consumes, transforms and sometimes it destroys. It's unknown to us whether that village still exists, perhaps in ruins or in a memory's narration. There must be even stones, vague memories or a few village walls. A street and abundant sunlight.

<sup>40</sup> The pre-chapter journey, merging in "Bethany-dossier", has been drawn up on that house and its dynamics.

the Word of God: in the personalised form of the "book", but even in the modality of "listening in connection".

For example, the phenomenon "you-tube", as a channel of encounter for the most varied "groups of the Word", has become "an almost contagious experience" with the registration of unexpected and always more numerous new members. Not only on behalf of those who were already quite familiar with these instruments but also of those who looked over these worlds for the first time and which were still unknown up to three months ago.

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*If the lockdown has hemmed in the liturgies, it surely failed to put boundaries to the Word of God!* All those who among us remained orphans from the daily mass in the chapel of the community or in the parish Church, we not only learned the "solidarity of the Eucharistic fasting" shared with those groups and with those whole geographical areas which are always deprived of the mass, except on some days of the years, but we have even discovered that besides the Eucharistic communion, there exists also the communion with the Word. We have experienced that if the Mass is a community action, so is the encounter with the Word.

Finally we have personally witnessed that the Word of God can be proclaimed not only from the Ambon of the parish church or of the convent chapel, but also from the "virtual squares"

Moreover, it's important not to forget that the first organised encounter with the Word of God wasn't born in a closed Church or in the convent's hall, but on a public square (Cf. Neh 8,1-9).

### That bright little point

Therefore, new challenges are emerging on our horizon. New spaces, new opportunities. And our Chapter will be inserted here, with its discernment and its decisions for the coming years.

Will they be years of definitive liberation from the Covid? Years of living together with the virus? We do not know. However, we know that they are years of mission and self-giving. The scenarios will change, but the poor will be always with us.

Thus, *that bright little light* in the grey sky of our times or *the small light* on the uncertain sea of our days, will be our charism, which as usual, will know how to indicate us the way, through the word of our 21<sup>st</sup> Chapter which we will celebrate within this epoch of corona virus. *The Chapter of the pandemic!*

And if, like the disciples of the Gospel (cf. Mk 4,35-41), we were caught off guard by an unexpected turbulent storm<sup>5</sup>, it will increase our awareness, as Pope Francis puts it, to realise that *“we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, abut at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other”*<sup>6</sup>.

### Is it perhaps the dawn of a new world ?



<sup>5</sup> Cf Mk 4,37 (35-41).

<sup>6</sup> Extraordinary moment of prayer... (cf. Note 1)

but it expands until it invades everything: house, banquet, friends, garden, road and perhaps even the village ... more so the Word doesn't remain confined to a book, but it resounds throughout the universe: in every fibre of it, even to the last branch of the last almond tree or the last star of the last galaxy.

We have understood a little during the lockdown days, when the impossibility of the direct relationship with the celebrated Eucharist, made us discover the direct relationship with the Word. Listening to it in the book. Contemplated in nature. Loved in every gesture of love which we have experienced or witnessed.

When the Word resounds in us and touches our shivering heart, while managing also to make us cry from emotion, it cannot remain confined, but it needs to overflow and to come out from us, like the perfume from the jar. *And it becomes gesture, caress, apron ...*

Listening to the Word knows just one direction: the one that goes from inner life to action; from intimacy to the word; from the heart to history. From me to the poor.

*The Word renders you always ready to go forth!* As it happened to Mary, who although she was more inclined to “remain sitting”, (cf. Jn 11,20) she didn't hesitate at all when the sister told her *“The Master is here and he asks for you”*<sup>39</sup>. (cf. Jn 11, 28). *And she rose quickly and went to him* (v. 29). Namely, on the road where everybody was crying. When you listen to the Word, it renders you capable “to walk” like the Master. Your steps behind his steps. Steps of love, which cost like the nard. Steps without return, like the perfume which inundates the house and cannot return to that “little bottle”. Love is agape!

<sup>39</sup> Cf. This Booklet, p. 26

### The measure of love is to love without measure

And then, as if it weren't enough, to say it with the evangelist Mark (cf. 14,3), that little bottle of alabaster, very precious and delicate almost as the 300 grams of nard contained in it, is totally smashed in a thousand pieces by the woman who not only anointed the Master's feet but even the head. The hymn to waste reaches its melody peak! Nothing is taken back home. Neither the contents, nor the container. Everything is given away: both the perfume and the precious alabaster. Once something is given, it's given. It doesn't return. Love is extreme, waste, price. It's totality and disproportion. You are expected to love until you give yourself totally. John would say: till the "end".

In Bethany, the "consummation" occurs with the rite of the smashed little bottle and the dispersion of the perfume throughout the house. Everything is flooded with that fragrance.

In Jerusalem, the "consummation" will take place with the rite of the cross, from where Jesus will draw everybody to him (cf. Jn 12,32), until he can certify that: "It is finished" (Jn 19,30).

So, what is the limit of love? Perhaps there is no limit, because "the measure of love is to love without measure". Golgotha teaches us. Bethany too!

### The Word like the nard

Only this love produces a true listening. Irrepressible listening, to the point of not wanting to miss one single word coming from the Beloved's mouth, because each of his Words is "the only thing that matters", which nobody can take away from us. Unless "this nobody" isn't ourselves.

Listening to the Word is an "irrepressible beauty" like the nard. And if this cannot remain confined within the precious jar of alabaster,

### First window

①

**«Understanding what God is telling us  
at this time of pandemic,  
represents a challenge for the Church's mission»**

(Pope Francis)<sup>7</sup>

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Like the entire Church, we too, sisters of charity,  
are requested to ask:

*What is God telling "us" in this time of pandemic?*

- *To me personally*
- *To us local-community and congregation*
- *To contemporary society*

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*I reflect personally ...*

*We can share in community ...*



<sup>7</sup> Message for the world mission day – October 2020



### Dedicated to Pozzaglia!

*Small Bethany on our plan*

*Once there was a village  
which is still there ...*

Words cherished by us sisters of Charity. Our memory flies to the day when, raising to the altars young Livia Pietrantoni – on the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1972 - Paul VI opened his short epic with these words: “There was once and it’s still there, a village-called Pozzaglia, surrounded by poor fields and by silvery olive trees. There was a parish church which gave to those good people faith and prayer. And there was also a blessed house, a nest full of children’s voices, amongst which that of Livia. A house where everyone was attentive to do things properly and to pray often”.

*Pozzaglia!* A village belonging to other times. Both on the periphery and on the road. Highly hidden and so much visible because it’s strongly sheltered by that small hill of ancient Sabina. Somehow like the village of Bethany, it also leans to a slope: the rock of Zion.

And in that village, there was Livia. A young woman who belonged to other times: “*pious, honest and very hard-working*”.

*The all-rounder girl*, knew how to handle the ovens in the house; or to put it better the big fireplace, around which the family gathered; where the meals were cooked, the prayers said and where they listened to the stories of grandfather Domenico.

*The all-rounder girl*, who was in charge of the stable, took the animals to pasture, tidied up the house and looked after her numerous brothers and sisters.

### Ten times in love!

If we make some bills, as we usually say, that jar of nard coming from the height of its 300 denarii, costs ten times as much as the thirty pieces of silver which Jude would have shortly received, as a price of his betrayal (cf. Mt 27,9).

*Lord, someone will betray you for thirty pieces of silver, but I will love you ten times as much. Someone will sell you for thirty pieces of silver, but with my love, I will ransom you still ten times more. For the one who betrays, you are worth thirty and for the one who loves, you are worth three hundred!*

We know how incoherent was Jude’s reaction: *This perfume is stolen away from the poor from* (cf. Jn 12,5). *With three hundred denarii, who knows how many food packages could be prepared for the poor!*

But we must not miss the sarcastic comment of the Evangelist: “*He didn’t care less of the poor. He was only a thief. And to cap it all, he kept the group’s money-box*”. We know Jesus’ answer: *One doesn’t renounce to love on behalf of another. One cannot compare two sublime relationships of love : Jesus and the poor. The poor will be always with you. They will even represent me!*

A similar reaction of consternation will also occur later, during the paschal supper carried out between Jesus and his disciples. Who would have understood the presence of that apron and the meaning of that gesture? It was unacceptable that a Rabbi bends down to wash the feet of his disciples. If anything, in the culture of those places, the opposite took place.

And then, did he need to wash the feet, precisely during the Paschal supper, which was the purest rite of all the year? “*During supper...*” (Jn 13,2). A curse! And so Peter, on behalf of everybody: “*Lord, do you wash my feet? ... Never!*” (cf. Jn 13,6,8). We know how it ended up.

extremes and waste; at the festival of consumerism where poverty is insulted, would say Jude. And it's not the first time. Even at the wedding of Cana, the six stone jars, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons (cf. Jn 2,6) were "excessive". Because every stone jar contained from 90 to 135 litres of wine. When multiplied by six it meant that for the end of that wedding, there remained from 600 to 800 litres of wine at that table. Moreover, it was "the best"... "which makes your head spin".

Drunk in Cana. Inebriated in Bethany. Perhaps we too, like Jude would have protested for such a waste. Three hundred denarii for half a kilo of pure nard was an excessive sum, considering that "one denar" was equivalent to 12 hours' work of a day labourer or to a salary of a Roman soldier. *Therefore, a year's salary for an instant of "affection"?*

And then why nard? One knew that it was very expensive and it was rare. Its flower, which grew on a height of about five thousand meters, could only be imported from the farthest chains of central Asia. In Israel there weren't such high mountains. It was especially used for the kings' crowning and for the solemn celebration in the temple, mixing it with the incense. And John speaks of "true nard", namely pure.

Did Mary perhaps loved that nard because it came from the altitudes? Being the perfume for the kings and for the temple, was her Master inferior to them? *Follow your heart!*

The nard was as precious as Jesus' friendship. And still "more precious" is his word. That "better part" which was gifted to her by the Master which *nobody will take it away from her* (cf. Lk 10,39.42). How can she thank him? So, here is the nard in exchange for his Word. A choice coming from the heart.

And when the "foreman"<sup>8</sup> called her, she obeyed immediately! Poverty was so great. Needs too. The salary: a God's blessing.

So, like many other young women of the Sabina, she either assumed the role of the worker, employed in the reconstruction of the road that went up from Campo Moiano to Pozzaglia; or that of the olive harvester, bent over the olive harvest, down there in the fields towards Tivoli, away from home, from the family and from the village.

Livia was a hard-working woman, ready to use her arms while facing difficult work. *Somehow like Martha? Surely yes.* But in a way she even resembles Mary in her gentle character, which matched with her natural inclination. A non talkative person! Mother-nature had formed her to the art of listening besides forming her to service.

She was so fond of that boundless silence of the fields and pastures, when, during the non-season times<sup>9</sup>, the sun wasn't so hot or the snow fell abundantly and permanently.

She loved the parish church which she willingly attended frequently when the others renounced to go. It was inaccessible, up there, on top of the village. Nestled in between the houses. The sun and the heat were unable to reach it. Livia stopped there willingly for a long time, even on her knees in front of that semi-dark and lonely tabernacle.

Work and listening. Arms and heart. As if they were her two lungs, *Martha and Mary* found their place in the unity of life of this

<sup>8</sup> *The foremen were a sort of* authoritative and exploitative "supervisors", who traced persons to work in the fields and on the roads; they organised their life and determined their salary.

<sup>9</sup> With "non-season" they meant both summer and winter

“young woman of other times”, who will become a sister of charity like Antide Thouret. *Sr. Agostina!*

Contemplative and active. Deeply in love with Christ and the poor, especially the sick. Strongly attached to Mary, whom she venerated throughout her life with silence and flowers, with the rosary while stopping in solitude in front of that tender and gentle painting. In that time, down there, in the wild Rifolta. Later, in the old attic of the ancient Hospital “Santo Spirito”.

Sure, resembling in a way Marta and even Mary. Or perhaps both of them together. Service and dedication. Prayer and spirituality. Yesterday in the small village of Pozzaglia. Later, in the big city of Rome. At the service of the Master, sick and lonely. *“For Jesus everything is so little”!*



*Once there was a village which is still there. Yesterday Bethany, on the way towards Jerusalem. Today Pozzaglia, on the Benedictine path towards Rome. Yesterday Martha-Mary. Today Livia-Agostina. Yesterday, a tomb, that of Lazarus. Today an urn, that of Agostina. Yesterday, the house of Martha and Mary. Today the small community and the small-hermitage.*



### **A dream for Pozzaglia**

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Is Pozzaglia called to become a small Bethany? A small spiritual village on the map of our geography? The village that offers hospitality and listening, a house of prayer and charity? ... Is it a dream or perhaps an utopia?

Questions and doubts increase within us, but we are aware that we are attracted by dreams, and urged by utopias.

This gesture is perhaps more rough in its form, because the tears will be replaced with the water; the basin will take the place of the alabaster jar; and the towel will replace the hair. However, the gesture abounds with tenderness and gentleness. Jesus must have learned it from a woman. *“The woman and God meet each other in the gesture invented by love and speak the same language”.*

The Word of God gives us innumerable texts about God’s tenderness and mercy, representing them with maternal and feminine images. Their splendour exceeds the ancient ones and today not even the most romantic and sensual film director would be capable to present them so perfectly in his film.

The prophet Hosea resorts to the maternal womb and to the woman’s bosom (rachamim) to describe to us God’s compassion (cf. Hos 11,8), his love for his people. Likewise Isaiah recalls the image of the mother and her son: *“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you”* (cf. Is 49,15). And the Psalmist echoes: *«I have calmed and quieted myself; I am like a weaned child with its mother»* (Ps 131,2a).

*“God – once said Pope John Paul I – is our father, but even more, he is our mother”<sup>38</sup>.* His love for us is unending, even when the darkest night prevails on us and on our times.

### **Half a kilo of pure nard !**

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So, returning to the Bethany dinner, one cannot absolutely ignore that excessive dose of perfume to be poured on the feet of just one man. (cf. Jn 12,3). One “pound” corresponded to 450 grams. Practically half a kilo of pure nard!. We are at the rhapsody of

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<sup>38</sup> Angelus, 10 September 1978;

Worn out feet in search of the poor, of the sick and of the sinners. And now caressed feet. Kissed repeatedly (cf. Lk 7, 38.45). Wet with tears and excessively perfumed.

Only a woman who is deeply in love could dare to that extent, and only a poem similar to that of the Canticle was capable to narrate this love (cf. Song of Songs 1,12).

All the four Gospels speak about it and this is already a strong sign of its importance. Even though the emphases made are so different from each other! In fact, experts are urged to suppose that it's a matter of different episodes.

Thus, in the midst of it all, there is this nard-perfume; this utterly precious and rare essence, whose fragrance is unique and purifying. A perfume coming "from the heights", totally emptied from its container which is smashed in a thousand pieces. A strong and pure scent which doesn't only enfold into a unique fragrance both the one who receives it and the one who sprinkles it, but it also floods the entire house and those friends.

#### A same gesture, for two suppers

That woman's strong gesture recalls another one, which Jesus himself will shortly accomplish<sup>37</sup>, in another room, always in a friends' house. Not in Bethany, but in Jerusalem.

It won't entail the gesture of the tears and the perfume, but it will resemble it just the same, even because the Master will bend down on his disciples' feet to wash them and to dry them. Rough and coarse feet, full of dust and marked by very frequent walking. Feet that are similar to his.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Jn 13,1ff

#### ***In the meantime ...***

- *The small community is there. And it didn't emerge today! Called to live according to the village's rhythms and to welcome the pilgrims – one pilgrim today, tomorrow another one – in transit from throughout-Europe on the path of St. Benedict; and those tiny groups or individuals - one, two, three - who seek silence and the Word.*
- *A tiny hermitage has emerged! It's so small that it can be easily lost in the midst of the old houses, built one upon the other. It is called to express the rhythms of silence and solitude, of prayer and manual work. Listening "continuously" to the Word of God, to support "the charity that serves the world, the poor and the church" [cf. Let. to sr. Anna Rita Micelli, 8 September 2019 – Attached text ]*

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#### **N.B.**

In view of the hospitality, some refurbishment has been carried out:

- Both in the house of the community. The Chapel overlooking the road has been entirely refurbished. The attic has been rebuilt and divided in small spaces, adequate to the guests' needs.
- And in the so called "grandfather's stable". The old tools are now enriching the museum, while the stable has been renewed and enlarged. Sufficient space on the two levels has been created to obtain from it a room and a chapel: it's enough for the person who inhabits the utterly small hermitage.



## PART ONE

**The tomb and the leprosy***When history changes your route*

Reading again the page of Bethany in times of the corona virus, is different from when we read it last year in preparation to the Chapter.

After the dramatic experience of this Spring 2020, from which we are slowly coming out - experience of lockdown, of intensive therapy units, of transmissions, of "dying in solitude" - before reaching Martha's house, the heart will perhaps lead you to stop at the tomb of Lazarus or to knock at the door of Simon, the "leper".

And here I am, joyful, to hand over to you this text which resembles a spiritual booklet.

Our goal is to re-harmonise ourselves with our recent experience, through a fresh reading which will enable us to understand those spiritual dynamics which launch us to the future with optimism.

The lockdown has ended, we hope so at least. But it will not be as before. We need to stop a little to understand what has happened. We were already journeying towards the General chapter, almost reaching the home stretch. The corona virus has created many queries and obliged us to postpone it.

Let us therefore reset the last steps which we were carrying out and insert this word in our route: *pandemic*. At the same time we must ask ourselves how it could affect our Chapter and our future. Without absolutely ignoring what our communities and chapter assemblies gave us, in terms of reflection and suggestions before the pandemic.

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**2.1. "Wasting love" ... "Flooding the house"***When the perfume cannot be "confined"**Freely inspired to*

Jn 12,3; Mk 14,3; Lk 7,37-38; Mt 26,6-7



When Mary washes the Master's feet with her tears and dries them with her hair, while she sprinkles them with the nard perfume, she

accomplishes a gesture of infinite tenderness and

at the same so highly seductive, that one would never expect it in that context and in that moment.

In those days "the woman" - *whoever she was, Mary or Martha* - could be imagined only confined to the house, especially when she has just ended her mourning and affliction. Here instead she is the leading figure in a public space - *a gala banquet* - where, besides the friends and the disciples, a "big crowd" of inquisitive Jews, line up to see the miraculously-healed-Lazarus (cf. Jn 12,9); including the chief priests and the Pharisees who never miss a public supper.

At that banquet, there is Martha who is dressed as a "table manageress". And there is also Mary, the one who "is always sitting at the Master's feet; the woman who clings to the feet of the one who has covered long distances. She seems to be telling him: *"Wherever you will go, I will go to. And wherever you will stop, I will stop too"*.



- **The second part**, entitled “*The first day of a new world*”, will introduce the Work-sheet: “Let’s initiate a workshop/discussion”.

*The Gospel entrusts to us a second Bethany “beyond the Jordan” cf. Jn1,28), which we know very little. Perhaps a new village needs to be built?*

Perhaps a small brick is required even on our behalf.

Somehow, our Chapter must take it in consideration.



*Therefore, let’s start afresh from that house; from that tomb. Aware that history changes your route, when you least expect it.*

And therefore, who knows whether the Word of God has something to tell us again, precisely in relation to what has happened and to what will happen.

Each one of us can enrich the contents of this booklet, by examining her experience, what she has learnt and what she hopes and expects.

Let’s start afresh therefore from Bethany, knowing that, if we remain under the light of God’s Word, we not only fail to risk going off track, but within our route we will find out again that the world’s current experience will enlighten the contributions of our sisters and of our chapters, rendering them new and prophetic.



This first part of the booklet consists of two sections:

- **The first one** entitled: “*The Master is here and asks for you. Words with a smell of resurrection*”, take us to Lazarus’ tomb, treading the same road which was trodden by Jesus, the two sisters and the crowd. The life of the house is transferred to the road, where one not only dies but also lives; where one not only weeps but obtains new life. The prevailing feeling will be the solidarity of the tears: the most visible sign of love which becomes proximity.
- **The second one**, entitled: “*From the tomb to the table. In the house of the infected man*”, we find in the centre Simon’s experience: “*the double-confined man*”. Even Bethany is under lockdown and is a support to us. It opens our heart to hope and to celebration.



## 1.1. The Master is here and asks for you

*Words with a good smell of resurrection*

*Freely inspired to*



*Jn. 11, 1-45*



Lazarus is ill. The two sisters, Martha and Mary, decide to inform the friend who has gone very far away. As soon as he receives the news, the Master who *“loved deeply Lazarus, Martha and Mary”* (Jn 11,5), decides to return to Bethany. It’s a long distance; he had to traverse again a big part of Palestine. In the meantime, the days go by and Lazarus dies. Accompanied by his disciples and averted by Martha who went to meet him, Jesus doesn’t even enter the village, but goes directly to the place where Lazarus had been buried four days before. His heart leads him directly to the friend’s tomb.

### “Follow your heart”

There is weeping on that road (cf. Jn 11,33). Like joy, suffering is a deeply human feeling. It belongs to everybody. But its “best part” that is, the most intimate sorrow, the one that touches the depth of the heart, is such a great feeling, that it cannot be confined. It needs to be shared. It cannot go hand in hand with solitude. If you suffer alone, you suffer twice. One would say that *“shared sorrow is divided in half”*<sup>10</sup>. And it takes you directly to the friends.

And this is precisely what happens on that road. Although surrounded by the disciples, by the village people, among whom

<sup>10</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas

*difficulty, for the sick, for the hungry, for the prisoners ... for all the poor and the impoverished?*

*The beauty of love dirties the hands. Like the nard flower which is rubbed on the feet.*

Suffering and poor humanity, needs friends who know how to cry and are always ready to return, even when they ran away scared. Humanity, who is coming out of the pandemic, needs an utterly “human” and “supportive” Consecrated life, but “even fragile in her tears”, resembling Christ, who is strongly human and fragile on the road that goes from Bethany to Lazarus’ tomb. In front of that tomb, He who *“loved fondly Martha, her sister and Lazarus”* (Jn 11,5), expresses his love simply through his tears. And the others cried not when they saw the miracle but when they saw the tears.

A modern hermit nun would say <sup>36</sup>: *«Nothing is greater than love. A drop of love counts more than an ocean of spirituality. Every tired heart needs this bread »* ... And after this pandemic, every heart is indeed tired !

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This second section of the booklet, will in turn be composed of two parts:

- **The first part** entitled *“Wasting love ... Flooding the house”*, takes us back to the table of Bethany, and makes us go through Mary’s itinerary. The one who clings to the Master’s feet and then opens up not only to listen to his word, but also to listen to the road.

<sup>36</sup> Sister Maria of Campello (1875-1961)

### **Nard for our days**

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And thus I fly with my thought to our days. Pandemics, pollutions, devastations ... Not waste of nard, but unfortunately of resources. Hoarding, desertification, exploitations ...

God knows how much essence would need humanity of our time. Thus, the heart opens up to hope and imagines that it will be precisely beauty<sup>35</sup> to save our "common house", simply because it has been created not to be invaded by viruses and pandemics, but to be flooded with gentleness, friendship and love like the house of Bethany. An utopia? Sure! But *"if you can dream it, you can accomplish it"*, said Walt Disney.

If you can dream of beauty, you humanity, you can achieve it. The aliens and the angels will not come to save the world. You are the one to save it. Not with the power of your skills, but with the beauty of your heart. *Yes, beauty will save the world!*

### **A reserve of friendship**

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At the same time, our world needs also many "Marys" who cling to the feet of that part of humanity, who is wounded and tired, as if they were the Lord's feet.

I am thus touched by this woman who clings to "God's feet", and wets them with her tears, kisses them with her lips, dries them with her hair and perfumes them with her nard.

Is this perhaps the vocation of Consecrated Life today? Clinging to the "world's feet", knowing that Jesus is there, in this tender and enamoured gesture?

Are we perhaps called to discover afresh our Consecrated life as a "reserve of friendship," "a well of love": *for the suffering, for those in*

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<sup>35</sup> F. Dostoevskij, *"The idiot"*

"many Jews", yet Jesus desires to share his sorrow for his friend's demise, in a more intimate manner, with Martha and Mary.

The same thing will happen even later. All the disciples, except Jude, will accompany Jesus in the Gethsemane. That night of the betrayal, nobody wanted to leave the Master in solitude. However, he wanted near him only Peter, James and John. Jesus must have desired to share his deepest sorrow only with them: *" My soul is sad. But I pray you: don't leave me alone. Keep watch with me"*<sup>11</sup>.

### **The vocabulary of tears**

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Tears are the language of both sorrow and happiness. We become all contagious. Unfortunately, sometimes they are the result of anger and express emotional weakness. But very often they belong to the vocabulary of love. One cries out of love. I recall to mind Peter, who *"wept bitterly"*<sup>12</sup> when the cock crowed. He loved Jesus to the point that he couldn't bear the fact of his betrayal.

It also happens to us in our sorrowful experiences that life has in store for us. Above all, we cry out of compassion. And compassion is always a synonym of love. I recall all the tears that the sufferings in the world cause on a daily basis. I think also of this pandemic.

Perhaps you have lost a parent or a brother or a son; a friend, or one or more of your sisters religious ... Without being able to see them again, deprived even of the simplest signs of tenderness which one could offer: a smile, an embrace or a kiss.

When a dear person passes away, the eyes fail to keep away the tears. Crying is a healthy feeling, especially when the tears are shared.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Mt 26,38; Mk 14,34

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mt 26,75; Lk 22,62

It is said that tears caused by love are bright pearls that God allows to fall to the ground. If this is true, how many pearls have enlightened the world during this Spring!

Therefore, going back on that road – *we don't know whether it was morning or evening* – but we can certainly say that God has strewn there abundant pearls, precisely because weeping was a diffused feeling among everybody. The village Jews weep, so did the family friends, his sister Martha, his sister Mary. And above all it is Jesus who *“bursts out in tears”* (cf. Jn 11,35).

*“See how he loved him”* (Jn 11,36), is the generalised whispering of those present, while the two sisters coin that most beautiful name for their brother : *“The one-whom-you-love”* (cf. Jn 11,3). Love is in the root of the name Lazarus and the sisters know that.

*So, going back to Bethany in the time of corona virus*, means especially, touching with one's hand the power of love, narrated by the language of tears. The *“beautiful news”* is precisely this friendly love which can be solely expressed through tears. Ermes Ronchi would say: *“The tears of those who love, are the powerful magnifying glass of life: you look through a tear and you understand things which you could have never learnt from books”*<sup>13</sup>.

And therefore, our thought goes back to the sorrow abundantly spread on the roads of the world due to this pandemic. As if the already existing sufferings weren't enough!

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<sup>13</sup> Ermes Ronchi, *“The tears of those who love, a magnifying glass on the world”*, in *Avvenire*, 26 March 2020

## PART TWO

### The perfume and the house

*When love knows no boundaries*

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In the first part of this booklet, the reference to the nard-perfume has been repeated several times. At times with the risk of repetition. Even in this second part, we find the nard again and it assumes *“the place of honour”*. An utterly pure and strong essence is wasted while it dilates. A balsam for the Master's feet and it's also a fragrance that floods the house.

And therefore, if one shares Jude's same reasoning, he could maliciously ask himself: what's the use of having nard? It's neither bread, nor clothes, nor water, nor land ...

#### Essence coming from high tops

*The nard* is simply *“beauty”*! Is it possible to live without beauty? The nard is that something *“extra”* which gives fragrance to life; it's *“the useless that is necessary to love”*. Can one live without love? ... Here lies the nard's secret!

Only a good climber is capable to collect a flower from the most extreme altitudes. You have to invent an *“inhabitant of the high peaks”* to cultivate it. The nard, which grows only on high altitudes, belongs to the spirit. The Canticle instructs us that it is the perfume of love and friendship.

When I recall the Bethany supper, during which Mary, ignoring the waste, pours as if by magic her nard on the Master's feet, I have the impression of feeling personally the strong perfume that fills that house.

### Third window

③

#### **"Even Bethany experienced lockdown!"**

(this booklet, p. 37 ff)

The "total confinement", imposed on us by the pandemic for a span of three months, [March – May 2020] has shaken *"our schedules, our moments of encounter and even the ordinary rhythms of our life and our work"*.<sup>34</sup>

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1. *Which are my inner feelings after the recent experience?*
2. *Which aspects of our community life received more attention? Which aspects received less?*
3. *If unfortunately such days had to return, what should we avoid as a community? What should we promote?*

*Personal reflection ...*

*We can share in community ...*



<sup>34</sup> Letter UISG-USG, Let's take care of each other", 29 June 2020

### When death has the smell of resurrection <sup>14</sup>

But does everything finish here? Does our pilgrimage end in that tomb? Oh no! *Going to Bethany in the time of corona virus*, entails also an awareness that it was on that road that Jesus pronounces the most beautiful "word" of the whole Bible: *"I am the resurrection and the life"* (Jn 11,25).

This means that if today death flows along the paths of the world, if suffering traverses hearts and cultures, if sorrow touches big cities and isolated corners of the planet<sup>15</sup> - *of course, not only due to the corona virus* - it is therefore the moment to remember that on that road *"death had already the smell of resurrection"*. Simply because the friend crying on Lazarus' tomb is the God of life. *Life is stronger than death!*

Jesus' words aren't an abstract formula of faith or of a dogma ex-cathedra, uttered by the Master between the hidden columns of the temple, perhaps while he stops with the doctors of the law to speak of *"of his Father's things"* (cf. Lk 2,49).

Jesus' words are the narration of a "reawakening" witnessed directly while it was happening, precisely on the spot where everything smelled of death, for he had been there four days. (cf. Jn. 11,17.39).

In Bethany, there isn't only the shock of death, alleviated by the tears of friendship. There is also the return to life. Lazarus is the story of a resurrection, but he is also an announcement of resurrection.

<sup>14</sup> Eugenio Montale (1896-1981). An Italian poet. Nobel Award for literature (1975)

<sup>15</sup> For example: The most inner regions of the Amazonia, where the pandemic continues to reap victims among the natives. Pope Francis mentioned them on Pentecost Sunday, during the Angelus (31 May 2020).

And he couldn't be otherwise, since the one who will be pierced to death on the Golgotha, will be precisely him - *the first one* - to resurge to life from the deep gorges of nothingness.

The Lord's Passover casts in advance its rays of life on the tomb of Bethany and it extends them to the tombs of all the centuries, impregnating them with the fragrance of the resurrection.

### **The reawakening of the heart**

Love always anticipates. Love is divine. Love doesn't go in quarantine. It's love that moves everything. Even a tomb's slab.

Therefore, the Passover anticipated in Bethany, transmits to us the beautiful news that humanity can be lifted from the depth of her limits which keep her imprisoned within her fragility. Humanity can be freed from all those bandages, including sin, which hinder her from projecting her look towards the infinite. Humanity can always come out of her tombs, because all types of stones can be overturned.

*Therefore, rejoice all of you, who have just come out from this long lockdown and witnessed the long line of camions carrying the dead towards the rite of cremation or heading towards the common graves. No night has ever been so long as not to permit the rising of the sun.*

In Lazarus, we find the narration of our ascent to the light, even from this pandemic. Thus, stopping at that tomb, means bringing the reawakening of Bethany within a Covid-19 ward. Sure, the human eyes have never seen any physical reawakening, but the heart did ... if only a friend has wept with you. *Before it is seen with the eyes, the reawakening is seen with the heart.*

So, in Simon's house, when Mary washes the Master's feet with her tears and perhaps even his head, she stimulates a rite which usually takes place in a sacred place, as she is the one to accomplish it. And she was neither the servant of the temple nor the owner of the house. The evangelist would prophetically say, "the bridegroom's friend" (cf. Jn 3,29).

She carries with her the utterly expensive nard, the precious and rare essence of the high mountain tops. She empties it completely, smashing it in a thousand pieces (cf. Mk 14,3).

Of course, her presence here with a boundless perfume, is her way of celebrating the full and rediscovered life of both her brother and her friend Simon. But she is especially witnessing her love towards *the guest of honour, the Lord of life*. Through her gesture, she is unknowingly anticipating the burial rite and that of the "resurrection".

It is true that the corpses were sprinkled with perfume. But if that perfume is called "nard", namely, "*essence coming from high peaks*" and she isn't present in the antechamber of a tomb, but in a banquet's hall, then it means that the same gesture expresses an entire canticle of love.

Shortly after, another Mary, will also shed tears of love on the feet of her "Rabbunì"<sup>33</sup>, not in a closed house, but in the garden of the "empty tomb". It will be the beginning of a new day!



<sup>33</sup> "My Master!": Jn 20,16 [Rabbunì: is a very familiar term]

Her presence renders the feast more beautiful and assures the success of a remarkable supper. Somehow, like the mother of Jesus at the wedding of Cana.

#### Mary in a "crouched" posture

And then there is Mary who remains silent, precisely as she did the first time at her sister's house (cf. Jn 12,3). Here too, she sits down at the Master's feet. Not in a listening position – *with her ear distended towards the mouth not to miss even one syllable* – but "crouched" according to Luke (cf. Lk 7,38). Bent and squatted, in the act of washing with her tears the feet of the guest of honour; and to anoint them later with perfume and to kiss them repeatedly. An unusual rite indeed!

In the experience of Israel, the ablution of the hands and also of the feet and head, was a sacred rite. God had ordered it to Moses, when they were still nomads in the desert (cf. Ex 30,17-21). And Moses turned it into a *universal norm*, and he handed it over to his people, as "an eternal law" (Ex 40,30-32).

But that of Moses was a preparatory act to a rite. The context demanded it: how can one approach the Lord's tent with dirty feet? How can one approach the holy Scriptures with impure hands?

In the post-desert era, when Israel, from nomad had become sedentary, and the liturgy from celebration in the tent became a rite inside the temple, the ablutions became gradually a burden of meaningless norms and empty prescriptions (cf. for example, Mk 7,1-6), unbearable loads for the people (Lk 11,46; Mt 23,25).

Even the Romans carried out the ablutions, as a sign of respect and hospitality towards the invited person, before a lavished meal: but it was always a servant who washes the guest's feet.

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#### Rising again to live

The Word of God always urges us to revise our types of opinions, and very often it reverses them. Especially because the Word isn't an abstract formula of thought, but it's divine blood flowing within human veins. It's a constant presence in the history of that God who is full of emotions and love.

A God whose human face is marked with tears and is not ashamed to make it visible to you. A God who loves you and saves you, now, here, every day. *A God who never leaves you alone, not even when a lethal virus has crossed your destiny.*

And therefore the Master, on that road, isn't relating to you that if you want to rise again, you must die before. *You live In this world, and you will rise again in the other.* Said in that way, it would be an abstract truth, distant from God's heart. He is telling you that, whatever situation you are going through, that same situation is the place of your resurrection.

Therefore, even in this pandemic, God has a breath of resurrection to share with us, a word of life to tell us. Even a virus can put us to the test, but it cannot extinguish us our interior life.

#### I am the resurrection and the life

On the road of Bethany, Jesus wanted to reveal his true name to Martha, his identity: *"I am ... that is, my name is resurrection and life."* *We know how in the Bible*, the name isn't something temporary, passing or ambiguous. The name is the person.

Jesus is the resurrection and the life! His announcement overflows from that road and from that tomb and reaches all the tombs of every place, of all the planets and galaxies; briefly, of the whole

cosmos! *It touches every fibre that traverses it: from man's heart up to the last branch of creation.*

With those words, Jesus is narrating himself to a friend. He isn't speaking to a doctor of the law, who perhaps would like to put him to the test (cf. Lk 10,25a), but to Martha. He hasn't in front of him the philosopher, but precisely, the friend. The woman who had once welcomed him in her house and scolded her for being a workaholic: "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things ...*" (Lk 10,41). The woman who now goes to meet him while she scolds him for being late: "*Lord, if you had been here ...*" (Jn 11,21). Martha is the only woman who, having been scolded, can scold Jesus.

#### The sky of friendship is always bluer

Friends are always spontaneous, direct; they don't treat each other with etiquette. They know how to look at each other's eyes with sincerity. Friendship means speaking always truthfully, welcoming each other faithfully and loving each other freely. The friend never disappears from your life and from your secrets even when he goes away. You find him always on the path of your sorrow.

The friend is a small atom of infinity, who sticks to you and makes you feel that friendship isn't a circle but a horizon. There are no clouds which cut through the sky, which sooner or later disappear. The sky is always bluer when friends encounter each other and their tears mix up together.

*And if then, your friend is God!* It is therefore the right moment to pass from the anxiety of what you would like to do for him, to the wonder of what He does for you.

Jews and some of his colleagues Pharisees. And why not, a few old quarantine companions: ex-lepers, like him. *And then there are some women!*

#### Martha, "the maitresse"

Martha stands out among all, who, *on reading John properly*, cannot go unnoticed and she is perhaps one among those carrying the water jars or the wine pitchers.

Martha is daring, "*she makes her way through*" (cf. Lk 10,40): she doesn't wait for the events passively.

And there she is now "*the one who serves*" (cf. Jn 12,2). Absolutely not an ambiguous expression in John's vocabulary. *The one who serves*, is the one who leads, decides and supervises.

The "servant" is the friend to whom I can entrust blindly what I cherish, because I know that he will accomplish whatever I entrusted to him. There is between us a harmony of vision and especially an understanding of the heart. *I will no longer call you servants but friends: that is, my intimate-ones, close to me, my collaborators, co-responsible with me. People whom I trust, because I love you and you love me.*

So Martha, is a sort of "sister servant", to put it in our language. Authoritative and "servidora", would say our Latin-American sisters. The one who at that supper organises the table, supervises the meal and guides the servants. She reassures everybody. She is *la maitresse de maison* (house mistress).

One has already intuited that Martha was a good cook, on the occasion when Jesus stopped in her house! And if she is there now, the reason is that most probably the village people knew it too.



In Bethany as in every other place, life is intensified after the days of infection, disease, death and solitude. There are feelings of joy when the danger is survived.

We are seeing it for ourselves in these days, when our societies, one after the other, are progressively but timidly proclaiming the end of the lockdown.

On everyone's face prevails the satisfaction of rediscovering life and movement, relationships and dreams, even though deep down remains perhaps the fear of the "big return".

Those of us who love 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian literature, must read the splendid poem of Giacomo Leopardi: "*Stillness after the storm*". The main actor is the small village with its life and the serenity which they rediscovered when the devastating and unexpected rainstorm was over. A click on internet would open pages and pages of comments, paraphrases and analyses. And even pages of similarities with our recent experience.

And even if the Song of the melancholic poet overflows with "cosmic pessimism", in the lyricism of his high verses, prevails more the harmony of the rainbow in the sky than the far and ominous "patches" of other more devastating hurricanes.

#### The village ... The friends ... The banquet

So Bethany, without friends and without banquets, wouldn't have been the village with which we are acquainted through the Gospels; because Bethany implies friendship, hospitality, welcoming.

The roads abound with feasts, faces and friends. Let alone the house of Simon. Old friends. New friends. There is Jesus, the guest of honour. There is Lazarus, the "resurged". Surely, there are some

That time, when she welcomed him in her house, Martha wanted to do many things for her friend-Jesus. Instead, on that road, he can do only one thing for her: lead her to resurrection! Still before her brother.

Martha, Martha, I am the reason of your daily learning to resurge in order to start living. *Do you believe this?*

I am the only one who can witness that you are capable to come out of the dark caves of your worries. *Do you believe this?*

The only one who can overturn your inner anxiety, the stone which is imprisoning your heart. *Do you believe this?*

The only one who can set you free from the bandages of your stress, which hinders you from coming out of that cliché – over-active – which you have assumed. *Do you believe this?*

*Martha, Martha, I am your resurrection, so that you might live! Do you believe this ?"*



#### Believing is loving

And if on the road of Bethany, Jesus had pronounced the most beautiful word of the whole Bible<sup>16</sup>, on that same road Martha pronounces the most beautiful answer of the whole Bible: "*I believe in you, Lord.*"<sup>17</sup> The verb "to believe", doesn't only express a profession of faith, but also a declaration of love <sup>18</sup> : *Yes, oh Lord, I believe in you, because I love you. And I love you because I believe in you.*

What did Martha see on that road to make such a committing declaration? Simply a friend, who, through the tears, repeats to her

<sup>16</sup> "*I am the resurrection and the life*"

<sup>17</sup> Jn 11,27 [«yes, oh Lord, I believe that you are Christ, the Son of God who must come in the world.»]

<sup>18</sup> It's the vocabulary of the evangelist John

some words of life. *I am the resurrection of your life. Stirring what is human in you.*

### Love changes you

The first resurrection that occurs in her, the friend of the first hour, is the gift in the person of Christ, who has taken possession of her heart. God loves with deeply human signs.

This doesn't mean that Martha is becoming another person. She is always the same one! Her act of faith in the Master whom she loves, leans entirely on that scolding which is familiar to us: *"If you had been here ... And instead you were not here. My brother died and he now smells bad, down in that tomb"*.

Quite impulsive, as usual. Spontaneous, without restrictions. Briefly, our known Martha; the one who wasn't scolded by Jesus for her attitude to service, but for her stress. On that day, He had contested her impulsiveness and not her generous heart.

But we know that in life one doesn't lose the common thread of his character. But the heart changes, when you are called by love. Consequently, everything changes. The same things happens to her sister Mary: *"The Master is here and he asks for you"*<sup>19</sup>, whispers to her Martha (Jn11,28). And the heart's voice prevails over suffering. Mary rises up "quickly" from her home's confinement and goes out to meet the Master (v. 29). *When love calls ...*

The "best part" is always the listening ear, even if the context changes. Yesterday the house. Today the road.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. This booklet, p. 56

enough for the periphery to be on the border of the big city<sup>32</sup>, to feel safe, immune and protected.

They are the human relationships who give life to the place. And therefore I don't believe that the imagination would go so far from reality, if only we imagine Bethany without Simon, without Lazarus, without Martha, without Mary ... without Jesus.

Who knows how much the village felt impoverished when Simon, contracted leprosy and was obliged by the law to stay in quarantine. Considering his social status, everyone noticed his absence.

Who knows how sad the friends felt when Lazarus fell ill and then passed away. We understand it from the collective crying due to his disappearance (cf. Jn 11,33).

Who knows how much the inhabitants felt deserted and abandoned when Jesus left to go far away from Judea (cf. Jn 11,6-7). The people were used to see him often in the village. Each time he returned there, it was a feast; but how sad it was when he left again!

And finally, who knows how much Martha and Mary were missed by the friends, when due to their brother's passing, they withdrew within their sorrow and closed themselves up at home. Even the Jews - *John highlights* - felt the duty to knock at their door to console them (cf. Jn 11,19).

Bethany is the code of our societies. Do you think that there wasn't a total change when Simon came back? With the resurrection of Lazarus? Do you pretend that Martha and Mary didn't start going out again along the paths and alleys, after the resurrection of their brother?

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<sup>32</sup> *"Bethany was less than two miles away from Jerusalem"* (Jn 11,18).

pure and rare nard (cf. Mk 14,3). A fragrance that wraps and inebriates everything: the table, the rooms and perhaps even the garden. A perfume that fills the house (cf. Jn 12,3c) and even the friends! Not only their bodies but even their hearts.

The tomb and the leprosy are henceforth only a memory. *Lazarus is there near Simon*. Both of them wrapped up in that fragrance.

And with them there is almost the whole village. We know that when the feast starts, the room becomes crowded and there is noise at table. The banquet always symbolizes joy; it's a sign of friendship and the visual demonstration of positive relationships.

This was true in the past and is still true today. We have affirmed it during these months of lockdown! How difficult it was not to be able to invite a friend to our table or to accept an invitation!

That slogan "*everything will be fine*", whose echo, especially during the first days of total confinement, increased from one building to the other, from one zone to the other, and thanks to the social media, even from one continent to the other, has been sort of a "code" that demonstrates to what extent our societies have missed the relationships, even during this difficult experience".

#### Bethany under lockdown?

Bethany is not an exception. It would be enough to imagine it confined, closed down and without human relationships in order to quench its natural inclination to celebrations.

We must not forget that the presence of lepers in a village, declared its estrangement if few persons were involved, and the total lockdown of the entire village if the numbers were bigger.

Therefore it wasn't enough for the village to be on the road in order to have an open, lively and an active community. It wasn't

#### The power of love

Faith is rooted in weakness and not in strength. This applies even more to love. A God who cries will bring out Lazarus from the tomb and not a God who shows off his muscles. Because God isn't as powerful as those doctors and nurses who in the long Covid wards have almost worked miracles to save as many people as possible from the lethal virus.

God is only powerful in love, because he can do only what love can do. Therefore ...

#### "Lazarus, come out" (Jn 11,43)

It's the cry that resounds to the warnings of history and which the echo of faith carries from one tomb to another, from one existence to another, from one generation to another ... down to us and even beyond us.

Jesus trusts Lazarus. He is his friend! How can he still imagine him a prisoner of death? He knows that he will obey his word, as one day even the sea and the wind obeyed him?<sup>20</sup>.

And Lazarus is already out! *Henceforth, he has in front of him a world full of great hopes : Someone loves him and this Someone is stronger than death.*

#### The "fraction" of Lazarus present in us

Each one of us carries within her a fraction of Lazarus; a "fraction" of his experience. Perhaps she needs somebody to remove those blocking stones. I am referring to the guilt feelings, to the inability to forgive ourselves and the others; to the effort to remove at least the memory of the harm received. But if only one stone is moved, a ray of sunshine has already entered through that fissure.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Mt 8,27; Mk 4,41; Lk 8,25

Sometimes you too need someone who tells you the truth : *Come out!* Set yourself free from the regrets and disappointments, from thinking always about yourself, from putting yourself at the centre of the universe, as if everything oppresses you or everything depends on you.

Sometimes you too need someone who tells us: *Come out and enjoy the sun and the spring* of your consecrated life, of which you have perhaps lost the fragrance of its perfume and the relish of its beauty. Come out from the mess of your heart, within which you are perhaps withdrawn to end up living as a caterpillar, when outside yourself, you would live as a butterfly. Go out towards the road, to the world, to the others, to the poor. Run! One can run even at the age of hundred. And perhaps even fly.

#### The first sun of a new day

The bandages which we thought were wrapping up the dead man, have in reality liberated a “newly born child”. Lazarus is born to a new light, to a new life. A new life starts for him.

He will surely die for the second time. But his experience will narrate to the centuries that, thanks to the Son of God who remained in our midst, “*the shutters of death are henceforth wide open on life definitively*”. The huge door of death has overturned its hinges.

On that tomb appeared the first day of a new world, even though, whether we like it or not, our daily realities oblige us to struggle continuously with the concrete experience of death.

The issue of death is the mystery that every man and every woman carry within themselves, and that in every epoch and in every

whom Jesus had healed, *perhaps while he was heading to Bethany*. And the attention falls in particular on that only leper who returned to thank him. Was he Simon? The Gospel doesn't tell us. Luke, on the contrary, even speaks of a Samaritan man. I like to imagine that it's him.

Even if that's not the case, however something shocking must have happened in his life, since now he is there to celebrate and the Master is the most welcome guest.

We know that the Master went around those districts and villages “*doing good and healing*” (cf. Acts10,38), if not physically, surely spiritually. And the numerous “healed people” joined his group.

Was Simon also among the healed people? Deep down, if today he is the one to welcome Jesus in his house, most probably the reason is because yesterday it was Jesus who welcomed him among his friends.

The *double-outdistanced*, is now *the one who has received a double-healing* - his skin and his spirit. Healed and saved. Ermes Ronchi would say: “*When one is healed the wounds close, a young skin re-emerges. In salvation one finds afresh the source, who is God. You enter in him and he enters in you. And so, your entire life blooms again!*”<sup>31</sup>.

#### Come to the feast!

And therefore, that banquet can only be the answer to hastening love. *Friends, come immediately to the feast*”.

The “*leper- Pharisee*”, the *pure-impure*, hastens to welcome in his house the friend Jesus and permits a woman (was she his friend too?) to pour on his feet, and perhaps even on his head, all the essence of a whole “small bottle”. An alabaster jar, full of utterly

<sup>31</sup> E. Ronchi, “*Jesus hastens to heal man*”, in *Avvenire*, 6 October 2016

### A double outdistance

Therefore, Simon of Bethany had two reasons why he couldn't be touched, and therefore his social distancing had to be doubled: as a Pharisee and therefore impure; and because of his leprosy, and therefore impure.

And it's precisely him, *the double-untouchable*, whom Jesus approached. He sat down willingly at his table. Perhaps he even shared his same plate. As it happens among friends.

In fact, if the doors and windows of his house were open, if the friends could be welcomed, it meant that Simon had finished his quarantine. Initially, the leprosy condemned the individual to perpetual social exclusion; but he was fully healed and re-established. The law had readmitted him to civil life and to social relationships. Yesterday, it was the law. Today, it's the swab test! That same law which, without a certified healing, would have never permitted the opening of his house or welcoming friends, let alone the celebration of banquets.

### Love cannot wait

But once you are healed and forgiven by the law, you can then celebrate. *Love cannot wait*. Friendship too!

In Simon's house – *a Pharisee for some people and a leper for others* – there is a big banquet. A feast flooded with an utterly precious, expensive and strong perfume. *Simon returned to life and to the village!*

And Jesus is the guest of honour. Is it simply because he is the Master? Or even because he is the author of that healing? The thought flies to those ten lepers <sup>30</sup>, *“encountered from a distance”*,

<sup>30</sup> cf. Lk 17,12-19 (in particular, v.12b)

culture, it stimulates different insights and likewise determines attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles.

There are moments in history where the experience of death seems to prevail more than the experience of life. Let's think of the big famines, world wars, natural disasters and unfortunately today of environmental disorders and pandemics.

Yet, *on that tomb* appeared the first sun of the new day. The first day of the new world. *A small flash of light rose from Bethany. From Lazarus, a tiny seed of life.*

Often in the history of speculation, we have heard the affirmation : *“woe to those who are born”*<sup>21</sup> or still more sadly that *“all the mothers of the world give birth over a tomb »*<sup>22</sup> , meaning that the scope of birth is only death. Nobody can avoid death.

On other occasions, almost to balance these extreme positions, some have maintained that *“All of us are born incomplete and we need the rest of our life to be born completely ”*<sup>23</sup>. It's a desire to intensify life, removing entirely the experience of death.

### You are “hope”

In between we find the realism of *“Christian hope”*, which is neither a theory nor an announcement, but a narration. *Face to face* with the daily experiences of suffering and death, we aren't among those who defend a philosophy of life or death. And not even among those who precisely on behalf of the same Christian hope, pretend to be bearers of *“consoling words”*: *“Courage, Martha. Keep strong! One day Lazarus will rise up”* ... And then we continue to live as if the others' sorrow doesn't concern us.

<sup>21</sup> Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837): Italian poet

<sup>22</sup> Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956): A German playwright

<sup>23</sup> María Zambrano (1904-1991): Philosopher and Spanish critic

Christian hope isn't a promise, but a presence. It isn't an expectation, but a mission. It isn't a philosophy, but a person. It's the God of life who passes, consoles, forgives and loves, here and now, through you. You are "his hands", "his feet", "his mouth", "his tears" ... *You are hope, because you are proximity! You are hope because you are compassion. You are hope because you are consolation. You are hope because you are love.*

*Christian hope is Jesus who passes along, healing and doing good, here and now ... as he did yesterday there, in Palestine. Walking on my feet and on yours. Relying on my heart and on yours!*

*Christian hope isn't a theory, but a responsibility and a journey: "He sent them two by two" (cfr. Lk 10,1), to proclaim hope to the world, "healing and doing good" like him.*

#### God "loves you" in a tear

"God loves you" in every tear of the world. And you are that tear. It counts more to endorse the sorrow of the other than a thousand empty catecheses on sorrow.

When man really encounters God in his life, then his life changes. And if this encounter takes place on the path of sorrow, where somebody weeps with you, then those tears are simply God's "love for you" written in the blue sky of your existence. Because if it's true that death continues to defeat life, it's likewise true that love always defeats death.

The opposite of death in the Gospel isn't life, but love. They are those tears, on that road, which reveal the power of God's heart and consequently, the power of the human heart.

Even today, in this umpteenth human experience of deaths, transmissions and social distancing, which oblige us to reflect on how to live concretely the commandment of proximity and the

#### Outdistanced by law

If he was truly a leper, his skin must have been marked with the terrible disease. Even after being healed, a leper was considered a sinner, hence, "outdistanced". It doesn't matter if the presumed sin was committed by him or by his father or even by one of his ancestors. For the fact that he suffered from leprosy, he was always a sinner, and therefore impure.

And although the eventual healing certified by the priests had admitted him anew to social life, to go to the temple and to be present in the synagogue, he always remained "infected". Those missing bodily limbs or even only the small or big scars were his indelible "identity card", which testified that he was a leper. *"My sin is always before me" (Ps 50,3b).*

Those who passed near him were obliged to respect a marked security distance from him. It was rigidly imposed by the law. A social distancing which meant discrimination, exclusion, apartheid ... and which surely had nothing to do with health precaution. Instead, it's like the one required from us today; but not to protect ourselves from the other; but to protect him from us. I would say, that in spite of everything, our current Covid-19 treats us more gently than the past leprosy bacterium.

Therefore, woe betide if you go near a leper or even an ex-leper. You could neither approach him nor touch him, because the rumour said that if you don't necessarily become infected physically you will surely become so spiritually.

And therefore, in his own way, even a leper (or ex-leper) was untouchable like the Pharisee. But for the opposite reason! If the pure-Pharisees didn't approach the others, likewise, the impure-lepers were not approached by the others.

It's really true that the Word of God holds that treasure of resurrection and novelty of life, which always enlightens our existence in every situation.

And now, as we are gradually coming out of this terrible sequence of the many infections and of the confinement where the "invisible killer" has locked us up, Bethany opens up for us, *with its small pathways always exposed to the sun*<sup>28</sup> and with the vitality of the many friends, who ideally come to encounter us. As they once came to encounter Jesus. Therefore, among these friends, there was also Simon, called the leper.

#### Simon: the "pure-impure"

Dealing with a Pharisee, as Luke reminded us, Simon was a member of the category called the "pure". The law considered them as untouchable and just. Almost ironically, Jesus defined them "*the masters of Israel*" (cf. Jn 3,10).

Being unapproachable for their self-proclaimed impeccability, the Pharisees, who by definition were called "*the separated*", never mixed up with the common people. They used to keep a distance when they spoke from the highness of their wisdom. Many times Jesus clashed with some of them<sup>29</sup>. He couldn't stand their lack of sincerity. Even though a few among these, were his friends: Simon, precisely, and even Nicodemus (Cf. Jn 3,11ff).

So, *Simon-the Pharisee*, considered pure due to his social and religious belonging, wasn't perhaps pure in reality, and thus he kept to his nickname "leper", which most probably distinguished him among his compatriots.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Circ-letter n. 85, of 16 December 2019 (in particular p. 2)

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Mt 23,23 ff ; Lk 11,42 ff

sacrament of compassion, Pope Francis comes up to remind us that "*it won't do us any harm to weep a bit as our Lord wept for all of His people*"<sup>24</sup>.

Only a seed of love and proximity has the power to develop a life. Therefore, even during this pandemic, we are challenged by love! And it sends us to revisit our charisms in order to collocate them on the road of Bethany, where Jesus stays beside the two sisters in tears and weeps with them. Reminding us at the same time, that nobody on that road said: "see, how he weeps", but they all said to each other: " See how much he loved him!" Tears are equivalent to love.

Death is opposed by love. And love orders just one word: "*Loose him*" (cf. Jn 11,44). Which means: "*He who loves you, sets you free*"!

#### "Let him go"

And Lazarus goes like a sailing boat. St. Augustine would say: "*God provided him the wind and now he sets up the sails*". His whole life lies in front of him. Scriptures would say : "*A path opens up also, even through the mighty ocean ... a pathway always opens up, even through the waves*"<sup>25</sup>.

Lazarus will always be the faithful disciple alongside the Master: on one occasion sitting with him at the table of friendship, on another, walking behind him on the paths of the Passover. Love is contagious.

It's not mere coincidence that, as the evangelist John points out, "*the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well*" (cf. Jn 12,10). Did they do it? The Gospels say nothing about it.



<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis, Homily in St. Martha, 29 March 2020

<sup>25</sup> Is. 43,16 ... Wis. 14,3

## Second window

②

**«God did not create us for the tomb,  
but for life. Remove that stone! »**

(Pope Francis)<sup>26</sup>

Let's listen also to the invitation addressed by Jesus to those present, there near Lazarus' tomb: Remove that stone!

*Which stones do we need to take away today to unblock ourselves and make space to life which is in us?*

- *I as a person*
- *We, as congregation*
- *Humanity, of whom we are a part*

*Personal reflection ...*

*We can share in community ...*



<sup>26</sup> Angelus, Sunday, 29 March 2020

## 1.2. From the tomb to the table

*In the house of the "infected man"*

*Freely inspired from :*



Mt 26, 6-13; Mk 14, 3-9;

Lk7, 36-47; Jn 12, 1-9



*Bethany of the corona virus* reminds us of another friend of Jesus, Simon, called "the Pharisee" by Luke and "the leper" by Matthew and Mark <sup>27</sup>.

The fact that all the four evangelists speak of him, although in a very different way from each other, to the point that today, both the exegetes and experts still hold hot debates, we are urged to think that Simon was truly a leading figure in the village, where Jesus really liked to stop often.

The circular-letter n. 87 of 10<sup>th</sup> March 2020, had guided us to a rapid re-reading of this splendid Gospel page, putting it within the context of those days' experience. We were still at the beginning of the pandemic.

But it's worth turning to it now, while we are coming out of the total lockdown. Even Simon's experience can enlighten our current experience, because he was healed from leprosy and could celebrate after his quarantine; like Lazarus, who from the darkness of the tomb returned to the light and from the tight bandages passed to freedom and life.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Lk 7,36 ... Mt 26,6; Mk 14,3a