



The Holy See

***VIDEO MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PRESENTATION OF THE
COMPLETE WORKS OF DON MILANI AT THE ITALIAN BOOK FAIR****

[Milan, 19-23 April 2017]

“I will never rebel against the Church, because I need forgiveness for my sins several times a week, and I do not know who I would go to in search of it if I left the Church”. Thus wrote Don Lorenzo Milani, prior of Barbiana, on 10 October 1958. I would like to propose this act of abandonment to God’s mercy and to the maternity of the Church as a perspective from which to look at the life, works and priesthood of Don Lorenzo Milani. We have all read the many works of this Tuscan priest who died at the age of just 44 years, and we remember with particular affection his “Letter to a teacher”, written along with pupils from the school of Barbiana, where he was a parish priest. As an educator and a teacher he undoubtedly followed original and perhaps too advanced paths, that were therefore difficult to understand and to welcome immediately. His family education came from non-believing, anti-clerical parents who had accustomed him to an intellectual dialectic and a frankness that could at times appear too rough, when not marked with rebellion. He maintained this characteristic, acquired in the family, even after his conversion in 1943 and in the exercise of his priestly ministry. It is clear that this gave rise to some friction and to some sparks, as well as some misunderstandings with the ecclesiastical and civil structures, due to his educational proposals, his predilection for the poor and the defence of conscientious objection.

History always repeats itself. I would like us to remember him above all as a believer, enamoured of the Church even if flawed, and as a passionate educator with a vision of the school that seems to me to be a response to the needs of the heart and the intelligence of our children and young people. With these words I addressed the world of Italian schools, citing Don Milani: “I love the school because it is a synonym for openness to reality. At least, it should be! But it does not always succeed in being thus, and so that means that it is necessary to change its approach. Going to school means opening the mind and the heart to reality, to the richness of its aspects, of its dimensions. And this is beautiful! In the first years one takes a 360-degree approach to

learning, then gradually one focuses in one direction, and finally one specialises. But if one has learned to learn – and this is the secret, learning how to learn! – then this remains for ever, and he or she remains a person open to reality! This was taught by a great Italian educator who was also a priest: Don Lorenzo Milani”. This is how I addressed Italian education, the Italian school, on 10 May 2014.

His restlessness, however, was not the result of rebellion but of love and tenderness for his children, for what was his flock, for which he suffered and fought, to give them the dignity that was at times denied to them. His was a spiritual restlessness, nurtured by love for Christ, for the Gospel, for the Church, for society and for the school that he always dreamed of as a “field hospital” to tend to the wounded, to recover the marginalized and the discarded. Learning, knowing, speaking frankly to defend one’s own rights were verbs that Don Lorenzo conjugated every day, starting from the reading of the Word of God and the celebration of the sacraments, to the extent that a priest who knew him very well used to say of him that he had “indigestion of Christ”. The Lord was the light of the life of Don Lorenzo, the same that I would like to illuminate our memory of him. The shadow of the cross often loomed over his life, but he always felt he was a participant in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, and of the Church, so that he expressed to his spiritual father the desire that his loved ones “see how a Christian priest dies”. Suffering, the wounds inflicted on him, the cross, never obscured in him the Paschal light of the risen Christ, as he had only one concern: that his children grow with an open mind and with a welcoming heart, full of compassion, ready to stoop to the weak and to assist those in need, as Jesus teaches (cf. Luke 10:29-37), without looking at the colour of their skin, their language, their culture, their religious belief.

I leave the conclusion, like the opening, to Don Lorenzo, with the words he wrote to one of his young people, Pipetta, the young communist who had said to him, “If all priests were like you, then...”. Don Milani answered, “The day we will have broken down together the gate of a park, and installed together the house of the poor in the rich man’s palace, remember Pipetta, do not trust me, that day I will betray you, that day finally I will be able to sing the only cry of victory worthy of a priest of Christ, blessed are the poor because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. That day I will not stay with you, I will return to your rainy and smelly little house to pray for you before my crucified Lord” (Letter to Pipetta, 1950). Let us therefore approach the writings of Don Lorenzo Milani with the affection of one who looks to him as a witness of Christ and of the Gospel, who always sought, in his awareness of being a forgiven sinner, the light and tenderness, the grace and consolation that only Christ gives us and that we can encounter in the Church, our Mother.

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