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Pilgrimage of the Holy Father Francis to the tombs of Don Primo Mazzolari and Don Lorenzo Milani (I)

This morning, the Holy Father Francis departed by helicopter from the Vatican heliport for his pilgrimage to the tombs of Don Primo Mazzolari in Bozzolo (MN) and Don Lorenzo Milani in Barbiana (FI).

Upon arrival, around 9.00, in the Bozzolo sports field, the Pope was welcomed by the bishop of Cremona, H.E. Msgr. Antonio Napolioni, and the mayor, Mr. Giuseppe Torchio. He then transferred by car to the parish of San Pietro, where he was received by the parish priest, Don Gianni Maccalli, and the parish vicar, Don Gabriele Barbieri.

The Holy Father prayed at the tomb of Don Primo Mazzolari. Then, following the greeting from the bishop, he gave a commemorative address.

At the end, in the sacristy, the Pope was shown some memorials to and works by Don Primo, by the President of the Mazzolari Foundation, Don Bruno Bignami, and the president of the Scientific Committee of the Mazzolari Foundation, Professor Giorgio Vecchio.

Then, after greeting some of the faithful, Pope Francis transferred by car to the Bozzolo sports field where, at around 10.30, he departed for Barbiana (FI), for his pilgrimage to the tomb of Don Lorenzo Milani.

The following is the Holy Father's address in remembrance of Don Primo Mazzolari:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

They advised me to shorten this speech a little, because it is a bit long. I tried to do so, but I did not succeed. So many things came to mind, here and there ... But you have patience! Because I do not want to miss all that I want to say about Don Primo Mazzolari.

I am a pilgrim here in Bozzolo and then in Barbiana, following the footsteps of two parish priests who have left a luminous trace, if somewhat “inconvenient”, in their service to the Lord and the people of God. I have said several times that the parish priests are the strength of Church in Italy, and I repeat it. When they are the faces of a non-clerical clergy, like this man, they give life to a true “magisterium of parish priests”, which is good for everyone. Don Primo Mazzolari was called “the parish priest of Italy”; and St. John XXIII greeted him as “the bugle of the Holy Spirit in the lower Po valley”. I believe that the priestly personality of Don Primo is not a singular exception, but a splendid fruit of your communities, although he has not always been understood and appreciated. As Blessed Paul VI said: “He walked ahead with a long stride, and often we could not keep up with him! And so he suffered, and we suffered too. It is the fate of the prophets” (Greeting to pilgrims from Bozzolo and Cicognara, 1 May, 1970). His formation is the offspring of the rich Christian tradition of the Po Valley, Lombardy, Cremona. In the years of his youth he was impressed by the figure of the great bishop Geremia Bonomelli, protagonist of social Catholicism and pioneer of the pastoral care of migrants.

It is not up to me to recount to you or to analyze the work of Don Primo. I thank those who have dedicated themselves to this over the years. I prefer to meditate with you - especially with my priestly brothers who are here and also with those from all over Italy: this was the “parish priest of Italy” - on the timeliness of his message, which I place against the backdrop of three scenes that filled his eyes and heart every day: the river, the farmhouse and the plain.

1) *The river* is a wonderful image, which belongs to my experience, and also to yours. Don Primo exercised his ministry along the rivers, symbols of primacy and the power of the grace of God flowing incessantly toward the world. His word, preached or written, drew clarity of thought and persuasive force at the source of the Word of the living God in the Gospel, meditated and prayed, rediscovered in the Crucified Jesus and in men, celebrated in sacramental gestures never reduced to pure rite. Don Mazzolari, parish priest in Cicognara and Bozzolo, did not shelter himself from the river of life, from the suffering of his people, who shaped him as a pastor who was clever and demanding, especially with himself. Along the river he learned to receive the gift of truth and love every day, to make him a strong and generous bearer. In preaching to the seminarians in Cremona, he affirmed: “Being a ‘repeater’ is our strength. [...] However, between a dead repeater, a loudspeaker, and a live repeater there is a big difference! The priest is a repeater, but his repetition must not be soulless, passive, without cordiality. Along with the truth that I repeat, there must be, I must to put something of my own to show that I believe what I say; it must be done in such a way that the brother hears an invitation to receive the truth” (1). His prophecy was realized in loving his time, in linking himself to the lives of the people he met, in seizing every opportunity to announce God’s mercy. Don Mazzolari was not one who regretted the Church of the past, but tried to change the Church and the world through impassioned love and unconditional dedication. In his work, “The Parish”, he proposes an reflection on the methods of the apostolate, convinced that the shortcomings of the parish in his time was due to a defect of incarnation. There are three roads that do not lead in the direction of the Gospel.

- The way of “letting go”. This is the way of one who stays at the window to look out without getting dirty hands – being a passive observer in life. He is content to criticize, to “describe with bitter and lustful mischief the errors” (2) of the world around. This attitude quietens the conscience, but it has nothing to do with Christianity because it leads us to back out, with a spirit of judgement, sometimes sour. There is a lack of proactive ability, or of constructive approach to problem solving.

- The second erroneous method is that of “separatist activism”. We are committed to creating Catholic institutions (banks, cooperatives, clubs, trade unions, schools ...). So faith becomes more operative, but - Mazzolari warned - it can create an elite Christian community. It favours interests and clientele with a Catholic label. And, inadvertently, barriers are built to the emergence of the question of faith, and risk becoming insurmountable. There is a tendency to affirm what divides rather than what we have in common. It is a method that does not facilitate evangelization, but rather closes doors and creates mistrust.

- The third mistake is the “dehumanizing supernaturalism”. This takes refuge in the religious to circumvent the difficulties and disappointments we encounter. We leave the world, the true field of the apostolate, in favour of devotion. It is the temptation of spiritualism. A limp apostolate is born, without love. “Those who are distant cannot be interested in a prayer that does not become charitable, with a procession that does not help bear the

crosses of the hour". (3) The drama is in this distance between faith and life, between contemplation and action.

2) *The farmhouse*. At Don Primo's time, it was a "family of families" who lived together in this fertile countryside, even suffering miseries and injustices, waiting for a change, which then led to the exodus to the cities. The farmhouse, the house, offer us an idea of the Church that Don Mazzolari led. He too thought of an outgoing Church when he meditated on priests with these words: "To walk, we must go out of the house and of the Church, if the people of God are no longer there; and to take care of and worry about those needs that, while not spiritual, are human needs and, just as they can cause man to be lost, they can also save him. The Christian has detached himself from the man, and our way of talking can not be understood if we do not first introduce him to this road, which seems to lead farthest and is the safest. [...] To do a lot, one has to love a lot". (4) This is what your pastor said. The parish is the place where every man feels he is expected, a "hearth that knows no absences". Don Mazzolari was a pastor who believed that "the destinies of the world mature on the outskirts", and he made his own humanity an instrument of God's mercy, in the manner of the father of the Gospel parable, so well described in the book "The Most Beautiful Adventure". He was rightly called the "pastor of the distant" because he always loved and sought others, and he was careful not to define a theoretical method of the apostolate valid for all and forever, but instead to propose discernment as a way to interpret the spirit of every man. This merciful and evangelical outlook on humanity led him to give value also to the necessary gradual approach: the priest is not one who requires perfection, but who helps each person to give their best. "Let us be content with what our peoples can give. Let us have good sense! We must not overburden the shoulders of the poor people" (5). I would like to repeat this, and repeat it to all the priests of Italy and the world too: Let us have good sense! We must not overburden the shoulders of the poor people. And although, for this openness, he was called to obedience, he lived on his feet, as an adult, as a man, and at the same time on his knees, kissing the hand of his bishop, whom he never ceased to love.

3) The third scenario – the first was the river, the second the farmhouse – the third scenario is that of your *great plain*. Those who have welcomed the Sermon on the Mount are not afraid to cross, as a traveller and witness, the plain that opens out without reassuring boundaries. Jesus prepares His disciples for this, leading them into the crowd, among the poor, revealing that the summit is reached in the plain, where God's mercy is incarnated (cf. *Homily for the Consistory*, 19 November 2016). Don Primo's pastoral charity opened up several horizons in the complex situations he had to face: wars, totalitarianism, fratricidal clashes, the hardship of democracy in gestation, the misery of his people. I encourage you, brothers and priests, to listen to the world, to those who live and work in it, to take on every question of meaning and hope, without fear of passing through deserts and areas of darkness. In this way we can become a poor Church for and with the poor, the Church of Jesus. That of the poor is defined by Don Primo as a "sluggish existence", and the Church needs to convert to recognition of their life to love them as they are: "The poor want to be loved as poor people, that is, without calculating their poverty, without pretence or right to debt, not even making them citizens of the kingdom of heaven, much less proselytizers" (6). He did not proselytize because this is not Christian. Pope Benedict XVI told us that the Church, Christianity, does not grow by proselytism, but by attraction, that is, by testimony. That's what Don Primo Mazzolari did: he bore witness. The Servant of God lived in poverty but was not a "poor priest". In his spiritual testament he wrote: "Around my altar, and around my house and my work there was never the sound of money making. The little that entered my hands [...] went where it was supposed to go. If I were to have any regret on this issue, it would concern my poor and parish works that I could have helped a great deal". He had meditated deeply on the difference of style between God and man: "The style of man: with a lot, he does little. God's style: with nothing, He does all" (7). For this reason, the credibility of the proclamation passes through the simplicity and poverty of the Church: "If we want to bring the poor people back to their home, the poor need to find the air of the Poor man", that is, of Jesus Christ. In his book "The *Via Crucis* of the Poor", Fr. Primo recalls that charity is a matter of spirituality and of gaze. "Those who have little charity sees few poor; those who have much charity see many poor; those who have no charity see no one" (8). And he adds: "He who knows the poor, knows his brother: whoever sees the brother sees Christ, who sees Christ sees life and its true poetry, because charity is the poem of heaven brought to earth" (9).

Dear friends, I thank you for welcoming me today, in the parish of Don Primo. To you and to the bishops I say: be proud of having made "such priests", and do not be tired of becoming "such priests and Christians" too, even though this calls for struggle with oneself, calling by name the temptations that deceive us, letting ourselves be healed by God's tenderness. If you should acknowledge that you have not gathered Don Mazzolari's lesson, I

invite you today to cherish it. The Lord, who has always inspired in the Holy Mother Church shepherds and prophets following His heart, help us today not to ignore them yet. Because they have seen far, and following them will save us from suffering and humiliation. Many times I have said that the shepherd must be able to stand in front of the people to show the way in their midst as a sign of closeness or behind them to encourage those who fall behind (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 31). And Don Primo wrote: "Where I see the people slip towards dangerous slopes, I put myself behind; where it is necessary to climb, I attack in front. Many do not understand that it is the same charity that moves in one case or the other, and that nobody can do it better than a priest" (10).

With this spirit of fraternal communion, with you and all the priests of the Church in Italy – with those good parish priests – I would like to conclude with a prayer by Don Primo, a pastor who loved Jesus and His desire for all men to be saved. Don Primo prayed thus:

"You came for everyone:

For those who believe

And for those who say they do not believe.

All of them,

Sometimes these more than those,

They work, they suffer, they hope

For the world to go a little better.

O Christ, You were born "outside the house"

And You died "out of the city",

To be in an even more visible way

The crossroads and the meeting point.

No-one is excluded from salvation, O Lord,

Because no-one is excluded from Your love,

Which does not offend or recoil

From our oppositions or our denials".

Now, I will give you my blessing. Let us pray to Our Lady, first, Who is our Mother: without our Mother we can not go ahead.

[*Hail Mary*]

1 P. Mazzolari, *Prete così*, 125-126.

2 Id., *Lettera sulla parrocchia*, 51.

3 *Ibid.*, 54.

4 P. Mazzolari, *Coscienza sociale del clero*, ICAS, Milano, 1947, 32.

5 Id., *Preti così*, 118-119.

6 Id., *La via crucis del povero*, 63.

7 Id., *La parrocchia*, 84.

8 Id., *La via crucis del povero*, 32.

9 *Ibid.* 33.

10 Id., *Scritti politici*, 195.
