



**MESSAGE OF THE ARCHBISHOP OF LUCCA  
AND THE RECTOR GENERAL OF OMD**

**ON OCCASION OF THE FOURTH CENTENARY OF  
THE TRANSIT OF SAINT JOHN LEONARDI**

**Lucca, Saint Mary of Rose, 1st September 2008**



## **FROM REMEMBRANCE TO COMMITMENT DURING THE FOURTH CENTENARY OF THE TRANSIT OF ST. JOHN LEONARDI**

### **It's time for Jubilation!**

Dear brothers and sisters, the Jubilee Year that the Church has given us on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the transit of St. John Leonardi, a priest from Lucca, founder of the Clerics Regular of the Mother of God, co-founder of Urban College of Propagation of Faith and Patron of pharmacists has to motivate us to lead the Church that is in Lucca and the whole Leonardine family through this message of a joyful proclamation of an event of grace that present again and in a very special manner, an occasion for a renewed commitment from us. The beginning of this unique year of grace, indulgence, pilgrimage and jubilee that will be held in Lucca on 4th and 5th October 2008, and finally will be concluded in Rome on 9th October 2009. Throughout this jubilee year in many other communities, both in Italy and abroad, will rejoice for this gift, while many initiatives such as pastoral, cultural and social, will help us know more about this giant of holiness ..

We know that in the life of the Church anniversaries are not just a family album to flip through with nostalgia, but lively moments where the original grace of the paschal presence of Christ through his saints still reaches us, consoles us and encourage us. When, four hundred years after his death, the departure of a man is remembered and celebrated means that he has left an indelible mark that is strong and profound. To such an extent he re-embraces his life if they could understand the choices he made, things lived and find the sense. The Church of Lucca, blessed by the gift of holiness of John Leonardi that obtains the grace that sanctifies and consecrates for mission and the Order of Clerics Regular of the Mother of God that preserves the charismatic gift and imitates the apostolic zeal, are in celebrations and wish that let this anniversary be a new visit by God, just as it was exactly four centuries ago when God visited us through the inspired and renovating life of John Leonardi that culminated in his Christian transit on 9th October 1609.

### **We are in need of Saints**

A saint is a true man. A true man so much adheres to God and thus the ideal for which his heart has been constituted and that which constitutes his destiny. Today more than ever before we need to rediscover the true humanity that is in us, to rekindle the thirst for truth, beauty and meaning that demands the heart but hard to find in the desert a world that has lost traces of God and therefore he no more understands where his own steps are leading him.

We believe that the Saints make a return of God among men. "We need men who keep their gaze straight to God, learning from there the true humanity. We need men whose intellect is illuminated by the light of God and in whom God opens the heart, so that their intellect can speak to the intellect of others and their hearts can open the hearts of others. Only through men who are touched by God, God can come back among men" (Card. J. Ratzinger, Subiaco on April 1st 2005)

The history of salvation teaches us that men dear to God, have never stopped narrating his love for us. And for this reason that the holiness of John Leonardi, a gift of the Spirit to the Church, belongs to everyone. His is the story of an encounter in which God, speaking to his heart, has conquered him for the sake of the kingdom and has placed him in the Church as a light to enlighten all those who wish to undergo a serious process of "permanent reform" of personal as well as Communitarian. His traces can be found among his spiritual children, but also in local and universal

church that he has loved with passion. Passion that is the strength, an ability to kindle and to determine energies, to put them in circuit for the renewal of faith. It is enlightening to read his life from the perspective of passionate intelligence. His charisma is a design of fire made on the evangelical "texture".

He dreamed of a Church that was a narrative by the strength of the Pentecost. He has generated forces for a mission capable of breaking down the barriers of all oppressive enclosures, obsessive jealousy, blindfolded fears, to live in the breeze of Pentecost!

Today, when we hear more than ever the need of holiness as a true pastoral strategy, when we warn with urgency that the proclamation of the Gospel needs to be done first in flesh and blood in the lives of those who receive him to become a fascinating and credible event for the life of the world, we want our gaze towards a human and Christian adventure of St. John Leonardi to rediscover the authentic language of fidelity to Christ, the Church and the man who characterized it in a profound way. At the heart of the celebration we naturally place his memory. He, John Leonardi, will be present in a special way during this year in our minds and hearts. The celebration of the fourth centenary of the transit urges us to turn our gaze on him, to contemplate his life, to discover the nucleus that have formed his spiritual and apostolic intensity.

### **A glance on his life**

An ancient Christian text of the first century, the Didakè or Doctrine of the 12 Apostles says: "Look upon the face of the Saints and from them derive inspiration". The glance on life is always the most practical lessons. The same Word of God is open to a new intelligence when it is interpreted by a biography that has been sought to be flesh and blood of that same Word. The truth of faith becomes enlightening, when they cease to be abstract concepts or moralist proclaims, and reveal, however, the wonder that comes from an encounter with a person, with an event that gives life a new horizon. The gaze on the life of Saint John Leonardi becomes fascinating because, as has been written about him by a great archbishop of Lucca, Bishop Giuliano Agresti, "he was an evangelical man, strong, humble and poor, whose Christian and priestly ability carry along with him the serious sufferings of the prophets and the crucifixion of the true servants of the Gospel. Very soon he has learned a fundamental maxim that, that is, "the way to serve God" needs to "suffer many afflictions" (cf. Letter of 3rd January, 1604) and therefore knew how to live heroically his "agony" in "obedience to the faith", to revive the lived Gospel, to indicate a new path of holiness, particularly the missions entrusted by the Holy See to restore identities of many historic institutions of the Church and to help the newborn". It is necessary to retrace in going through his life. The life of John Leonardi, like that of us or any other person, is made up of events, meetings and concrete experiences. Get into them means finding the dynamics of Christian event that is always a meeting with a person, that of Christ, who leads our steps to unknown paths.

St. John Leonardi was born in Diecimo (Lucca) in 1541. He was the last of seven children of James Leonardi and Joanna Lippi. In the bosom of his Christian family and the shadow of the huge belfry that is still on the houses of diecimites, he grew and was strengthened by the faith generated in him to the baptismal font and the Eucharistic table of the splendid Romanesque church. At twelve years his parents sent him to Villa Basilica, to an uncle priest. So John Leonardi spent his adolescence between the service of the parish church and the humanistic studies. His arrival in Lucca in 1558 was decisive. He went there for work. His father wanted him in a shop of spices run by a known pharmacist of the city: Antonio Paris. Here John learns to bend over the evil of mankind and the Church of his time. He strongly feels the cry of pain of both and, makes the diagnosis, understands that it is not enough only the scientific knowledge, but also the necessary technical skills. In

sharing the faith with the group of “Colombines”, a lay movement that was in Lucca, under the leadership of the Dominicans of Saint Romano brings forth a genuine Catholic reform and a path of serious formation that places the Word of God and the sacraments of the Church at the centre, has by now matured within themselves the deepest convictions like: It is Christ, the crucified and risen, the gift of his person communicated to the Church and the world, the medicine which we need more.

It is necessary to start again from Christ. The primacy of Christ, is made as the measure of all things and becomes the criterion of judgement and action, as often repeats and above all lives, is the generating principle of a vitality that seemed almost lost also in the eyes of those who, while regretting the evils of the time not able to find the courage of a appropriate therapy. John Leonardi start again from Christ who lives and is present in the sacramentality of the Church. The choice to become a priest matures and is realized on this way. The evangelical fruitfulness of his decision is immediately reflected in the pastoral intelligence that flows from his work: he is a creative catechist and convincing witness of the truth that he transmits; a builder of peace between groups in struggle, a zealous priest who knows how to combine contemplation and action, a reference point for young people who only expected to be able to experience a Christianity that was an event in their history and not an utopia. They began to follow him.

And like this, in the small upper room of the Church of Saint Mary of Rose, on 1st September 1574 was born the first nucleus of what in time will be the Order of Clerics Regular of Mother of God. Their lifestyle, texture of obedience to Christ and the Church, modulated by poverty and translated into experience creates mistrust and suspicion from the then Republic of Lucca. Their choice of reform in the wake of the Council of Trent is not understood as genuine, but was seen with the lens of political prejudices, erred measures to those who fear radical commitments or pretends to preserve the status quo. It is within painful disagreements experienced that Leonardi learns to look at Christ crucified and risen. The "Holy Face" kept and revered in the Cathedral Church of Lucca is an eloquent symbol and synthesis of unquestioned faith that encourages him. It is there that he formed his Christocentric ideal: "Have Christ before all things" (Letter dated 25th May 1592), which has as a "corollary" interior emptiness: "it is essential that in these things we must strip off our own interests and concern only the service of God "(ibid., 27th July 1601).

His expulsion from Lucca, a city that he always loved and that he paid back with a deluge of holiness, could seem like a defeat, but it was the way in which the Spirit transplanted the good and made it also to grow elsewhere the good plant! It is in Rome, whereby now the works of John Leonardi acquires a universal extension. Supported by the friendship of extraordinary protagonists of Catholic renewal that was followed by the Council of Trent, the first among all was Philip Neri, but also the venerable Cardinal Cesar Baronio, Saint Joseph Calasanz and others, let out a great passion for Christ and the Church evangelically fruitful. Estimated by the Popes, who appreciated his virtues, he received their delicate assignments whose success can be explained only through the prophecy of the Spirit that blows over our dead bones and resuscitate them. Whole diocesan and monastic community due to his action, were able to rediscover the Gospel and the seed of reform of life. The geography of the breath of the Spirit leads him to the shrine of Our Lady of Arch (Naples), among the Benedictines of Montevergine, to Aversa, Vallombrosa, Montesenario, and in Siena. Wherever he appeared with the same characteristics which then he would write to Pope Paul V, when in 1605 he would direct his proposal, verified by experience, for the reform of the Church: "Those who want to undertake the reform of the habits of men let them present to the glances of how many of them want to reform themselves as mirrors of every virtue and lamps placed on the candle stand. "

The mission becomes an inevitable litmus test to the authenticity of their faith. This is how the mission is documented step by step in each stage in the life of Saint John Leonardi. The secret of his mission is simple and enclosed in the affirmation handed over to Pope Paul V in 1608: "Do not seek

ones own interests but those of Jesus Christ." It is when missionaries are capable of transforming every gesture, every effort, every crumb of time and energy for the sole and supreme interest: Christ and the coming of his kingdom. Towards the end of his existence this missionary spirit that, if he had not found clear indications of obedience, would have been pushed beyond the boundaries of Italy, he had way to materialise it in a brave and modern project that was developed together with Msgr. G. B. Vives and the Jesuit Martín de Funes: to form, in Rome, men "to the Apostolate", coming from the same places and areas to which then they must be sent. It was the birth of the future Urban College of Propagation of Faith which has formed thousands of missionaries, many of them are martyrs, who have carried to the ends of the earth, the name and the person of Christ the Saviour.

It would not be complete our quick glance on the life of Saint John Leonardi, if we could not find a glorious synthesis in the face of one who, more than any other creature, contains the meaning and destiny of man and the Church: the Virgin Mary. John Leonardi includes immediately, attracted mainly by the mystery of the assumption of Mary, venerated in Diecimo at Villa Basilica, in Santa Maria Corteorlandini, that the Virgin is the seal of guarantee for all the work of Christ. Receiving her is the assurance of not mistaking the way, not upsetting the method laid down by God for our salvation, not loosing the way of hope, to which She is a sure sign and deposit for the whole Church. With the guidance of Mary, who is elected as the patroness of his Order and whose name became the program for all, he found the teacher, the sister, the mother for their journey of discipleship, constantly experiencing her protection.

John Leonardi died in Rome at night between 8th and 9th October, 1609. He died while he was at the top of his service and loyalty to what he has been moved by the sweet Valley of Serchio: the search for His Face, the Face of the faces, in whose likeness we are continually as pilgrims. He was beatified by Blessed Pius IX on 10th November, 1861 and proclaimed as saint on the day of Easter on 17th April, 1938 by Pope Pius XI. On 8th August 2006 Pope Benedict XVI has proclaimed as the Patron saint of pharmacists.

### **Heirs of charism in a new reality**

The world of St. John Leonardi is certainly changed. We are invited to re-read his life searching into it what is everlasting and inspiring to live today with that spiritual intensity and the missionary dynamism with which he lived. Certainly it is above all the primacy of Christ that is everlasting. In cultural and social transformation in which evolve the existence of our Saint, begin to be outlined those requirements which are then merged into modernity and which has among its most damaging developments like marginalisation of God, the illusion of an autonomy of man who tends to live "as if God does not exist." The crisis of modern thinking is not other than the result of the split between faith and reason and that has resulted in a landfall of relativism and irrationalism that no longer satisfy the man.

John Leonardi in his choice of "Above all Christ" reminds us of everlasting newness that of the Christian event introduced in history: the Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. It is the Person of Jesus who is the center of the universe and history. The encounter with him enlightens the meaning of the life of each one of us and the destiny that awaits us. Today we must be more than ever convinced that Christ is the person that our world is in need and He is our "measure". There is no environment which can not be touched by His strength; there is no evil that can not find in Him a remedy, there is no problem not solved by Him. Christ or nothing. This was the measure of St. John Leonardi! And this is the measure of the Saints!

Certainly it is the perennial living presence of Christ in his Church: fragile and holy, rooted in history and at times her becoming is obscure, where wheat and weeds can grow together, (cf. Mt 13.30), but still always a sacrament of salvation. John Leonardi had lucid and clear awareness that the Church is the scope of God (cf. Mt 13, 24). He was not scandalized for this fact foreseen and announced before by Jesus, but decided to be a wheat and not a weed: decisive, that is, to love Christ in this new body that he has given throughout the centuries, namely the Church and to contribute in rendering her increasingly transparent sign of Him. "Not only this. For the love of Christ he worked hard to purify the Church, to make her beautiful and holy. He understood - and this is the fundamental fact that distinguishes the reformer from the rebel - that the reform should be done within the Church and never against the Church. In this St. John Leonardi was truly extraordinary and his example is a surprising reality. He came to write, with humility and daring at the same time, to the Pope Paul V pointing out the way to genuine reform of the Church, namely her continuous purification is to be a clean mirror of the face of Christ. He wrote as follows: Those who want to undertake the reform of the habits of men, consider the glory of God before anything else, they must request above all to Him, from whom proceeds all good things, with insistence and living supplications, the help for a task so much necessary for the salvation of souls and which is so arduous "(From the homily of Card. Angelo Comastri, the Basilica of Saint Peter, 30th April, 2008). The certainty of finding Christ in the Church and understanding the Church in the mystery of Christ is essential for the renewal of our parish and religious communities and to live in the concreteness of the sacraments.

Missionary proclamation is everlasting, a task never concluded by the whole Church, that originates from the bosom of Trinity, as it is described by Jesus himself: "As you, Father, you are in me and myself in you, may they also be one, so that the world may believe that you have sent me "(Jn 17:21). The nature of love is fire. One who announces the Gospel participates in the charity of Christ, his desire to "bring fire on earth" and how would be that "if it was already kindled" (cf. Lk 12, 49). A charity which is an expression of such gratitude that pours from the human heart when it is open to the love gifted by Jesus Christ. A love that lives in the heart of the Church and from there, as a fire of charity, reaches out to meet every person. This is the only explanation of the passion, confidence and freedom of speech (parrhesia) that is manifested in the preaching and the action of John Leonardi and that both struck his contemporaries. Today we need to rediscover this same boldness removing any indifference towards truth and goodness, every false pluralism which weakens the very reason to be the evangelizer, overcoming the temptation of a privatization of faith that is in itself already an implicit acceptance of a weak faith and not fully expressed.

Through the intercession of Mary, Mother of God and Saint John Leonardi let us submit our commitment, assuring that the "communion of saints" that we profess is a guarantee of support and hope for our communities and humanity so that through us they may experience an encounter with Christ.

Together we bless all of you in wishing you a happy Leonardine Jubilee!

Lucca, Saint Mary of Rose,  
1st September , 2008  
434th anniversary of the foundation of the Order of Mother of God

+ S.E. Mons. Benvenuto Italo Castellani ,  
Archbishop of Lucca

Fr. Francesco Petrillo, O.M.D.  
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