



CIRCULAR LETTER TO THE BROTHERS

ROMA 2014

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ON RESURRECTIONIST SPIRITUALITY
FOR THE BICENTENNIAL OF THE BIRTH
OF FATHER PETER SEMENENKO CR

ROME 2014

On cover: Window from the St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish Church in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

[The Brothers,] mindful of the fact that they bear the name of Him “who is not here, but has risen and sits at the right hand of God, the Almighty Father”, will make their likeness to Him in this newness of life consist in an ever greater detachment of their hearts from the world; and, having risen with Christ, in order to seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, they will love the things that are above, not the things that are on earth (Col 3: 1-2).

(Rule of 1850, par. 7)

Dear Brothers!

Every anniversary is a refreshing of the memory and a return to the beginnings. Therefore I would like to make this, my fourth circular letter, an invitation to a personal and communal, reflective and prayerful inclination toward spirituality, which by the nature of the vocation is the most important duty of consecrated persons. The foundations of Resurrectionist spirituality were laid by Fr. Peter, co-founder of the Congregation, a *sui generis* philosopher, eminent theologian, much-sought spiritual director and charismatic confessor, who is universally judged to be the one who best understood and developed the thought of

our Founder, Servant of God Bogdan Jański. His true achievement was the writing of the *Rule of the Brothers of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ* in 1850. He was also – as described by Pope Leo XIII – the soul of our Congregation. Historians are unanimous in stating that in the writing of this Rule Fr. Peter became for generations a reliable guide on the path of the spiritual life of the Congregation.

Speaking of spirituality, we must remember that the spiritual life – that is, “life according to the Spirit” – is above all the pursuit of what the Spirit of the risen Lord wants from us (cf. Rom 8: 5).

Every form of consecrated life approved by the Church, according to its received charism, develops and nurtures its own spirituality, which means “a concrete program of relations with God and one’s surroundings, marked by specific spiritual emphases and choices of apostolate, which accentuate and re-present one or another aspect of the one mystery of Christ” (*Vita Consecrata*, 93). We do not need to be reminded that to us Resurrectionists Providence has entrusted the central mystery of the Christian faith.

Reviewing the rich legacy of Fr. Peter, I would like to pluck from it some selected specific elements which flesh out our relationship with Christ and with our brothers and sisters.

1. FAITHFUL PRAYER – BUT WHAT TYPE?

If God is love and sanctification, prayer is also love and loving, and a sanctifying interaction (Passion and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ, p. 164).

Life according to the Spirit is essentially a life of prayer, which – as the above mentioned *Rule* of 1850 already recognized – is to be the continuous occupation of each of us, wherein our whole

being should be transformed into prayer (cf. Art. 92). In this life we have chosen, prayer is the clearest expression of our love for God; it is a response to his antecedent and completely undeserved love. In prayer the road of our vocation begins, a journey which lasts our entire life. Such a love on our part can withstand everything and endure to the end (cf. 1Cor 13: 7-8). But if our prayer degenerates into modes of formalism and routine, this is a clear sign of a decline of faith and love, which over time brings as a consequence the death of spiritual life. Pope Francis writes: “If the warmth of God, of his love, of his tenderness is not in our own hearts, then how can we, who are poor sinners, warm the hearts of others?” (Francis, *Address to the International Congress on Catechesis*, Sept. 27, 2013). Similarly, Father Peter also urges us: “My dearest, my beloved... despite your numerous occupations, do not abandon prayer, but stay with it above all because in it God gives you strength and peace, and that is exactly what you need amidst these storms and attacks which you must endure” (*Listy*, Vol. 7, p. 19-20). As we know from our own experience, in every age and every land such storms and tempests (in social and personal life) are never lacking.

Prayer is a powerful driving force on the way to holiness and a means which connects us most intimately to God’s love, because “from it flows the grace of God: and we cannot, of ourselves, attain our sublime vocation nor tend to a union with God in love” (*Rule* of 1850, Art. 89). Not surprisingly, our Constitutions call us to strive to be “men of prayer” (Art. 54). It’s not easy to be such men, especially in these times when the world is pushing to build a civilization without God, and people seem to think they are so strong and wise that they do not need his help. Yet we know and experience that He alone is the source of strength and wisdom in us, and that we are assured the assistance of the Holy Spirit: “for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for

us with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8: 26). Fr. Peter, fascinated by the tool of communication of his time, wrote to Mother Karska, foundress of the Immaculate Conception Sisters: “The Lord Jesus is our telegraph. It seems to me that there are times when, without our being aware of it, we receive internal communications which are sent to us by Him” (*Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 105).

This awareness situates our apostolic action in the perspective of prayer, because prayer without deeds is only a statement on a poster which smacks of inconsistency and falsehood: “Indeed, all prayer ought to be directed to action. It should be transformed into action, while every action should become a prayer; and only at that point will there be harmony in life” (*Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 144). On the other hand one’s works, even the best, without the support of prayer, lose their supernatural value when the person is seeing only himself in them and it’s all about one’s own business; and so “the faces of brothers and sisters are obscured and it becomes impossible to recognize the face of God in them” (*Starting afresh from Christ*, Cong. for Consecrated Life, 25).

Let us ask ourselves:

How much time do I devote to prayer, especially meditation, adoration, self-examination, prayerful reading of Scripture?

In prayer do I think more about loving God and waiting for his prayerful assistance, or rather about my own personal ambitions and interests, attachment to my own ideas or security for my proximate or distant future?

Do I cultivate anew the original flame of my vocation in each situation, even the most humanly hopeless ones, remembering that when God seems to close a door he is always opening a window?

Do I realize that by neglecting and disregarding prayer I am risking the loss of the great values of love, faith, hope and joy, the source of which is abiding with Christ?

Does our prayer (personal and communal) call people today to lift their eyes so that everyday life does not overwhelm them, so that they might know how to be enraptured by God and the Gospel?

2. EVANGELICAL OBEDIENCE – BUT WHAT TYPE?

In obedience you will find the surest, absolutely certain guarantee of your salvation and of God’s grace for you. Do not listen to any temptation, least of all to one that springs from self-love. Listen to the voice of God. (Letters, Vol. 3, p. 21)

To imitate Christ and to seek His face—this is the very essence of consecrated life; we endeavor to make visible, in the Church and in the world, the characteristic qualities of Jesus – virginity, poverty and obedience (cf. *Vita consecrata*, 1). Father Peter, in accordance with centuries-old tradition, regarded the life of the spirit as first and foremost an obedient life: that is, searching out and fulfilling the will of God, even when this implies a road of sacrifice unto the cross. To one of our brothers he wrote that in the framework of becoming true religious the first thing is obedience: “Do it, however, for the love of God to whom you professed your vows, and for the good of your soul” (*Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 21).

Obedience already in its etymological layer refers to “hearing”: that is, to be open to another and to be willing to accept what the other wants to communicate. This means that in its essence the evangelical counsel of obedience, which in our reality is raised to the status of a vow, for its implementation requires two persons: one who speaks, and one who listens. The one who speaks, of course, is God, but – we must remember – he does this through multiple external mediations: the events of life, the stirrings of

our heart, the voice of conscience, the requirements arising from the vocation received, “sound principles” guiding the functioning of a community, the regulations of those who have authority, the norms coming from our Constitutions, statutes and other types of particular legislation. All these kinds of human mediations, often imperfect, yet still binding in conscience, have one goal: helping us to know and to do the will of God (cf. *Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram*, 9).

A particular concern of Fr. Peter’s was that the mediation of superiors be most excellent. Therefore, he first reminds us that the true superior of the Congregation is the Lord Jesus, who in his kindness at every step and at every moment makes up for “the superior’s inadequacy, weakness and poverty”; he strives for unity and harmony among the various levels of government which are required for developing God’s work; he chastises unreasonable haste and superficiality in the duties of the superior, because “you need to look into each one’s soul, and gain each member’s confidence”; he reprimands the superior who is not enough of a father, does not show a paternal heart, but “rules by command”; he urges that the leadership have great patience, great understanding and indulgence, as well as great love, for “the only good superior will be the one who is superior by love”. The task of being a superior, and to be such according to the mind of God, “requires complete self-denial. You may never set yourself or your will against the subject. In acting, you should never rely on your own strength. You must always place God and His will first, and allow Him to remain there. You must rely on God’s strength, allowing Him to do everything, while you simply cooperate with Him” (cf. *Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 22-31).

All confreres, including those who at some time exercise the ministry of leadership, have both the privilege and the duty to listen, to enter humbly into the dynamics of carrying out God’s

will. In listening to intermediaries, most resistance and prejudices seem to be with the persons serving as major superiors, especially in unusual and difficult situations: when one must sacrifice his own personal plans and ideas; when one must unexpectedly move away from a work already initiated; when one must change communities or adapt himself to those who are considered difficult to live with; when in the name of the apostolate one must give up his claim to the right of managing his own life and mission; when the needs, or the superiors, seem to be – humanly speaking – not very convincing (*Instruction Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram*, 10). Thus Fr. Peter underscores the need for two attitudes in obedience: a supernatural viewpoint and unconditional trust. In his letters he writes: “The superior is indeed God’s representative and acts as his vicar; [...] he speaks in the name of God; [...] God is with him”. “Lack of confidence paralyzes everything and causes things to come apart in our hands. Trust is similar to oil on the outside, and it is a vital juice which gives strength internally” (*Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 22-26).

Let us ask ourselves:

In regard to what I earnestly strive for and what I’m looking for in my daily life: is it myself, or rather God and his will? Am I looking for privileges, for the satisfaction of popularity or other things that pass away, or do I look for the One who never passes away?

Do I listen to God’s voice by deepening my knowledge of Church law, our own legislation, history and spirituality of the Congregation as well as the spiritual intuitions of our Founders?

What obstacles stand in the way of my implementation of the vow of obedience: perhaps laziness, arrogance and pride? Perhaps seeking my own comfort, gratification and pleasure? Maybe my own glory or the praise of others and vanity in general? Or perhaps my own goals, intentions and self-realization?

3. COMMUNION WITH CHRIST – BUT WHAT TYPE?

Just as there are three essential elements of life inherent in a living person: light, air and nourishment; similarly for our supernatural life the word of God is the light from above, prayer is our spiritual air, and the true Bread come down from heaven is our superessential nourishment. (Fr. Peter Semenenko CR, Mądrość ascezy, p. 50, No. 48)

Listening and obedience lead directly to the rich reality of the Word of God, which is “the first source of all Christian spirituality. It gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God and with His saving and sanctifying will” (*Vita consecrata*, 94). It is also, along with prayer, liturgy and the sacraments, an effective means of strengthening our bonds with Christ. Hence the Word of God has always been an inspiration for exploring and shaping the charism and the mission of a religious community.

In Semenenko’s legacy there are no truly exegetical works or special incentives for reading and meditating on the Word of God, because it seems that for him it was too obvious a thing. Yet he came from the school of the House of Jański, where Sacred Scripture was the “spiritual daily bread”: biblical quotations on the walls of the house, a daily hour of Scripture reading, the obligation of mastering by memory the words of the Lord Jesus (Bogdan Jański, *Diary*, pp. 331, 340). From communion with God’s Word Fr. Peter drew the light needed to explore, understand and fall in love with his own vocation; he found the strength to follow and to carry out his mission; and as a spiritual director and preacher he was able to read the reliable signposts on the path to holiness.

In this spirit the *Rule* of 1850 recommended diligent preparation for preaching the Gospel, so that the faithful might be

enlightened, more deeply versed in the divine mysteries, strengthened in holiness. The model here is the Risen One, who explains the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, so that “their hearts were burning within them” (cf. Art. 190).

Today the Church has rediscovered *lectio divina*, to which the highest importance has been attached since the beginnings of religious life: “By its means the word of God is brought to bear on life, on which it projects the light of that wisdom which is a gift of the Spirit” (*Vita consecrata*, 94). The texts which present the words and deeds of Jesus Christ are particularly suited to a prayerful-meditative reading of God’s Word.

It would be good and useful that in our days of recollection and religious retreat we would rely often on this method, and apply it more broadly in our educational and pastoral work. In fact, it produces remarkable fruits: it trains us for contemplation, stimulates zeal in following Christ, helps us to interpret God’s will and motivates us to comply with it, sheds light on the hidden mysteries of faith and human life, strengthens us in our vocation and orients our existence toward the supernatural. In our Resurrectionist context we could say that it initiates our conversion and drives its dynamism to last our whole life; it reveals the spaces in which we need to die to ourselves and marks out for us the way to new life; and, most importantly, it reveals to us God’s love, which forgives, raises us up and comes to our aid (cf. *Constitutions*, 1).

Let us ask ourselves:

Do I appreciate the great gift of the Word of God? Do I try to delve deeper into the inspired texts, using the tools and aids ever more available to me?

What am I doing so that God’s word might ignite and enliven in us the hope which we, as “official” messengers and qualified witnesses, are to bring to others?

Do I put God's word in first place, and does it direct my daily life? Or am I rather guided by customs and habits, stereotypical thinking, superstitions and prejudices?

Is it my experience that the Word of God is a support and solace for me? Is it capable of filling my heart with hope, peace and joy?

4. ASCETICAL PRACTICES – BUT WHAT TYPE?

I am totally enraptured, if I may speak thus, in the Lord Jesus, in His goodness, his love; I offer myself entirely to Him; or rather, I have given myself once and for all definitively to Him, and I want to live entirely under His dominion. I insist that He be necessarily my Lord, that He may take full advantage of my dedication and exercise His rights over me. (Listy, Vol. 11, p. 26)

Another concrete instance of spirituality are ascetical practices, including internal acts of devotion as well as external actions. Father Peter, as an expert in spiritual matters, was not only a theoretician but also a true ascetic. For, captivated by the figure and teaching of Jesus, he was able to take up the challenge of renunciation, purification and transformation; he knew how to struggle for his interior life, for his contact with Jesus Christ, in order to surrender himself completely into His hands. At the same time he was a realist and knew that asceticism leading to perfection requires the most complete dispossession of self, and it is “like decapitation, it clearly distinguishes two different kinds of life: our own, and that of Christ” (*Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 175).

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If the imitation of Christ – in the double sense of the word: as following Him (*sequela*) and as resembling him (*imitatio*) – is “a repetition of the whole life of the Lord Jesus” (*Spiritual Exercises*, p. 65), then in both senses – in the view of Fr. Peter – the Easter Season is extremely important. He presents in a particularly original way his ascetical perception of the resurrection of Christ, as a prelude to a person's interior transformation and a new quality of spiritual life. Thus the tomb closed by a huge stone is a metaphor for the person enslaved and struck down by the overwhelming weight of his own passions and sensuality: the official seal at the entrance to the tomb is a sign of the helplessness and impotence of the person who does not take God into account, rejects God's will and wants to rule his own life; and the dazzling angel represents the omnipotence of God, who brings the person back to life and enlightens him. This is the power of God, breaking the seal and pushing away the stone – as in case of the resurrection of Christ – which raises fallen human nature to new life. Then the intellect receives the crown of clarity and truth; the royal robe of God's goodness and tenderness enfolds the heart; the will receives the scepter of God's authority and dominion, in order to live henceforth by love, and through love to reign in eternal union with God (*Our Father*, p. 178-186; *Spiritual Exercises*, s. 229-233; *Credo*, s. 242-243).

Let us ask ourselves:

Does Resurrectionist spirituality interest me? What do I do that I might better understand and penetrate it? Do I have great visions and desires?

Does the radicalism leading to spiritual resurrection frighten me?

Does attachment to my own judgments, preferences and whims “keep me at the gate of holiness while not allowing me to enter” (*Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 107)?

Do I keep in mind that my desire for new life with Christ is a benefit for the People of God and a contribution to the transformation of the world?

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The Church has always believed that external ascetical practices are effective means in the pursuit of holiness, because they help to master and correct the inclinations of human nature wounded by sin (cf. *Vita consecrata*, 38). In this area Fr. Semenenko saw the major role of spiritual direction, for he believed that “any person who wishes to make progress in perfection needs a guide” (*Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 100). This spiritual ministry of Fr. Peter’s to major figures of his time mobilized him as well towards an almost heroic work on himself. As a master of the interior life, he was convinced that spiritual direction “is by divine right, for every soul who wishes to make progress in perfection must submit to direction. One cannot begin on his own to guide himself, according to his own will. This is the order established by God. [...] One cannot change directors the way one might change his clothes or his residence” (*Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 101). Similarly, St. John Paul II wrote with firmness: “None are exempt from the obligation of human and religious growth; by the same token, no one can be over-confident and live in self-sufficient isolation. At no stage of life can people feel so secure and committed that they do not need to give careful attention to ensuring perseverance in faithfulness; just as there is no age at which a person has completely achieved maturity” (*Vita consecrata*, 69).

Therefore, we cannot deprive ourselves of spiritual guidance, counsel and consolation. We can’t rely on ourselves (self-will, self-love, self-activity). We should not expect any special progress if we do not utilize the resources that God places at our disposal. We can never let go of our unceasing and persevering progress on the path of Christ crucified and risen.

Let us ask ourselves:

In my spiritual work do I refuse to remain content with minimalism and not lose the objectivity of my vision? Am I sure that shortsightedness and lack of transparency do not threaten me?

Am I sensitive to the spiritual need of my brother, who might be looking for a good word, some counsel, support or assistance?

Do I try not to get discouraged by lack of results in my work, or am I forgetting that spiritual life requires time and perseverance, putting out energy and all my means?

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In our ascetical tradition we find no warrant for special types of mortification, yet the concept itself (from the Latin *mortificatio*) refers to “lifelessness”, to dying, to death. At the same time it is not about some single acts but rather a constant attitude, which Fr. Peter describes as “a spirit of mortification” which he also links to difficulties and suffering. Suffering emerges from the challenge of putting up with one another, from the effort to overcome all the adversities of life, from surmounting all difficulties, from rejecting everything that turns us away from God (cf. *Rule* of 1882, 79).

Toil and effort make up our labor, which in our spirituality is presented not only as an expression of spiritual poverty but also as a valuable and essential component of external mortification (cf. *Constitutions*, 27 and 82). This work, however, should be carried out “not only faithfully but, moreover, with great eagerness” (*Rule* of 1882, 80), “with love and joy” (1966 *Constitutions*, 91) and zeal (*Constitutions*, 82). Willingness to work has always been one of the important criteria of our vocation; thus Father Peter articulates in one of his letters the “rule” that an individual “under the influence of the senses, who lives completely on the surface, one who enjoys convenience, etc., and consequently one who is incapable of sacrifice, self-denial and mortification” (*Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 3), is not suitable for

religious life. Conscious of this requirement of labor, we must keep in mind that in every toil we find on the one hand a part of the cross of Christ, and on the other a glimmer of the Resurrection, where new life appears, the new good and leading to a better ordering of human society (cf. John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, 27).

Let us ask ourselves:

Do I cultivate a spirit of mortification, observing at least the communal and individual ascetical practices contained in our *Constitutions* and *Statutes*?

Do I treat my work and duties (even at times the undesirable ones) as a spiritual exercise which helps me on the way of holiness? Do zeal, diligence, generosity and honesty accompany me in my labors?

In carrying out my apostolic work, do I take into consideration solidarity with those who are most vulnerable, the disadvantaged, poor, and wounded?

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I have laid out for you several selected concretizations of the spirituality of Fr. Peter Semenenko. One can sense in them a serene atmosphere; we find emanating from them the love and truth, hope and optimism which are the source of Christ's passage through death to resurrection as well as his continual presence in our lives.

It is my wish that this letter might serve as an invitation to walk anew with Christ Risen along the road to Emmaus; to "find again one's first love, the inspiring spark which first gave rise to following (Him)" (*Starting afresh from Christ*, 22). Who, if not we Resurrectionists, feel our hearts burning within us as we hear God's Word along the road, recognize Him in the breaking of the bread and set off to our brothers and sisters to bring them the Good News!?

Let us entrust our "life according to the Spirit" and our Resurrectionist way of living for Christ, to his Mother, Our Lady of Graces of Mentorella, in the words of a prayer of Father Peter:

"May our most holy Mother, the Mother of mercy and compassion, who is so full of kindness and pity, intercede for us. May she obtain and pour down on us all of the basic graces which thoroughly transform a person from old man to new man, from Adam to Christ; so that we may be new creatures, in whom there is no remnant of the former decay and corruption, but only a new purity and justice. May she obtain for us the grace of silence and humility, the grace to dwell within our own nothingness and to place our confidence in God; but also a deep and fervent love, as well as that which flows from love: the fulfillment of God's will with all eagerness and good will (*Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 106-107).

In Christo Redivivo



Bernard Hylla CR

Ojciec Bernard Hylla CR
Superior General
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Rome, June 29, 2014, 200th Anniversary of the Birth of Fr. Peter Semenenko CR