Homily for the Funeral of Fr. Cesare Bettoni, Mairano (Brescia), May 23, 2020

Dearest confreres, friends, and faithful of St. Andrew the Apostle Parish, here in Mairano: we have come here to meet you and share with the Bettoni family, with the parish priest, Don Piero, and with all of you, this intense moment of prayer and celebration of the Holy Mass, together with our dear and beloved Fr. Cesare, who returned to the Father's house two days ago. Other than being your brother, uncle, or relative, Fr. Cesare is also our much-loved confrere, and we Rogationists are moved, and tears run our eyes with the thought that we must let him go.

We came from Desenzano, Milan, Padua, Rome, Florence, and desire to represent the confreres from our communities, particularly including the communities from the St. Matthew Province in the Philippines, where Fr. Cesare worked as a missionary for over twenty years.

We are here to thank God for giving Fr. Cesare to us. We are here to pray for him, to embrace him, to gather around him, and to pay our respects to him full of admiration, affection, and gratitude. One cannot fail to love him.

Fr. Cesare is a son of this beloved land of Brescia, which gave birth to great personalities such as St. Pope Paul VI (who is Giovanni Battista Montini). From his parents, Fr. Cesare received wisdom of life and heart here in the environment of peasants where he grew up. This accompanied him during his long years of service as a formator in the Congregation and made him intuit, discern, untie knots, foster relationships, and form many generations of Rogationist priests and brothers. Immediately after receiving his priestly ordination right here in Pievedizio on June 21, 1980, he worked as a formator of the seminarians in Palermo until 1985. From 1986 until 1998, he assumed many responsibilities, always in the formation of young religious students of philosophy and theology in Manila, Philippines, while actively collaborating as a member of the government of the Rogationist Philippine-Indian Delegation. In the 1998 General Chapter, he was elected as the General Councilor on the Sector of Formation. Fr. Cesare carried out this responsibility, while he was at the same time the Superior of the Center of Studies (Studentato) in Grottaferrata. From 2005, he returned to the Philippines where he remained until 2016 when he went back to Italy for health reasons. He had been given the very delicate office of being a Novice Master, which he had begun to discharge even before the 1998 General Chapter.

Now, Fr. Cesare has left us, snatched by death from the affection and friendship of those who knew and appreciated him. Our faith comes to our aid, especially in these moments of pain. And this tells us that he continues to love us, to be close to each of us. St. Paul reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ and our brothers (cf. Romans 8:35-39).

In this Eucharistic celebration, remembering Fr. Cesare is not only a suffrage, but thanking God for having given to his Church and our Congregation a generous man who responded to the calling of the Lord by committing himself to work in every way for the good of the Church and the growth of our Congregation, especially in the Philippines where he accompanied the initial phases of our missionary presence in Southeast Asia for more than 20 years, as I said, in the very delicate and important field of forming candidates to the Rogationist religious life.

Fr. Cesare had a strong, determined, and even demanding character. He never backed off from the challenges that God asked from him. As soon as he was ordained a priest, the Superiors assigned him to work in Palermo, in a totally new and difficult environment for him. And after five years, he was asked to leave Italy, his language, and his affections in order to go as a missionary to the Philippines. There, he put himself at the service of the Church and of the Filipino people. In a message we received yesterday, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, the Archbishop of Manila, and now the Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, spoke of Fr. Cesare "as a good person, a wonderful man, and a priest who shared his life with the Filipino people. The Lord will reward him with eternal joy.”

Fr. Cesare intensely lived his 66 years of life that the Lord gave him. On June 21, he would have celebrated 40 years of his priesthood, while on July 14, it would have been his 67th birthday. He had particular attention to the poor, those who are most in need, and those who are sick. In the Novitiate house in Silang, Philippines, where he was the Novice Master, he immediately identified the poorest families in the area. He made sure that they had their daily lunch together with the novices. He spent time with the poor families, who came just to have, at least, one meal a day. He took care of many of their children and tried to help them in every way. I am aware that every year that here in your very town, you organized fundraising activities to help these poor people who came to Fr. Cesare every day. When he was the Superior of the Center of Studies (Studentato) in Grottaferrata, the poor dined together with the Community.

Certainly, the last and most painful challenge that Fr. Cesare faced in his last four years, since 2016, was his illness, which constrained him to live the pain that consumed him. He gave us an example of accepting God’s will by renewing his trust in the Lord of Life every day; and every session of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Eventually, as he was drained by medicine, he did not make it anymore, and left. He brought nothing with him, except the example he left us behind: one of love, forgiveness, drying the tears in the faces of others, and his hard-fought acceptance of illness. In his daily struggle against the disease, we want to thank the family members of Fr. Cesare – his sisters, brothers, nephews, nieces, and all those close to him, particularly including the confreres in the Community of Desenzano del Garda, where he stayed even for extended periods whenever he felt a little better. From our hearts, thank you very much.

At this moment, we would like to say many things that struck us, many facts, and beautiful moments that we shared with Fr. Cesare. I have been able to be with him and work with him in the Philippines for 16 years: how much I learned from him! The numerous messages of condolences that we received did nothing but confirm the experiences we have had of him:

* a smiling person; we will cling to this smile which is a sign of a noble soul
* a good, faithful, and wise servant; simple, always available, friendly, humble, reserved, and poor
* a person with an extraordinary sense of humanity, who possessed both the firmness of the educator and the tenderness of a ~~real~~ authentic father and brother.

I do not wish to continue reporting other testimonies on Fr. Cesare, but all agree in saying that, in his humanity, he was an exceptional person, a solid Christian, and an exemplary Rogationist priest.

The Gospel passage selected for today was also read a few weeks ago when Fr. Cesare celebrated one of his last Holy Masses, and it was dear to him.

Jesus said to his disciples: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” He uttered these words just a few hours before his arrest, trial, and death on the cross. Jesus wanted to console them. This statement is not circumstantial because he himself experienced the pain he intended to alleviate. His invitation to “not being troubled” is a real comfort for those who know what suffering is. Jesus suffered; therefore, his consolation is real. Then, Jesus asked them to have faith in God and also in him because “in my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” And he added that he would go to prepare a place for them, and then return to take them with him and to dwell together. The real “house of the Father,” where Jesus was about to go and prepare a place for the disciples is his dead and risen body. Our eternal home will not be the simple survival of the soul, but of the union of our body with the transfigured body of Jesus. The place he is preparing for us is eternal life with him – his eternal company, “so that where I am, you also may be.” Truly, we are all awaited by the Lord, who repeated twice that he went to prepare a place for us. This is the great reason for consolation – that we are “expected” – not only in this life but in eternity. In this time of the pandemic, the death that visits us and hundreds of thousands of people all over the world will not have the last word.

Dear Fr. Cesare, the Lord Jesus, who defeated death in his risen body, waited for you and prepared a place for you next to him. Bring our embrace and our tears with you, “keep your eyes, which are full of glory, focused on our eyes that are full of tears". Thank you. Rest in peace.