



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS
TO ALESSANO (LECCE) AND TO MOLFETTA (BARI),
ON THE 25th ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF H. E. MSGR. TONINO BELLO

MEETING WITH THE FAITHFUL

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS

*Square in front of the Cemetery (Lecce)
Friday, 20 April 2018*

[[Multimedia](#)]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I have come as a [pilgrim to this land](#) which gave birth to the Servant of God Tonino Bello. I have just prayed at his tomb, whose monument does not rise upwards but is wholly planted in the earth: Fr Tonino, sown in his land — he, like a sown seed — seems to want to tell us how much he loved this territory. I would like to reflect on this, evoking some of his words of gratitude: “Thank you, my small and poor land, for delivering me poor like you but, for this very reason, you gave me the incomparable richness of understanding the poor and of being able to place myself today at their service”^[1].

Understanding the poor was for him true abundance — it was also understanding his mother. Understanding the poor was his richness. He was right, because the poor are truly the Church’s riches. Remind us again, Fr Tonino, in the face of the recurring temptation to yield to the powerful in charge, to seek privileges, to settle down to a comfortable life. The Gospel — you used to recall this at Christmas and Easter — calls us to an often uncomfortable life, because those who follow Jesus love the poor and the meek. The Master did the same, and thus his Mother proclaimed,

praising God, for he “has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree” (Lk 1:52). A Church that cares about the poor remains ever attuned to God’s ‘channel’, never loses the frequency of the Gospel and feels the need to return to the essential in order to consistently profess that the Lord is the one true good.

Fr Tonino reminds us not to theorize closeness to the poor, but rather to be close to them, as was Jesus who, rich as he was, became poor for us (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). Fr Tonino felt the need to imitate Him, involving himself firsthand, to the point of stripping away his very self. No request aggrieved him; indifference wounded him. He did not fear lack of money, but was concerned about precarious employment, a problem that is still so relevant today. He never missed an opportunity to say that the worker comes first with his dignity, not profit with its greed. He did not sit on his hands: he acted locally to sow peace globally, in the belief that the best way to prevent violence and every kind of war is to take care of the needy and promote justice. In fact, as war generates poverty, poverty also generates war[2]. Peace, therefore, is built starting from the houses, the streets, the shops, where communion is formed by hand. Fr Tonino used to say with hope: “From the workshop, as one day from the workshop of Nazareth, will come forth the Word of peace that will set humanity, thirsty for justice, on the path to new destinies”[3].

Dear brothers and sisters, this vocation of peace belongs to your land, to this marvellous frontier land — *finis-terrae* — which Fr Tonino called “window on the world”, because the South of Italy opens up to the many Souths of the world, where “the poorest are ever more numerous while the rich become ever richer and ever fewer”[4]. You are an “open window, from which to observe all the poverty that looms over history”[5], but above all, you are a *window of hope* that the Mediterranean, a historical basin of civilization, may never be a tense arc of war, but a welcoming ark of peace[6].

Fr Tonino is a man of his land, because his priesthood ripened in this land. Here blossomed his vocation, which he loved to call *evocation*: evocation of what God dotingly favours, our fragile lives, one by one; the echo of his loving voice that speaks to us every day; the call to always go forth, to dream boldly, to decentralize one’s existence in order to place it in service; the invitation to always trust in God, the only One capable of transforming life into a celebration. This then, is vocation according to Fr Tonino: a call to become not only devoted faithful, but true lovers of the Lord, with the ardour of the dream, the enthusiasm for giving, the audacity not to stop at half measures. Because when the Lord ignites the heart, hope cannot be extinguished. When the Lord asks for a ‘yes’, one cannot respond with a ‘perhaps’. It will do us all good, not just young people, but all those who seek the meaning of life, to hear and listen again to the words of Fr Tonino.

In this land, Antonio was born Tonino and became *Don [Father] Tonino*. This simple and familiar name, which we read on his tomb, still speaks to us. It tells us of his desire to become small in order to be close, to shorten distances, to offer an outstretched hand. He invites us to simply and genuinely open up to the Gospel. Fr Tonino heartily recommended this, leaving it to his priests as

a legacy. He used to say: “Let us love the world. Let us care for it. Let us embrace it. Let us show it mercy. Let us not always oppose the rigours of the law if we have not tempered them first with doses of tenderness”[7]. These are words that reveal a wish for a Church for the world: not *worldly*, but *for the world*. May the Lord give us this grace: an unworldly Church, at the service of the world. A Church cleansed of self-referentiality and “outgoing, outstretched, not enveloped within herself”[8]; *not waiting to receive but to provide first aid*; never drowsy with nostalgia for the past, but ablaze with love for today, following the example of God, who “so loved the world” (Jn 3:16).

The name ‘Fr Tonino’ also tells us about his healthy allergy to titles and honours; his wish to deprive himself of something for Jesus so that he stripped himself of everything; his courage to free himself of what might recall the *signs of power* in order to make room for the *power of signs*[9]. Fr Tonino certainly did not do so out of convenience or to seek approval, but because he was moved by the Lord’s example. In our love for Him we find the strength to cast off the mantle that hinders our step in order to clothe ourselves in service, to be “the Church of the apron, the only priestly vestment recorded in the Gospel”[10].

From this beloved land of his, what could Don Tonino still tell us? This believer, with his feet on the ground and his eyes on Heaven, and above all with a heart that joined Heaven and Earth, coined an original word — among many others — which gives a great mission to each of us. He liked to say that we Christians “must be *contempl-actives*, with ‘ct’, that is, people who start from contemplation and then allow its dynamism, its commitment to action, to flow forth”[11], those who never separate prayer from action. Dear Fr Tonino, you warned us not to immerse ourselves in the vortex of things without planting ourselves before the Tabernacle, so as not to delude ourselves that we are working in vain for the Kingdom[12]. And we could ask ourselves whether we start from the Tabernacle or from ourselves. You could also ask us whether, once departed, we are walking; whether, like Mary, Woman of the journey, we stand up to join and serve mankind, every man and woman. If you were to ask us this, we would have to feel ashamed of our inaction and our constant justifications. Therefore, may you reawaken in us our lofty vocation; help us to be more and more a *contempl-active* Church, enamoured of God and passionate about mankind!

Dear brothers and sisters! In every age the Lord places on the Church’s path witnesses who embody the good news of Easter, prophets of hope for the future of all. God has produced one from your land as a gift and prophecy for our times. And God desires that His gift be welcomed, that His prophecy be fulfilled. Let us not be content to jot down good memories; let us not be bogged down in nostalgia for the past, or even in idle gossip about the present or in fears for the future. Let us imitate Fr Tonino; let us be carried away by his youthful Christian ardour; let us feel his pressing invitation to live the Gospel without discounts. It is a powerful invitation addressed to each of us and to us as Church. It will truly help us to spread the fragrant joy of the Gospel today.

Now, all together, let us pray to Our Lady and then I will impart the blessing to you, okay?

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- [1] “Grazie, Chiesa di Alessano”, *La terra dei miei sogni. Bagliori di luce dagli scritti ugentini* [“Thank You, Church of Alessano”, *The land of my dreams: Flashes of light from Ugento writings*], 2014, 477.
- [2] Cf. St John Paul ii, “If you want peace, reach out to the poor”, *Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1993*.
- [3] *La terra dei miei sogni* [The land of my dreams], 32.
- [4] “Il pentologo della speranza”, *Scritti vari, interviste aggiunte* [“The pentologue of hope”, *Various writings, additional interviews*], 2007, 252.
- [5] “La speranza a caro prezzo”, *Scritti di pace* [“Hope at a dear price”, *Peace writings*], 1997, 348.
- [6] Cf. “La profezia oltre la mafia” [“Prophecy beyond the Mafia”], *ibid.*, 280.
- [7] “Torchio e spirito. Omelia per la Messa crismale 1993”, *Omellerie e scritti quaresimali* [“Press and spirit: Homily for the Chrism Mass 1993”, *Lenten homilies and writings*], 2015, 97.
- [8] “Sacerdoti per il mondo”, *Cirenei della gioia* [“Priests for the world”, *Cyrenes of joy*], 2004, 26.
- [9] “Dai poveri verso tutti” [“From the poor towards all”], *ibid.*, 122 ss.
- [10] “Configurati a Cristo capo e sacerdote” [“Conformed to Christ, head and priest”], *ibid.*, 61.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 55.
- [12] Cf. “Contempl-attivi nella ferialità quotidiana”, *Non c’è fedeltà senza rischio* [“Contemplatives in the daily workweek”, *There is no fidelity without risk*], 2000, 124; “Soffrire le cose di Dio e soffrire le cose dell’uomo”, *Cirenei della gioia* [“Suffering the concerns of God and suffering the concerns of man”, *Cyrenes of joy*], 81-82.
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