
Annalena Tonelli: an inspiring missionary for today's world

Annalena Tonelli: "I proclaim the Gospel with my life and I burn with the desire to continue to proclaim it out until the end"

Annalena Tonelli, Italian Catholic missionary, the "Mother Teresa" of the Somali people, was a remarkable woman, who lived in silence her life in the footsteps of Jesus Christ for 35 years, in a Muslim environment. Awarded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees with the prestigious Nansen Refugee Award the 25th of June 2003, she was murdered on the 5th of October 2003. Annalena has never liked to talk about herself. It was only after many pressures that she gave this testimony during an international meeting of Volunteers held in Rome, in the Vatican, in November 2001. .



I have lived to serve the Somalis.

My name is Annalena Tonelli. I was born in Forlì in Italy on 2 April 1943. I am involved in health services, but I am not a physician. I have a PhD in Law in Italy; I have a qualification to teach English in Kenyan Secondary Schools. I obtained certificates and diplomas for TB control from Kenya, Tropical and Community Medicine from England, and Leprosy treatment from Spain. I left Italy in January 1969. Since then I have lived to serve the Somalis. For thirty years, I have shared and lived with them except for short breaks due to unavoidable circumstances.

From the time I was a child, I chose to live for the others: the poor, the suffering, the abandoned, and the unloved and this is what I have been and will continue to be until the end of my life with the help of God. I wanted to follow Jesus Christ. Nothing else was of any interest to me: only Him and the poor in Him.

For Him I have made the choice of radical poverty... even though I will never be so poor as the truly poor, the poor that fill every moment of my life.

I serve without a name: without the security of a religious order, without belonging to any organization, without a salary, and without putting aside money for a pension in my old age. I am not married because such is the joy I experience in my choice. I wanted to belong totally to God. I did not have the call to have a family of my own. And so it was, thanks to the grace of God.

I have friends who have been helping my people and I for thirty years now. Everything I have achieved I did because of them, especially the friends from Forlì, of the Committee to fight Hunger in the World based in Forlì. Others are from all over the world. We have so many needs.

I give thanks to God for the friends He has given and continues to give me. We are apparently different but equal in substance: we fight for the poor to be raised from dust and made free; we fight so that “all may be one”.

I left Italy after six years in the slums of my hometown, serving children in the local orphanage: little girls mentally handicapped or victims of family violence, and poor people of the Third World. This was possible due to the activities of the Committee I had helped to establish.

I thought that I could not give of myself totally if I stayed in my own country but I felt suffocated within the narrow boundaries of my area of operation. I soon realized that one can serve and love everywhere but by now I was in Africa and I knew that it was God that had taken me there; and there I remained in joy and gratitude I left committed to “cry out the Gospel with my life” in the footsteps of Charles de Foucauld, who had ignited my existence.

Even now, thirty-three years later, I proclaim the Gospel with my life alone and I burn with the desire to continue to proclaim it out until the end. This is my basic motivation, together with an invincible passion, which I have always had, for the wounded and downtrodden people without deserving such a fate, beyond the boundaries of race, culture and faith.

I have given CARE: love, loyalty and passion

I try to live with complete respect for “those” that the Lord has given me. Where possible I have adopted their style of life. I live a very modest life in my housing, my food, my means of transport and my clothes. I spontaneously abandoned my western habits. I have looked for dialogue with everybody. I have given CARE: love, loyalty and passion. May the Lord forgive me if I use these important words.

In Africa, I have almost always lived with the Somalis, first with the Somalis of North-Eastern Kenya, and then with the Somalis of Somalia. I live in a world that is rigidly Muslim. From Mussolini times up to the civil war on 1990 the presence of religious people was allowed only for spiritual assistance to the Italian community.

I have been in Borama for the last five years. Borama is in the Northwest part of the country, bordering Ethiopia and Djibouti. Borama has no Christians to share my faith. Twice a year, around Christmas and Easter time, the bishop of Djibouti comes to celebrate Mass with me and for me.

I live alone now, because my companions, who together with the poor people made my life a paradise during my 17 years in the desert, took different paths when I was forced to leave Kenya.

In 1984, the government of Kenya tried to commit genocide against one nomadic tribe in the desert. They wanted to exterminate fifty thousand people. They managed to kill a thousand. I managed to stop the massacre and for this reason, I was deported a year later. I remained silent for love of the little ones that I had left at home (Wajir), who would have been punished if I had spoken out. However The Somalis spoke with one voice and struggled to ensure that light was thrown on the truth about this genocide. Sixteen years have passed and the Government of Kenya has openly admitted its responsibility, asked for forgiveness and promised compensation to the families of the victims. The Newspapers and the BBC talked at length about my role. Today, many of the Somalis, who showed open bitterness on my regards have now accepted me and have become my friends. They know that I was ready to give my life for them, that I risked my life for them.

At the time of the massacre, I was arrested and taken before the martial court. The authorities, all of them non Somalis, all Christians, told me that they had arranged two ambushes which I providentially avoided but that I would not have escaped another. Then one of them, a Christian, asked me what had led me to act in that way. I answered that I was doing it for Jesus Christ who asks us to give our lives for our friends.

It has been my experience over the years that no evil ever remains hidden, and no truth remains unrevealed. What matters is to go on fighting as tough truth was already upheld and wrongdoing was not able to touch us and evil was not triumphing. One day goodness will shine forth .We ask God to give us the strength to wait, because we may be dealing with a long wait-even until our death. I live waiting for God and I understand that waiting for the things of men weighs on me less than on other people .I live, identified with the poor, the sick and those who nobody loves. I am largely concerned with the control and cure of the tuberculosis.

Love generates love

I went to Kenya as a teacher. At the beginning of this significant experience it was the only job I could do without harming anybody. I had a hard time preparing lessons on almost every topic because of a lack of teachers. I had to involve myself in the study of the local language, culture and traditions, sure that education means freedom. The students mostly of my own age or slightly younger, who previously had threatened to boycott my classes because I was a woman, became very involved and motivated. The results were excellent. In fact many students of that time now fill splendid positions in the various Ministries of the Government, in private activities in the country and often the news comes to me that many claim to have been my students in the North East Province and this is obviously untrue!

I remember soon after my arrival, I fell in love with a child who was sick with sickle cell and hunger. It was a time of great famine and I saw many die from hunger During my life I witnessed another famine, in Marca, South Somalia, and I assure you that it is such a traumatizing experience that it can make one lose faith. I had fourteen famine stricken children living with me. I donated my blood to that child and invited my students to do the same... one had the courage to do it, breaking with the traditions and prejudices of a world that, to me, seemed to ignore every form of piety and solidarity. The others followed

suit. And it was, perhaps, my first experience of the fact that in a Muslim context as well love generates love.

My first true love

The people infected with tuberculosis were my first true love. They were the most rejected and abandoned in that world. Tuberculosis has been raging in Somalia for centuries. It is estimated that everyone is infected with TB, even if providentially only a small percentage of the people who are infected develop the illness during their life.

I was in Wajir, a desolate village in the heart of the desert of North-Eastern Kenya, where I met my first TB patients: I fell in love with them and it was love for life. The TB ward of the local hospital was the ward for the desperate. It was shocking to see that they were completely abandoned and nobody cared about their suffering. I knew nothing about medicine. I carried the rain water I collected from the roof of the nice house that the Government had given me as a teacher of the local Secondary school, and filled their containers which had previously been filled with the salty water from the wells of Wajir I was given sort of orders by people apparently disturbed by the clumsiness of a young white woman who they wanted to get rid of as soon as possible. Everything was against me then. I was young, thus unworthy of attention or respect. I was white and therefore despised by a race, which thought itself superior to everybody, be they white, black or yellow or members of any other nationality. I was a Christian and therefore the more despised, rejected and feared. Everybody was convinced I had gone to Wajir to make proselytes, to convert people. Moreover I was not married, an absurdity in that world where celibacy is not considered at all a value to live for. Thirty years later, those who do not know me, still look down on me because I am unmarried. Only those who know me well will say and say tirelessly that I am a Somali in the same way as they are and that I am an authentic mother of all those I have saved, healed and helped, thereby ignoring the reality that I am not a natural mother and never will be.

I served them on my knees

I immediately started studying and observing. I was with them every day. I served them on my knees I was beside them when they were getting worse and did not have anybody to take care of them anybody who could look them in the eyes, anybody who gave them strength. After a few years in the TB Manyatta every sick person who knew they were about to die wanted only me next to them so that they could die feeling that they were loved. I began to supervise the patients' treatment after they were discharged from the hospital. The fact became known about. Treatment carried on and completed in the desert did not exist. They were all defaulters-at the rate of 100%.

In 1976, WHO (World Health Organization) asked me to take the responsibility over a pilot project on the cure of tuberculosis among the nomads. They were introducing a new short-term treatment that would cure them in six months of the previous cure. They asked me to invent a system to guarantee that the patients would complete their six months cure. In fact, for the first time in Africa short term treatment was given to an open number of sick people treatment that allowed a cure for a period of six months, where up to that time a period of eighteen months of medicines taken every day had been necessary.

It was September 1976. I decided to invite the nomads to settle in an area of the desert in front of the “Rehabilitation Centre for the Disabled”. I was working there with the companions that had joined me during those years, all volunteers without a salary, all for the poor and for Jesus Christ. Together we had started a Center for the rehabilitation of the people with poliomyelitis of the desert of the North-East of Kenya. We were a family. Besides the infected by polio we welcomed other wounded and abandoned people: the blind, dumb and deaf, people with physical or mental handicaps... the children grew up with us as their full time mothers and I am still a reference point for them.

Meanwhile the nomads began to come with their tents tied down on the back of their camels. They took down the canvasses, the bent frames and the ropes and built a tent. For six months the taking of the medicines was closely supervised every day. We received medicines with incredible regularity, almost a miracle for Africa. After six months the caravan of camels was back on the road and the healed person would go back into the desert. This policy that the WHO calls DOTS (directly observed therapy short chemotherapy) is now the official global policy of the WHO to control tuberculosis. It is applied in many countries of Africa, Asia, America and Europe too, as one of the best instruments by which to guarantee the “compliance” of the sick person with the treatment, without which there would be not authentic recovery and the curse of T.B. would continue to expand throughout the world and increasingly in the most tragic form, that of resistance to anti-tuberculosis medicines.

I live out dialogue in this way, without words

The TB Manyatta was a great adventure of love, a gift from God. It was thanks to the T.B. Manyatta and only in part to the Rehabilitation center because the handicapped count less than those suffering from T.B. in my world, that people began to say that perhaps we, too, would go to Heaven.

Then a very serious event occurred which put our lives in great danger and made the people change their minds about our entry into Heaven.

We began to be taken as an example. The first to do so was an elderly chief who cared a great deal for us “We Muslims have faith, he said one day, “and you have love”. It was like the time of a great thaw. People increasingly said that they ought to behave as we did, that they ought to learn from us to care for other people, and in particular for the most sick, the most abandoned.

Seventeen years later, immediately after the massacre of Wagalla, an elderly Arab stopped me in the middle of one of the main streets of that poor village. He was deeply touched because he had a friend among those who had been killed and had seen me beaten up when I was discovered burying the dead; because he had been afraid and had done nothing to save his own people, whereas I had dared to and I had risked my life to save their people who had become mine. He shouted, “In the name of Allah, I say that if we do follow in your footsteps we will go to Heaven.”

In Borama, where I now live, people pray fervently for my conversion to Islam. They talk to me about it quite often, but with sensitivity, adding that God knows anyway and that I will enter Paradise even if I remain a Christian. They do not want to hurt me. They try to make me feel “assimilated” by them and very near to them. They tell me every hadith (story) where the Prophet, following in the footsteps of *Issa*, Jesus, used to eat from the same dish with lepers, had compassion for poor people and showed love

for the least .I went back to Italy for a month in June 2001. I had been away for many years. For my people there it was a great event. Many were afraid that someone or something would have stopped me from coming back to them. Great was their joy when they saw me back again The most loved and revered sheekh, who taught the Qura'n to all other sheiks of the area, immediately came to my office to tell me that while I was in Rome (for them Italy is Rome) they were very happy and were praying with me for my pilgrimage, because it was an authentic pilgrimage. Sheik Abdirahman rightly proud of his knowledge repeated to me that they knew that some of the disciples of Issa, Jesus, their great prophet, are buried in Rome. To visit the places of martyrdom is one of the pilgrimages that every Muslim wants to carry out during his or her life. And thus it was that they felt that it was them who had sent me on this pilgrimage and they waited for me to tell me about it and share it with them.

In a very broad sense inter-religious dialogue is this. It's sharing. Words are not needed. Dialogue is life lived better; at least I live out dialogue in this way, without words.

We continue the struggle to free people

I have already said that tuberculosis is a scourge in Somalia In Borama, a town with about 50,000 people, we diagnosed and treated 1500 people every year almost all of whom had positive sputum above all during the early years. Now we also have the problem of AIDS. For three years now we have been seeing people with both TB and HIV, but the problem is quickly spreading. It went down to 800 patients last year (2000), but the presence of sick people with HIV is worsening the situation. In a country like Somalia where TB is endemic, TB is the first infection contracted by HIV people. We are working very hard to ensure that the population becomes aware of the problem and fights it from inside, changing their behavior and generally doing everything possible to stop the spread of the disease.

I started out five years ago with thirty beds and an increasing number of huts for the serious cases that could not get a bed in the ward. Today (2001), I have 200 beds, 8 new wards built by UNHCR, a laboratory built by UNPD UNDP and over 100 huts for patients who cannot find lodging in the village. Some of them come from far away: Ethiopia, Djibouti, and the remote areas of Somalia, others are rejected by their families because of the stigma attached to the illness. Tuberculosis is part of the people, of their history, of their struggle for existence. And yet Tuberculosis is a stigma and a curse, the sign of a punishment sent by God because of a sin that has been committed whether openly or in a hidden way.

In Borama, we continue the struggle to free people from the ignorance and the slavery of prejudices and stigma. Still today, we witness people who prefer to not to be diagnosed, treated and cured, and thus choose to die so as not to admit in public that they are afflicted by T.B. Our staff primarily at a personal level carries this fight forward.

With the DOTS system, we see all the patients every day, every day we speak to them, every day we deal with their small or big problems. Every day we discuss with them what keeps them slaves, unhappy and in the dark. And they become free happy, and they are increasingly in the light. . In the TB Center we have opened up schools for the patients and their friends: school of Qura'n, the alphabet and English. I have been involved in schools for thirty years. I organize them, I build them, and if necessary I finance them. A creature able to live in God is certainly an event of grace. There remains, however, the reality that with

education man flowers more easily in a creature that is capable of living in God, his creator and provider of every good.

The patients come to us when they are frightened, humiliated, unhappy and suffering. After a few weeks of cure, as soon as they feel a little better, they would like to run away, return to the bush, to their camels, goats and millet fields.

In the “school” of talks with the staff that takes place every day, in the schools of literacy, Qura’n and English, they gain in trust, understand the reasons why they have to finish their treatment and take their drugs and medicines under supervision, they no longer suffer, they are no longer afraid. It is possible to recover from T.B. and become strong, stronger than their family relatives their friends and acquaintances. Once they have been cured, T.B. does not spread to their children, to their wives. Before they did not know how to read and write, they knew almost nothing about their religion, now they know, they know it in translation, they learn to understand and to appreciate the universal values of good, the truth, and peace, of giving oneself to God: Allah has given, Allah has taken away, blessed be the name of Allah. They learn to face up to physical suffering and death, and not to fear them, not to reject them, to accept them. Allah exists! Allah knows and guides everyone.

We talk about this every day; we console each other, find new strength and hope in this new awareness that grows every day. And their lives change, our life changes and grows in a deeper awareness of God and in a new capability to live in His presence.

“I was blind and now I can see...”

After six months there are patients that ask to be readmitted in order to go on attending the Center so as to complete a school course, their study of the Qura’n, and all of them feel that they are teachers and with pride show the others their achievements, their progress, and their growth in human dignity. I share their life, take care of every aspect of their treatment, study new books of medicines to learn how to treat them; I look for doctors and nurses, raise funds because I do not have access to the funds for NGOs because I am a person on my own without an organization. And it is thanks to this sensitive, attentive, caring staff that at the T.B. Center we also run a clinic for people with epilepsy and mental disorders.

They are the demoniacs of this world, brought to us in chains, dirty with their excrement, and often screaming. After a few days of treatment and care we remove their chains, they are able to clean themselves and, little by little, they come to get their medicines, and flower again into normal people.

And it is thanks to two obstetricians from my staff and two *sheiks*, who are greatly loved and respected and who cooperate a lot with us, that we have initiated a significant campaign to eradicate the practice of Female Genital Mutilation and infibulations that in this part of the world is still practiced by 100% of the women.

And with this excellent staff we organize, twice a year an Eye Camp. The eye specialists are our friends who come here and within four days they manage to perform between 300 to 400 operations of cataract using an intra-ocular lens. The people are very grateful for this service. We fill Borama with banners reading “I was blind and now I can see...” It is our John (*gospel of John*), but they do not know.

One of the most consoling and encouraging experiences

Then there is the school for deaf children. Four years ago (1997), the first Kenyan Somali I had brought to school to receive a special education because he had been deaf since birth came to visit me after an adventurous journey of about one month through Kenya and Ethiopia. He was now a man and had kind of love problems and had felt the need to speak to me because in a certain sense I had been his mother and had helped him to become engaged. He immediately decided to stay and together we set up a school for deaf children. Nothing of the kind was ever started before in Somalia, there is no special education, neither for the deaf nor for the blind or the mentally handicapped children. University professors did not believe that it was possible to educate a deaf child until they saw our school. Nobody here thought it was possible.

Today everybody knows that a deaf child can do everything but hearing, that he feels like anybody else, that he can understand everything... Certainly it is a long way to go but perhaps we can now already see a light less pale... but in the distance the light is so bright that it can make your heart explode with joy and gratitude looking forward to a day that is not so far away... a new earth and a new heaven... We started our school with three deaf children, they soon became five, then eight, twelve... and today we have fifty two. We started teaching in one room within the small house I'm renting in Borama, and then we built a shade outside, then another room... At the same time other children with physical handicaps, victim of polio or war, came to beg us to take them in, because they were afraid to go to normal schools.

Our world is a hard one, a world of the strong... there is no space for the weak. We decided to take them in, telling them that as soon as they had gained enough confidence... the fact that they knew like the others and knew better than the others would have inevitably given them the strength to rise up and to feel like the others we would pay the school fees to send them to normal schools. We employed an excellent teacher for them.

In the meantime the first T.B. children that had been treated and cured at the T.B. center wanted to continue their education but many of them had no money for school fees, so we decided to take them in with the handicapped children. Of course, the people around us talked about the splendid things that were happening. And thus it was that UNHCR offered to build a real school for us. In 1998 we built four classes, an office for the teachers, a storehouse and the toilets. Then my friends in Forli built three more classes; then some Protestant friends from England whom we had met thanks to a series of providential circumstances-humble and generous people-who ask me not to send so much detailed reports when I give them account on how I have spent their money, who say that everything is going on well, everything is fine, everything is the gift of the Lord, built three more classrooms with two toilets, and again our friends from Forli' built another classroom. And still there is room for one more class in the piece of land we have received from the local community.

In the last two years, we have also taken in thirty children from the outcast clans: the blacksmiths, barbers, hunters of small game and tanners. None of their children ever went to school. They are kept apart, their sons and daughters cannot marry Somalis from other clans. They are in rebellion against God and men because of their status of being the rejected, the despised, the marginalized. And they are great workers! Many of them had TB, so they had the opportunity to go to school in our Center. There they had

the opportunity to savor the beauty, the greatness and the joy of learning, of understanding, of growing, of developing and of becoming free.

It was natural then for them to ask us to take care of their children and educate them; their children that for centuries had worked from childhood, children who, like no other children, gain their daily bread from their own sweat.

Later on, some educated people and other rich men came begging us to admit their children into our school because it was well run, with good discipline and committed teachers who love the children and teach them well. We decided to take them in...they are so few.

UT UNUM SINT has been and is the loving agony of my life

Today the school is a beautiful mixture of children from different backgrounds, with all kinds of different histories, of every kind of capability. Of course, the deaf ones study in smaller independent classes, but during recreation they are all together, the deaf children and the “normal” children. This is one of the most consoling and encouraging experiences, which gives us hope for a world where all people will be united as one in love .

This UT UNUM SINT has been and is the loving agony of my life, the yearning of my whole being. It is a life that I fight for and I struggle as Gandhi, said, my great mentor together with Vinoba, after Jesus Christ, a life that I fight for, I, a poor thing to be good, truthful, non-violent in thoughts, words and action. All my life I have struggled so that all may be one.

Every day, at the TB Center we strive for peace, for mutual understanding, to learn together to forgive... forgiveness, how difficult it is to forgive! My Muslim friends find it so difficult to appreciate it, to seek it in their lives and in their relationships with others. They say that their religion is so fudud, that it makes so few demands. God, they say, asks men to forgive, but if man is unable to do so God is forgiving.

Every day, we fight to understand and make it understood that blame does not only lie on one side but also on both sides; we reason together and strive to see everything that is positive in the other person. We look at each other in the face, in the eyes; because we want truth to be done...my staff has learnt to laugh at their limits, at their meanness, at their greed for money, at the thirst for revenge when they are hurt. These are all things that make forgiveness very difficult...they say that Allah certainly does not want this; even though Allah is infinitely merciful.

I for my part, since long ago have learnt or better understood in the depth of my being that when something goes wrong (misunderstandings, attacks, injustices, enmities, persecutions, divisions), the fault is undoubtedly mine, certainly I have made some mistakes. At the feet of the Lord it is easy to identify my fault, it does not take much time, it makes me suffer but not very much, because in the end it is so great and beautiful to recognize one's fault and fight it so that the blame may be removed, the sinful behavior be amended and so that in every relationships with other people the approach becomes positive...our duty on earth is to bring life: Life is certainly not condemnation, *ius belli* (the right of war), accusation, revenge, putting one's finger in the wound, pointing out the mistakes and the faults of other people hiding our faults instead,, irresponsibility, lack of patience, hunger, jealousy, envy, lack of hope

and of trust in people. Life is always hoping, hoping against every hope, forgetting our miseries, and ignoring others' wretchedness, believing that God exists and that He is a God of Love.

We should believe that nothing will disconcert us and we can always go on, with God! Perhaps it is not easy; it could be a titanic task to believe like that. In many ways, faith is such darkness, this faith that is first of all a gift, a grace and a blessing... Why me and not you? Why me and not her, not him, not them?

Nothing has meaning without love

Yet, life has a meaning only if one loves. Nothing has meaning without love. My life has known so many, indeed so many dangers I have faced death so many times. For years I was in the middle of wars. I have experienced in the flesh of my own people, of those that I loved, and thus in my flesh, the wickedness of man, his perversity, his cruelty, his unfairness. And I came out of this experience with the rock-solid belief that the only thing that matters is love. Even if God did not exist, only love has a meaning, only love can free a man from everything that makes him a slave. Only love allows one to breathe, to grow, to blossom and to be daring. Only love can offer the other cheek, the cheek not yet wounded, to the mockery and beating of the one who hits us because he does not know what he is doing. For love, we risk our life for our friends; we believe all things, bear all things, have hope and endure all things.

It is then that our life is worth living. It is then that our life has beauty, grace and blessings. It is then that our life discovers happiness even in suffering, because we feel the beauty of living and dying. I strongly feel that we all are called to love, that is, to holiness. The poor woman of Leon Bloy wandered from door to door... a beggar... "There is only one kind of sadness in the world: that of not to be a saint," she kept repeating. I love to think that there is another sad thing in the world: not to love... in the end it is the only thing that truly matters.

Indeed we must free ourselves of so much rubbish. But there are practical methods, there are ways, there are clear signs that there is God in the small inner cell of our souls calling us. Unfortunately, God's voice is very weak, so we need to listen attentively, to be silent, find a quiet place, even if often this place is among the others, like a mother that cannot stay away for long from her children. Indeed, in order to love it is not always enough to be good in our hearts, to yearn, to be thirsty for God. It is part of the experience of those who decide to serve the poor that the poor are not easy to love and the human heart, even that of those who give themselves can sometimes be mysteriously very hard.

Seven women thirsted for God

In Wajir, we were a community of seven women and all of us, though in different ways and to a different extent had a thirst for God. We understood that when we were on the brink of losing the sense of our service and the ability to love, we could again find these lost gifts only at the feet of the Lord. For this reason, we built a hermitage where we could retire for one day or more, or for long periods of silence at the feet of the Lord. There, we could find once more our balance, quiet, long-sightedness, wisdom, hope and the strength to fight the daily battles above all against what keeps us slaves inside, what keeps us in the dark.

We left that place with a renewed fire of love for all those people whom the Lord had put on our path... Sometimes we shared the experience... but most times we remained silent... but the radiance of the faces of my companions was so beautiful, so bright that it would tell me everything that modesty prevented them from telling me about by words.

At the Center, only God and Jesus Christ

Later on, there were other hermitages, other times of silence, the Word of God, great books, great friends, so many people that have inspired my life, people of the Catholic faith and the Fathers of the desert, the great monks, Francesco di Assisi, Chiara, Teresa di Lisieux, Teresa d'Avila, Charles de Foucauld, padre Voillaume, sorella Maria, Giovanni Vannucci, Primo Mazzolari, Lorenzo Milani, Gandhi, Vinoba, Pina e Maria Teresa ... but at the Center, only God and Jesus Christ. Nothing matters to me but God, Jesus Christ... the little ones do, those who are suffering do; I go crazy about them, I lose my head over these embers of wounded humanity.

The more they are wounded, mistreated, despised, voiceless, valueless, the more I love them with tenderness, understanding, tolerance, fearlessness and boldness. This is not something worth of praise; it is part of my nature. In them I see HIM, the Lamb of God who suffers in His flesh the sins of the world, who loads them onto his shoulders, who suffers with such great love... nobody is separated from the Love of God.

I have blamed myself a thousand times for having accepted to come here and speak to you about my life. I have been weak in submitting to the opinion of my friends who are convinced that after forty years it is good and right to share the gifts of God with others. But if this "public sharing" could help somebody who does not believe, someone who does not experience the extraordinary reality of God that loves every person, from the worthiest in the eyes of men to the most unworthy... then I would fall on my knees and bless the Lord because the Almighty has done great things in me .

The people who are not good, unable to forgive, who like to hurt, who want vengeance, the deceitful men are not necessarily bad, unable to forgive, untruthful

They are like this because they have never met someone able to love and to understand them, to carry the burden of their faults.

"Have you done evil? I will pay at your place," such are the words of Gandhi. This is what Jesus Christ has repeated for 2000 years. Who knows why we human beings are so deaf... certainly Jesus' voice is often weak and silent...but then He is in the cell of our soul and it shouldn't be too difficult to go down there and stay with Him. Mere words? No, it is the truth. It is the reality.

Certainly, for the majority of us it is and it will be necessary to be silent, switch off the mobile, throw away the television, and decide once and for all to become free from the slavery of what appears important in the eyes of the world but has absolutely no value in the eyes of God.

At the feet of God, we can find again the truth we have lost. Whatever has fallen in the dark will come to light, every storm will be calmed, and whatever appeared as a value is not a value anymore and we awake to the beauty of an honest, sincere, good life made up of true things and, not appearances, a life woven by

goodness open to others in an omnipresent very strong tension towards making all be one. It is time to come to the end. I have given a lot to the Somalis. I have received a lot from them. The greatest gift they have given me, the one I still find difficult to live, is that of the extended family in which, within the clan, everything is shared. The door is always open to welcome even the most distant member of the clan. Food is always shared naturally with anyone who knocks at the door. Nobody complains. To share with the brothers is seen as the most natural thing to do.

In my world, in Borama, unemployment is the scourge. Many people have never worked in their lives because they have never found a job. And so it happens that if there is one who has a job, he is “forced” to share the fruit of his work with twenty or thirty other people. But it is not a burden; it is the most natural thing in the world. Sharing is part of their life. And then there is their prayer five times a day...to stop whatever one is doing to give time and space to GOD.

Muslims have taught me the Faith

During these thirty years I have been suffering because in our western world we do not make a stop during our daily chores we do not get up at night, we do not interrupt our conversations to become silent and to remember that GOD exists-how beautiful to do this together with other people- to acknowledge that we come from HIM, we live in HIM, we return to HIM. But the most extraordinary gift, the one for which I will give thanks to GOD forever, is the gift of the nomads of the desert.

They are Muslims and they have taught me the Faith, the unconditioned surrender to GOD, a surrender that has nothing to do with fatalism but a surrender based on the solid rock of GOD, a surrender that is TRUST and LOVE. My nomads of the desert have taught me to do everything, to accomplish everything in the name of GOD. BISMILLAH RAHMANI RAHIM...

In the name of GOD, All-powerful and Merciful...in the name of GOD one wakes up, takes a bath, cleans the house, works, eats, works again, studies, talks, performs the thousand chores of every day and finally goes to bed: EVERYTHING IN THE NAME OF GOD.

The habit of the name of God being constantly repeated as narrated by “The stories of the Russian pilgrim” that had struck and fascinated me before my departure, has transformed my life permanently. I give thanks to my nomads for their teaching. Then life has taught me that my faith without love is useless, that my Christian religion does not have so many commandments but only one, that it is useless to build cathedrals or mosques, or to perform ceremonies or pilgrimages... that the Eucharist, which is a scandal to the atheists and people of other faiths, carries a revolutionary message: “This is my body made bread so that you too can transform yourself in bread at the table of peoples, because if you do not become bread, you won’t eat a bread of salvation but a bread of damnation.”

If I do not love, God remains without epiphany

The Eucharist tells us that our religion is useless without the sacrament of mercy and that heaven meets earth by love. Silesio says: “If I do not love, God dies on the earth; that God is God I am the cause; if I do not love, God remains without epiphany.”

This happens because we are the visible sign of His presence and we make Him to be alive in this hell of a world, where it seems He does not exist, every time we stop next to a wounded person.

In the end, I am only able to wash the feet in the true sense of the word, of the destitute, those who nobody loves, who mysteriously have nothing attractive in the eyes of men.

Luigi Pintor, a so called atheist, once wrote that there is nothing important in life than to bend down so that someone, grabbing your neck, might be able to get up again. That is true for me. It is in kneeling down so that they can, grabbing my neck, get up and start again to walk and even to walk where they have never walked, that I find peace, endless strength in the absolute conviction that everything is grace.

I would like to add that the little ones, the voiceless, those of no value in the eyes of the world but so precious in the eyes of God, the beloved ones of God, need us and we have to be there for them and with them, even if our action is just a drop in the ocean. Jesus Christ has never talked of results. He has talked only to love one another, of washing one another's feet, of forgiving each other always... The poor are waiting. There are infinite ways of serving the others, what is needed is only creativity. Let us not wait to be instructed about the right time to serve.

Let us be creative ... thus we will live new heavens and a new earth every day of our life.

Annalena Tonelli