

**HOMILY FOR THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE
SANT'EGIDIO COMMUNITY
San Giovanni in Laterano
*February 10th, 2018***

Your Eminences,
Dear brethren in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Ambassadors,
Distinguished Authorities
Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,
Dear friends,

I am delighted to be celebrating this Eucharistic liturgy here today with you, on the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Sant'Egidio Community. Together with the many who have gathered here in this Lateran basilica, I express gratitude to the Lord for having inspired and accompanied the Community for all these years. I greet you all affectionately and in particular Professor Andrea Riccardi and the president, Prof. Marco Impagliazzo.

The presence of so many, from the youngest to the elderly, the representatives of your communities present in many countries, Christians of different denominations, Authorities and Ambassadors, all bear witness to the affection and respect of so many and express the expectation that you will continue to bear the fruits of good.

The Church of the Diocese of Rome, represented here by the Vicar of His Holiness, has seen you move your first steps following the Second Vatican Council. Today he rejoices and prays with you, because, as Saint John Paul II said in 1986- "*Wherever there are other Sant'Egidio Communities – even if not Roman ones – they are always from Rome.*"

We have listened to the Word of God. Do not stop returning to the Word of God! This is the thread of your history; listening to the Word every day, from the beautiful Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere to every corner of Rome and the world.

Let us therefore return to the Word on this day of celebration. Mark the Evangelist narrates the meeting of Jesus with a leper in

Capernaum in the peripheral Galilee. This is the first healing of the fourteen narrated by the evangelists. Leprosy was a disease that in addition to its intrinsic seriousness, excluded people forever. Lepers were obliged to shout from afar the words “*impure, impure*”, so that they could be avoided (Luke 3,45). Leprosy was therefore considered a sort of living death.

The healing by Jesus released the leper from segregation and so the man started to talk to everyone about what he had experienced. Freeing people from segregation and solitude, integrating them in the circle of life, is what you have been doing for years, ever since – as young students – you addressed with passion the Roman working class suburbs overcoming so many barriers.

Children, women, men, the poor, the elderly living difficult lives, saw themselves almost like the leper of Capernaum. Their destiny regards to the city was that of being excluded. They used to say, “*I am going to Rome*”, and when looking for work they kept their origins secret.

There seemed to be an invisible wall or an abyss. Those very first encounters with that world marked the beginning of the story of their liberation from the “*leprosy*” of exclusion. You communicated the Word of God in the poorest peripheries, you nourished crowds of people yearning for dignity and solidarity, and they became your favourite brothers. With enthusiasm and humility you made it known that no one is excluded in the eyes of God. This story continues in many countries in the world; in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas.

This story concerns the “*leprosy*” of poverty, but also of disease, as in the case of treating those suffering from AIDS in Africa. The excluded themselves become the protagonists of an innovative liberation of others. You believed that peace is possible, that a people is never condemned to be hostage to violence and you tried to allow growth of real hope for a liberation from the war and violence that, like leprosy, affects entire populations.

It is thus that you became committed to approach those who fight or hate one another. Furthermore, you paid attention to those wounded by war and by poverty. This reminds me of the refugees and

the emigrants, in particular the Humanitarian Corridors for refugees from Syria and the Horn of Africa.

But let us return to the Capernaum of the Gospel. The leper is kneeling in front of Jesus; “*Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean*” he said. The encounter with Jesus reawakens a request for redemption. Jesus “*had compassion*” for that man and healed him. Jesus’ compassion is at the heart of his relationship with people. Jesus “*stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I will do it. Be made clean."*” (Luke 5,13a). Words accompany the physical contact. By touching him Jesus overcame the barrier. He revealed to the leper that God wished to save him; “*I will do it, be made clean.*” The impossible becomes possible.

The way of compassion, taught and practiced by Jesus, has been, and must increasingly be, the path to be followed by the Community. Thanks to compassion our at times lazy and powerless arms too will reach out and hold those who are separated. “*And we find ourselves in one single family where one confuses those who help with those who have been helped. The protagonist become the embracing*” as Pope Francis told you (speaking to the Sant’Egidio Community on June 14th, 2014).

There a surprising fact in the evangelical words. Jesus tries to impose silence on the cleansed man and asks him not to present himself to the priests. He is in no rush to receive consensus or publicity, but experiences disquiet because one only understands the grace of that encounter step by step.

Compassion and passion are not disassociated from patience, which is the capacity to work in faith and in expectation, and has marked your history for these fifty years. You did not stop when faced with a wall of what seemed to be impossible. God’s love does not stop and does not back away when faced with the abyss that divides from enemies, from lepers, from the poor.

On Sant’Egidio’s 20th Anniversary, Saint John Paul II said, “*Your small community posed itself no borders from the very beginning if not that of mercy*” (1988).

This was also experienced at Capernaum; the miracle of an encounter without borders. From Capernaum to another Capernaum,

in the various peripheries of the world; that is how the human family is recomposed beyond its lacerations.

When you looked at the dream of a world at peace you did not accept the abysses inherited from the past.

The dream began to come true in your daily service to the poor. Your commitment to peace became a struggle against war, “*the mother of all poverty*”, as you say. In this perspective I see the passion for reconciling people, for weaving bonds of brotherhood between Christians and the followers of various religions, to keep alive the “*spirit of Assisi*”. “*Prayer, the poor and peace*” is how Pope Francis so effectively summarised fifty years of your life.

We are not here only to remember and celebrate a beautiful story. Your story is open to the future and is a gift to the young generations.

Fifty years are a talent for the Church to spend without fear of tomorrow’s world, so different from yesterday’s world. Yes, the global world needs communities like yours, deeply-rooted at a local level but also capable of moving at a global level with spirit and brotherhood.

Finally, with the words of the Apostle Paul, I express a wish and a hope, which is the key for walking towards the future; imitate the Apostle Paul, just as he imitated Christ, without looking for your own interest, but that of many, so that everyone may achieve redemption.

In expressing our gratitude for today’s celebration, we ask God the Almighty to send His divine blessing to each and every one of you, to your work and the path still to be travelled. May Mary, the Mother of God and our mother, accompany you. Amen.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin