

## C'EST LE CIEL!

JEAN-PAUL HERNÁNDEZ SJ

Dear Living Stones!

In the first days of September I had the joy to welcome in Rome a group of 9 homeless persons led by an old Swiss priest who is very well known in Lausanne and Fribourg for his social work among the poorest. They came to encounter Pope Francis, but also to enjoy what some of them called “the first holiday of my life”. The old priest knew about “Pietre Vive” and asked us to accompany the group in several churches of the “eternal town”.

The group was composed by Swiss citizens and by immigrants, Christians and Muslims. Some had psychiatric problems. Some had been in jail. Some have serious alcohol problems and didn't smell very well. They all smoke constantly. The oldest member of the group was a lady who was not even able to speak clearly and who lived on the street since 50 years. As soon as we entered in the first church we visited, she looked on high and spoke clearly: “Oooh! C'est le ciel!” (it's heaven). I thought: in one exclamation this poor homeless did the best summary of books and books, libraries and libraries of art historical scholarship and theology. No specialist, no historian, is able to add anything to this expression, which is not only a sentence but an exclamation, an emotion, a bodily movement, an event. I thought also: Pietre Vive has only one goal: to allow this event.

This event was indeed allowed not only by the masterpiece itself, but by the context, by the human entourage, by the welcoming previous experience. This woman had been invited by the priest and had asked 20 times if it was a real invitation or just for fun; this woman had travelled 12 hours in a minibus from Fribourg to Rome with other “strange people” but without violence; this woman had slept for the first time since years in a real bed and was served by some Jesuits and several Living Stones. This woman has discovered something like a community.

I think that only a community (a free welcoming community!) can disclose the deeper sense of the Christian art of our churches. In 2013, in our first edition of “Pietre Vive Santiago”, a professor of aesthetics visited us and told us simply: “Build the community and the piece of Christian art will reveal by itself its deeper meaning”. “C'est le ciel!” is not only an aesthetic exclamation, but it's a spiritual discovery. It's not only about an object of art, but it's about new relationships among human beings. The “heaven” is the new way to enjoy the relationships. The art makes it visible.

The expression of this old lady reminds me a crucial episode of the history of Christianity. At the end of the 10th century, the pagan Prince Vladimir of Kiev sent embassies to several non pagan Reigns in order to choose the religion that could be the most appropriated for his people of the Rus'. The messengers coming back from Islamic countries spoke about the sadness of the inhabitants. The messengers who visited western Christian churches came back speaking about ugliness. Those who were among Jews remembered that the Jews lost even Jerusalem, so they couldn't be an interesting religion. Those who visited Constantinople and participated to a liturgy in Hagia Sophia referred: “We do not know if we were on earth or in heaven”. And so did the Rus' become Christian of Byzantine tradition.

This story (referred in “Nestor's Chronicle” of the 12th century) shows that the aim of a church is to bring people into heaven, but it shows also that this is possible only through the Church. We know theologically that the main “heaven on earth” are the sacraments, but the amazing effect which touched so deep the messengers of Prince Vladimir can be reached today by the witness of a living community, by the welcoming joy of young faces, by the experience of gratuity. This is also “Church”. This is the experience of “Pietre Vive”: Church in church to open the heaven. And this was the experience of that old lady.

Today not only the whole Rus' of Kiev is waiting to choose its own creed, but our whole society, the whole humankind. The post-modern and post-secular human being is not “against” faith, but is like a pagan “exploring” several ways and experiences. He will choose the one that opens him the heaven. The tourists we welcome in our Living Stones service are the whole humankind looking for “the most appropriated religion”.

In a certain sense, the whole humankind is waiting back the people who met the Living Stones. They are the ambassadors who will say at home: "we were in heaven".

But among all messengers it's important to recognize the most important ones: the poorest, the homeless, the last. They are the most faithful and true ambassadors because they are really free and they recognize immediately the heaven. "C'est le ciel!" is an affirmation. It's a present tense. It's the heaven already now!

In a certain sense, the heaven cannot be open without this celebrating exclamation. The heaven cannot be open without a poor who recognizes it. "I came to announce the good news to the poor" says Jesus quoting the prophet. We cannot announce the good news if we don't announce the good news to the poor. They show us where heaven is. They show us where to go. If they recognize the heaven in our churches, the whole "Rus" will soon or late recognize it, because if a poor says that it is the heaven, that means that it is really the heaven.

That's why I invite each community of Living Stones to search this kind of messengers. To listen to them. To let them show you, where heaven is and how to open it. In your guided visit, choose always the lowest, the last, the poorest. Jesus loved to speak to children and to the poorest. Antoni Gaud after a certain point of his life renounced to lead important people in the construction site of the Sagrada Familia, and began to accept only children and poor people in his guided visits. I can tell you: Living Stones was born in that way and will be always born again through this way.

Thank you to those Living Stones communities who began to volunteer in prison. To those who are active in an Hospital. To those who are leading refugees and homeless. Some other Living Stones are planning to lead disabled people, blind people,... A lot are leading children. Thank you all of you. You put stones on life. C'est le ciel!