

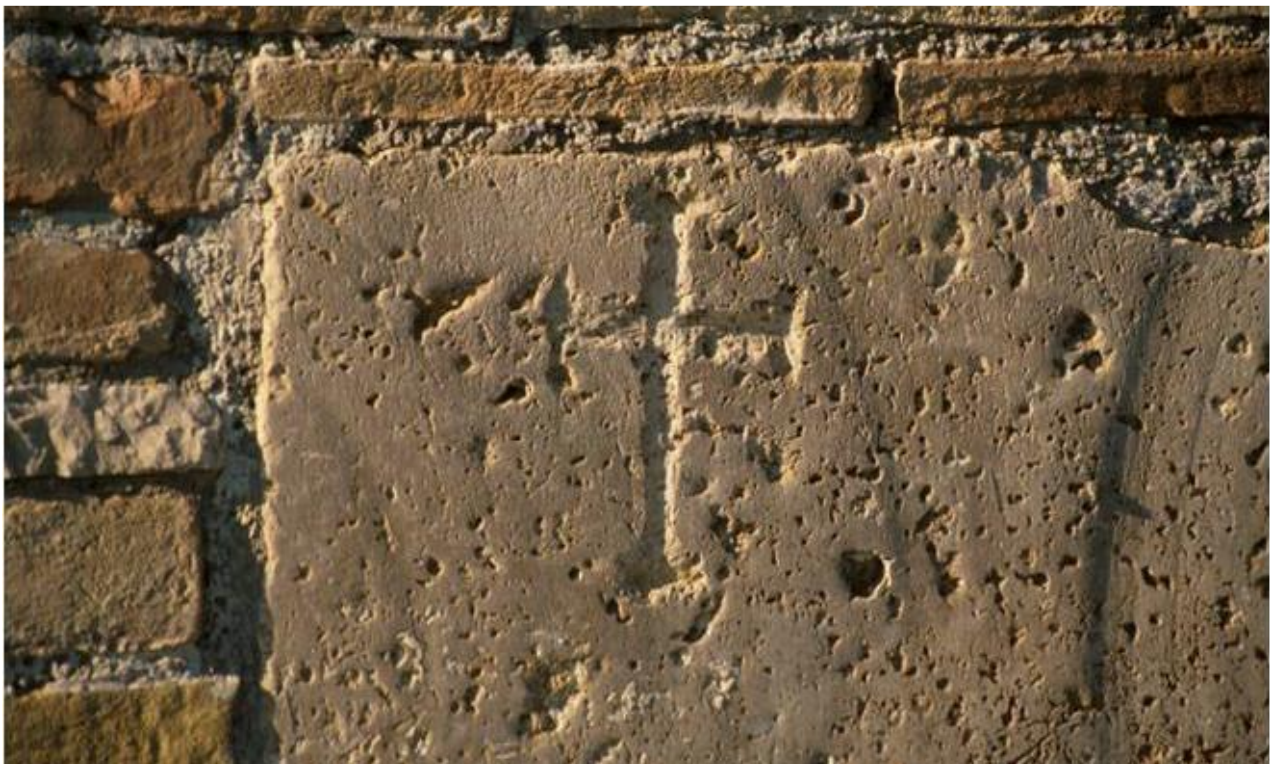
What Living Stones is



LIVING STONES

"If a pagan comes and tells you 'Show me your faith!' take him to church and show him the decoration of which it is adorned and explain him the series of sacred paintings." (St. John Damascene, *In Defense of Holy Images*)

"The true apology of Christian faith, the most convincing demonstration of its truth against every denial, are on the one hand the Saints, on the other hand the beauty that the faith has generated. For that today the faith can grow, we need to conduct ourselves and the people we meet to meet the Saints, to get in touch with the beauty." (Joseph Ratzinger, *La Bellezza, la Chiesa [The Beauty, The Church]*, Rome 2005)



"Living Stones" is a communion of youth communities born to announce Jesus Christ, the Beauty of the Church, to those who look at the beauty of churches. It is an act of love towards the beggars of sense and light who seek Life in the stones of Christian monuments.

Through welcoming, prayer and free guided tours the "Living Stones" announce the Gospel as the "invisible in the visible" that the art reveals. They make experience the Christian sacred space as a place of encounter with God.

For the Living Stones the Christian art is a prayer delivered to the eye, made accessible. But it is also a narration, a story of holiness. To contemplate the work of art means then to enter into the prayer of the artist and in the history which it tells. It occurs thus a spiritual communion through the centuries where a tourist becomes a pilgrim. He finds himself in a space that reveals his own inner life, his identity, his vocation.

A community of "Living Stones" answers to following characteristics:

1. The community

- ❖ The living stones are not isolated guides but operate in a community. Their being visible as a community inside the churches is already a first testimony of the Beauty that they desire to reveal: the beauty of a faith that creates the communion so longed for by every human heart.
- ❖ Being a community inside the sacred building is to make visible what the sacred building is a metaphor for: the Church of “living stones constructed as a spiritual building” around the “Living Stone” which is Christ (cf. 1Pt 2:4-5). For many “distant” who enter a church, the living stones are the first “face” of a young, welcoming, joyful Church.
- Therefore, it is necessary that in addition to the times of service, the living stones nourish a rich community life of prayer, sharing and formation in a climate of the deep spiritual friendship.
- Even in places where the Living Stones are an expression of a wider community (e.g. "Ignatian Youth", CLC, "Magis groups" etc.) it is important that the "Living Stones" group has its specific moments.
- The Church “anchorage” of Living Stones is the Society of Jesus, and in particular its youth apostolate. The

coordinator of each group of Living Stones is a Jesuit or non-Jesuit who is familiar with Ignatian spirituality (laic, religious, diocesan priest, etc.).

- Living Stones has a Catholic origin and a Catholic identity but Christians of other denominations must feel "at home". Depending on local characteristics, Protestant or Orthodox components give to the group of Living Stones an ecumenical character that enriches the witness of communion. The content of the visits will also encourage the openness and dialogue with non-Christian traditions.
- Apart from exceptional cases the living stones that do an active service must be young people between 18 and 35 years. The living stones more advanced in the age become a support for the apostolate of the youngest, with the welcome, financing, formation, contacts, logistical help, intellectual research, publications etc.

2. The prayer

- ❖ The Living Stones rise from the prayer and lead to the prayer. Through the personal meeting with Christ and through the listening to His Word in the silence, the living

stone finds the desire to love and lets himself to be shaped as a witness of a Beauty offered to all.

- ❖ Only praying, the living stone will know how to communicate in his guided tour the desire to pray. And only praying he will be able to say "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Ps 117) looking at those whom the Lord entrusts to him for the short time of a visit.
- ❖ The service of Living Stones is deeply "priestly". They welcome people as gifts to be returned into the hands of the Lord.
- ❖ The "spirituality" of Living Stones is an arc between two questions, two "graces to ask for" in a prayer. The first is expressed in a retreat of preparation or in the morning before the service. The living stone enters the prayer with the question: "Lord, what do you want me to tell the tourists from you?" The second marks the end of the service. In a re-reading of the experience the living stone listens to the Lord again and asks Him "What did you say me through them?". The whole service thus becomes a "spiritual exercise".
- ❖ The Ignatian spirituality is the natural background of Living Stones for the great importance that St. Ignatius attributes to the image and imagination in his Spiritual Exercises (to

enter a prayer in the sight of God, "composition of place", "contemplation" etc.).

- In churches where they do their service, the living stones arrange a "prayer corner", possibly animated by songs and readings. It is where the living stones gather for a few minutes after each visit to let the heart rest in front of the Lord, to thank Him for each guided person and to give Him the joys and sorrows. The "prayer corner" is pointed out as an opportunity also for tourists. Also they can gather there, light a candle and write a prayer in the book which will be read at the end of the day during the prayer of living stones.
- Each day of service should be framed by the prayer: one hour of meditation in the morning and a mass (or a sharing in prayer) in the end of the day.
- In the community meetings which are not dedicated to the service, plenty of time is taken for prayer, possibly in the style of Ignatian prayer.
- Once a year the Living Stones group will do a week of Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, if possible together. If the members of the group have already done a week of Ignatian Spiritual Exercises in other Ignatian reality, it is expected that every year they do a specific Living Stones retreat of at least three days.

3. The announcement

- ❖ The proposal of Living Stones to the general public is not that of a cultural service and even less of a tourist visit. But it is a true proclamation of the fool love of God and an introduction to interiority.
- ❖ Every single living stone finds his personal manner in which he pronounces the announcement in the best way. Generally they base on what in the work of art has touched their own lives most closely. Thus the words receive a weight of the experience that makes them get into the heart of the listener. So the triangulation of testimony between the work of art, the witness-interpreter and the listener is created.
- ❖ The style of Living Stones is situated in a fruitful tension between two poles: the need for the explicit announcement that saves the life and the recognition of the presence of God in every human heart, already since always. The absolutising of the first pole becomes a temptation to demonize the world and to place myself on the place of the Saviour. The absolutising of the second pole becomes a temptation not to announce any more.

Through the mediation of art, the announcement of Living Stones makes out of two points one single event of truth.

- ❖ Another arc characterizes the announcement of Living Stones: the one which exists between a) the question of the tourist and b) the faith of the Church or the spiritual experience which is expressed in the piece of art. The thirst of God which lives in the heart of every single human being is often hidden in a re-elaboration expressed in artistic-cultural or simply touristic terms. Through the mediation of art, the Living Stones take the person from where he is, with his expressed question, and accompany him to find his true question, to the possibility to confess his own search for God. The works of arts are, as Florenskij says about an icon, “frames of a meeting”.
- ❖ The living stones welcome a visitor in the church as a teenager welcomes a friend in his room. The most important element is the human, personal relationship. To make the guest feel "at home". Then the teenager describes to his friend pictures and posters that he has put on walls of the room. He does not describe them to him indicating the number of pixels of the photo or the chemical formula of the used paper, but explaining why these images are important to him and why he has put them in that position. Maybe he will sing the song of the

photographed singer or he will speak about his grandmother or his girlfriend visible on the photos. And while he is telling the story of these people, his passion for them will transpire. And maybe his friend will become curious and he will want to know them. So the living stone live with the tourist.

❖ The members of Living Stones must be chosen only among those believers who desire to bring the others closer to the faith, knowing that "the greatest work of charity is the evangelization, which is the service of the Word" (Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2013).

➤ But as Simeon and Anna (see Luke 2) the living stone is waiting in the temple for the entry of Christ. He comes in every single man. Therefore for the living stone every man who enters the church is an "Advent". During the welcoming (inside and outside the church) and during the visits a "welcome", the listening, a welcoming look, the appreciation of what each visitor "brings with him", the desire to learn from him, in one word: the "drawing near" are very important. This "listening" is not a strategy but a true listening to Christ who passes. In every visit the living stone finds himself as a guided guide. By his brothers and by God.

- The announcement of the living stone is thus the revelation of what is already there. As in front of the work of art a word of a guide "shows" what is already there but has never been noticed, so the Word is the "light" that "shows" that "the Kingdom is at hand". The Living Stones guide, through showing the work of art, illuminates that work of art which is the man and his proximity to the Kingdom. In this sense, "evangelization is the highest and most integral promotion of the human person" (Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2013).
- The announcement of the living stone is neither a front announcement nor a "preaching" that exploits the work of art as an "excuse." The word of the Living stone remains faithful to the objectivity of what the tourist can see. Then the visit works as the parables of the Gospel. Explaining the horizon of faith, in which the work of art was born, becomes a way how to make present a story. At the beginning it's the story of "others", apparently remote (e.g. "A father had two sons ..."). Only slowly the listener realizes that this story could be his own story. But he is free to go in or not. The living stone speaks not of what the listener "has to believe", but of what the community, that saw the birth of the work of art, had believed. And this can be very explicit. The charm of this faith, about

which the Living stone is speaking, and the glint, that it produces in his eyes, rise in the listener a desire to enter into this story of faith. It's so that the announcement of the Gospel leads to "fall in love with Love".

- The guided tour of living stones includes also the narration of lives of the main Saints represented in or that marked the church. In the transition from the aesthetic beauty to a story of the real life the beauty becomes true and the truth becomes beautiful.

4. The gratuitousness

- ❖ The proclamation of love of God is the proclamation of the gratuitousness of God. God loves for free. But the proclamation is "performative," it means it makes the gratuity of God really present. Because the proclamation brings into a play the announcer, it is a wasted time, given to the listener, without purporting results. An announcement of the gratuitousness of God, that would not be for free, would cancel the announcement itself. "Freely you have received, freely you give" (Matthew 10:8). In this the Living Stones are placed in the perfect

continuity with the intuition of St. Ignatius about the gratuitousness of the ministries.

- ❖ The discovery of this gratuitousness creates in the listener an imbalance that he will try to fulfill willing to persuade himself that in reality the gratuitousness does not exist. So he will try to "pay" for the visit. If the living stone accepts the money, the tourist has succeeded in neutralizing the disquiet caused by the proclamation. If on the contrary the visit remains radically for free, the tourist will remain with a "holy imbalance" in himself that will push him one day to want to discover this gratuitousness that he did not know before.
- The service of living stones must always be radically for free, both for the tourist and for the inviting institution.
- If the visitor insists on leaving some money the Living stone will say that he can give it to the first poor man he meets in the street or about whom he knows that he needs it. Then often the question "Why are you doing this?" arises. It is a precious moment in which the discourse can become more personal and the witness most explicit.
- In places where the service is done in churches with entrance fee, it must be very clear to the visitor that the

living stones have absolutely nothing to do with the institution that runs the monument.

- Just to be able to work in the radical poverty, the living stones will can and will have to look for other ways of providing of the common expenses. Also reduced to the minimum, expenses can't always be avoided and must be financed by the members themselves, by former living stones or benefactors of externals to the service.

5. The essentiality

- ❖ The Good News is proclaimed with a free heart of one whose "equipment is light": "Do not take neither gold nor silver, nor money in your purses, nor scrip for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff" (Mt 10:9-10). The material poverty of the apostle is one of the few bridges that today allow human beings to approach a Christian artistic heritage, often seen as "too rich".
- ❖ The announcement of the Good News to the poor is the mission of Christ and the messianic fulfillment of history (cf. Luke 4:18). The Good News is proclaimed to the poor or is not good news.
- ❖ The poor are authoritative "exegetes" of the Word. In them the truth of the Gospel is revealed. Only among the

"rejected stones" the "living stones" will understand what a living stone is. Only by listening to the least they will understand what it means "to guide".

- The radical simplicity of the active members, especially during the days of service, is a part of the style of Living Stones. In Living Stones meetings they look for a Spartan accommodation (in dorms or even on the ground) and self-management. They will avoid any unnecessary expense and every worldly style. This simplicity of life is a source of joy; it strengthens community ties and unbalances the apostle, making his word more charged. The apostle must remain a pilgrim, rich only in the Word.
- Also during the visits a simple style is important, in the clothing, in the means, in the attitudes. We beware of any excessive use of technology that can outshine the irreplaceable physical presence of the witness.
- We will avoid falling into the temptation of seeking the power, fights for influences and conflicts of interests. We will gladly welcome partnerships and "extra" services but without ever losing our specific and the freedom to say no: "Whatever house you enter, stay there, and then spread beyond" (Luke 9:4).

- The living stones must have a special love for the poorest people of the place, who often roam around the churches and in the center of the tourist cities. We should search for their company, if possible share with them meals, involve them in the visits. The greatest joy of a living stone will be when the poorest will come in communion with us, because the last one is always Christ. The poorest is he of whom the Psalm says: "Lift up your front door, look up old thresholds, and enter the King of glory" (Ps 24). To lose a contact with the poor, to offer guided tours passing over the beggars and ignoring the starving, means to lose Christ. The living stones can relax when the last poor comes into the church.
- Organizing visits for children, an exquisite exercise, with a strong impact on adults and with the high educational value for the living stones themselves, makes part of the care for the least.

6. The intellectual dimension

- ❖ The living stones are located at the crossroads of many cultural and intellectual challenges. The members of Living Stones communities thus live a path of formation and

reflection that goes beyond what is merely necessary for the guided tour.

- The tourism, and in particular the religious tourism, is one of the most marking mass phenomena of Western society. The living stones interpret it as a "sign of times" of a search for God more and more present in a world seemingly more and more secularized. The tourism is thus that "kairos" that the Church must take in order to meet the man.
- The Christian monument is a place of memory and therefore of identity, in a "liquid society" with a spasmodic and sometimes violent seek of identity. A spiritual reading of the monument is an evangelization of memory and a work on the identity of a city, a people, a nation. It is a bridge to many other disciplines such as architecture, urban planning, art history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, politics, etc.
- To explain the Christian art on the basis of faith means to accept a "conflict of interpretations" that are competing for the meaning of the Christian art. For Living Stones an interpretation that does not make the "fusion of horizons," it means that is not based on the horizon of

faith, which has created the work of art, is not a scientific interpretation.

- Living Stones promote a new way of reading the Christian art, putting in dialogue biblical, patristic and liturgical sources with the great authors of the art historical research, of the philosophical aesthetics, of the philosophical hermeneutics and of the biblical exegesis. In particular, the application of some insights of the narrative exegetical method for the sacred building seems to offer interesting perspectives.
- Already the artistic creation itself is a "theological event", regardless of the explicit intentions of the artist. Hermann Hesse wrote in *Klein und Wagner* (1920): "Art means: to reveal God in everything." In the Bible, the art is given to the man to build the temple, it is to remember God. And this temple is an image of the human life itself. But in place of the temple, the man has always been tempted to build the idol. The artist is thus the quintessence of the man who builds his own life as a temple or as an idol. As a "creator", the artist is also the highest collaborator of God. Living Stones will seek contact with the artists.

- Living Stones will take care of the intellectual formation of its members, not only locally, but with the organization of common moments for the formation of all.
- In the formation of living stones not only the deepening of the theology, that is the background of the origin of a work of art, will be important, but also the further developments of the theology that has surmounted some "nodes" whose tracks the works of the past bear (e.g. in the ecumenical field etc.).

Depending on local circumstances, Living Stones gives rise to many other initiatives that are not exactly the apostolate of Living Stones and that sometimes differ from the style of Living Stones itself but which can be watched with sympathy and considered as a fruit of the Living Stones. After the discernment and in accordance with the local community, members of Living Stones who participate in or guide these activities, will use the name "Living Stones" or not. Among these initiatives are to be highlighted: the contribution to catechesis in the diocese, TV, video and powerpoint production, conferences elsewhere (prison, parishes, schools etc.), publications, "art and spirituality" week-ends, theatre "performances" in the sacred space, special programs for disabled people,....

The history of Christian art is a continuous prayerful interpretation of biblical and liturgical sources. Biblical passages have profoundly marked the artistic models: the heavenly Jerusalem, Jacob's ladder, the starry sky etc. As "living stones" we recognize ourselves in particular in the episode of the burning bush (Ex 3). In it, the sacred author puts the reader in the situation to understand what a sacred space is and how the encounter with God, with our own identity, with our vocation happens. Living Stones would like to continue today the service which many centuries ago the editor of that episode began.



Our way to work together

Each local group (or “community”) is autonomous and is led by a “coordinator” chosen by the members of the same group. The election process is one of “spiritual discernment in common”. And if necessary, it could be led with the help of the “central coordination”.

Each group is helped, when possible, by a “spiritual assistant” (religious or secular) who accompanies the members in their vocational journey, but does not lead the group.

Every year (around November 1st) the coordinators of the entire international network gather to share LS priorities and discuss common projects and problems.

A central coordination of “columns” (elected by co-option) ensures the following services at the international network level:

- Accompaniment of coordinators in their difficulties;
- Organization of international events and camps;
- Preparation of the common intellectual formation (podcasts, box, formation camps,...);
- Preparation of the annual spiritual pathway (and “theme of the year”);
- International communication (web, socials,...);
- Institutional representation (legal recognition, relations with international institutions, financial aspects,...);
- Music education and its application to service.

Since 2022 a residential LS „house“ offers in Amsterdam an experience of 9-months community, service and formation.

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