

What a gift, time!

The start of a new year in our liturgy, is enlightened by the ancient blessing with which the Israelite priests used to bless the people: "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord look upon you with kindness and give you peace."

Dear friends and readers of the Salesian Bulletin, we are at the beginning of a new year. Let us express our best wishes to each other for this new year and for all the time that lies ahead. Let our greetings be a gift that contains all other gifts for a truly fulfilling life.

Let this wish be really enlightening. Let us let Don Bosco who, when he arrived at the seminary in Chieri stopped in front of the sundial that still exists today in the courtyard, and reflected: "Looking up at a sundial, I read this verse: *"Afflictis lentae, celeres gaudentibus horae."* Here, I said to my friend, is our program of life: let us always be cheerful and time will pass quickly (Biographical Memoirs I, 374).

Our first wish to all of you is to live what Don Bosco reminds us: live well, live serenely, and bring serenity to all those around you and time will acquire a different value! Every moment in time is a treasure; but it is a treasure that passes quickly. Don Bosco always loved to comment: "The three enemies of man are: death (which surprises); time (which escapes him), the devil (who lays his snares to entice him)" (MB V, 926).

According to an old saying: "Remember that being happy is not having a sky without storms, a road without accidents, work without effort, and relationships without disappointments." "Being happy is not just celebrating successes, but learning lessons from failures. Being happy is recognizing that life is worth living, despite all the challenges, misunderstandings, and periods of crisis. It is thanking God every morning for the miracle of life."

A wise man kept a huge pendulum clock in his study that chimed every hour with solemn slowness, but also with a resounding echo.

"But doesn't it disturb you?" asked a student.

"No," replied the wise man. "Because at every hour I am forced to ask myself: what have I done with the hour that has just passed?"

Time is the only non-renewable resource. It consumes itself at an incredible speed. We know that we will not have another chance. Therefore, all the good we can do, all the love we can give, all the kindness and the gentleness we are capable of must be given now. Because we will not return to this earth again. With a perpetual veil of remorse within us, we feel that Someone will ask us: "What have you done with all that time I gave you?"

Our hope is called Jesus.

In this new year that we have just begun, the dates and numbers of a calendar are conventional signs; they are signs and numbers invented to measure time. In the transition from the old year to the new year, very little has changed. Yet the perception of a year that is ending forces us to always take stock. How much have we loved? How much have we lost? How much have we become better? How much have we become worse? Passing time never leaves us the same.

The liturgy, at the dawn of the new year, has its own way of making us take stock. It does so through the initial words of the Gospel of John – words that may seem to be difficult to grasp, but actually reflect the depth of life: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God: all things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it." At the core of every life resounds a Word greater than us. It is the reason for our existence, for the existence of the world, for the existence of everything. This

Word is God Himself – the Son. This Word is Jesus. The name of the reason why we were made is called Jesus.

He is the true reason for which everything exists, and it is in him that we can understand what exists. Our life should not be judged by comparing it with history, with its events, and with its way of thinking. Our life cannot be judged by looking at ourselves and at our own experience alone. Our life is understandable only if it is approached from the perspective of Jesus. In him everything takes on a profound sense of meaning. Even the apparent contradictions and injustices are seen in a different light. It is by looking at Jesus that we come to get a deeper insight into ourselves. A psalm says it well: “In your light, we see light.”

This is the way to see Time according to the Heart of God, and we hope to live this new time in this way.

The new year will bring to all of us, to the Salesian family, and to the Congregation in particular important events and novelties. All in the context of the gift of the Jubilee that we are living in the Church!

Within the spirit of the Jubilee, let us be carried away by the Hope that is the presence of God in our lives.

The first month of this new year, January, is dotted with Salesian feasts that lead us to the Solemnity of Don Bosco. Let us thank God for this delightful dish with which he allows us to begin this new year.

Let us therefore leave the last word to Don Bosco and let this maxim of his shape our 2025: “My children, preserve time and time will preserve you forever.” (MB XVIII 482, 864).

Profiles of families wounded

in the history of Salesian holiness

1. Stories of wounded families

We are used to imagining the family as a harmonious reality, characterized by the coexistence of multiple generations and the guiding role of parents who set the norm, and of children who – in learning it – are guided by them in the experience of reality. However, families are often affected by dramas and misunderstandings or marked by wounds that undermine their ideal structure, leaving a distorted, misleading, and deceptive image of them.

The history of Salesian holiness is also marked by stories of wounded families: families where at least one parental figure is absent, or where the presence of the mother and father becomes, for various reasons (physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual), detrimental to their children, who are now on the path towards sainthood. Don Bosco himself, who experienced the premature death of his father and the separation from his family due to the prudent plan of Mama Margaret, desired – it is no coincidence – that the Salesian work be particularly dedicated to the “poor and abandoned youth” and did not hesitate to reach out to the young people who were formed in his Oratory with an intense vocational pastoral care (demonstrating that no wound from the past is an obstacle to a full human and Christian life). It is therefore natural that Salesian holiness, which draws from the lives of many of Don Bosco’s young people who were later consecrated through him to the cause of the Gospel, bears within itself traces of wounded families. This is a logical consequence of its origins.

Of these boys and girls who grew up in contact with Salesian works, three will be presented, whose story is to be “grafted” into the biographical legacy of Don Bosco. The main characters are:

– Blessed Laura Vicuña, born in Chile in 1891, orphaned of her father and whose mother began a cohabitation in Argentina with the wealthy landowner Manuel Mora; Laura, therefore, wounded by her mother's morally irregular situation, was ready to offer her life for her;

– The Servant of God Carlo Braga, from Valtellina, born in 1889, abandoned as a very young child by his father, while his mother was sent away due to a mix of ignorance and malicious gossip, being deemed mentally unstable. Carlo, therefore, had to face great humiliations and saw his Salesian vocation called into question multiple times by those who feared in him a compromising resurgence of the mental distress falsely attributed to his mother;

– Finally, the Servant of God Ana María Lozano, born in 1883 in Colombia, who followed her father to the leper colony, where he was forced to move due to the appearance of dreaded leprosy. She was hindered in her religious vocation, but was finally able to realise it thanks to her providential encounter with Blessed Luigi Variara, sdb.

2. Don Bosco and the search for the father

Like Laura, Carlo, and Ana María – marked by the absence of or the “wounds” by one or more parental figures – before them, and in a certain sense “on their behalf”, Don Bosco also experienced the absence of a strong family unit.

The *Memoirs of the Oratory* soon dwelt on the early loss of the father: Francesco died at 34, and Don Bosco – not without resorting to an expression that is, in some respects, disconcerting – acknowledged that, “God, *merciful* as He is, struck them all with a great misfortune”. Thus, among the very first memories of the future saint of the young, a lacerating experience emerged: that of his father's lifeless body, from which his mother tried to take him away, but encountered Johnny's resistance, “I absolutely wanted to stay”, explains Don Bosco, and then added, “If Dad doesn't come, I don't want to go [away]”. Margaret then responded, “Poor son, come with me, you no longer have a father”. She cried, and Johnny, who

lacked a rational understanding of the situation, intuitively grasped the full extent of the drama. With an emotional intuition, he empathised and shared in his mother's sadness, "I cried because she cried, since at that age I certainly could not understand how great a misfortune the loss of a father was".

In front of his dead father, Johnny shows that he still considered him the centre of his life. He indeed said, "I don't want to *go* [with you, Mom]" and not, as we would expect, "I don't want to *come*". His point of reference is his father – the starting point and the hoped-for point of return – in relation to whom every distancing appears destabilising. In the tragedy of those moments, moreover, Johnny had not yet understood what the death of a parent means. He indeed hoped ("if Dad doesn't come...") that his father could still remain close to him: yet he already sensed the immobility, the silence, the inability to protect and defend him, and the impossibility of being taken by the hand to become a man in his turn. The immediately subsequent events then confirm John in the certainty that the father lovingly protects, directs, and guides, and that, when he is missing, even the best of mothers, like Margaret, can only provide partial support. On his path as an exuberant boy, the future Don Bosco, however, encounters other "fathers": his near peers Luigi Comollo, who awakened in him the emulation of virtues, and Saint Joseph Cafasso, who called him "my dear friend", gave him a "gracious gesture to come closer", and, in doing so, confirmed him in the persuasion that fatherhood is closeness, confidence, and concrete interest. But there is above all Fr Calosso, the priest who "bumped into" the curly-haired Johnny during a "popular mission" and became decisive for his human and spiritual growth. The gestures of Fr Calosso operated a true revolution in the pre-adolescent John. Fr Calosso first of all *spoke to him*. Then he *allowed him to speak*. Then he *encouraged* him. Still: he took an *interest* in the story of the Bosco family, showing that he knew how to contextualize the "moment" of that boy within the "whole" of his story. Moreover, he

revealed the world to him, or rather, in some way, he brought him back to life, introducing him to new things, gifting him new words, and showing him that he had the abilities to do much and well. Finally, he *watched over* him with his gestures and gaze, and provided for his most urgent and real needs, "While I spoke, he never took his gaze off me. 'Be of good cheer, my friend, I will take care of you and of your studies'".

In Fr Calosso, John Bosco thus experienced that true fatherhood deserves a total and all-encompassing entrustment; it leads to self-awareness; it opens up an "ordered world" where rules provide security and educate to freedom:

"I immediately placed myself in the hands of Fr Calosso. It was then that I learned what it means to have a stable guide [...], a faithful friend of the soul. He encouraged me; all the time I could, I spent with him. From that time on, I began to taste what spiritual life truly is, since before I acted more materially, like a machine doing something without knowing the reason behind it."

The earthly father, however, is also the one who would always like to be with his son, but at a certain point can no longer do so. Fr Calosso also died; even the best father, at a certain point, steps aside, to give his son the strength of that detachment and autonomy which are typical of adulthood.

What then is, for Don Bosco, the difference between successful and failed families? One would be tempted to say that it all lies here: a "successful" family is characterised by parents who educate their children to be free, and if they let them go, it is only due to an unforeseen impossibility or for their own good. A "wounded" family, on the other hand, is one where the parent/s no longer give life, but carry within themselves problems of various kinds that hinder the child's growth: a parent who is indifferent to them and, in the face of difficulties, even abandons them, with an

attitude so different from that of the Good Shepherd.

The biographical events of Laura, Carlo, and Ana María confirm this.

3. Laura: a daughter who “gives life” to her own mother

Born in Santiago, Chile, on April 5th, 1891, and baptized on May 24th of the same year, Laura was the eldest daughter of José D. Vicuña, a disgraced nobleman who married Mercedes Pino, daughter of modest farmers. Three years later, a little sister, Julia Amanda, arrived, but soon after, their father died, having suffered a political defeat that undermined his health and compromised also their honour, along with the family's economic support. Devoid of any “protection and future perspective”, Laura's mother landed in Argentina, where she sought the protection of the landowner Manuel Mora: a man “of proud and haughty character”, who “did not hide hatred and contempt for anyone who opposed his plans”. A man, in short, who only seemingly offered protection, but was actually accustomed to taking, if necessary, by force, whatever he wanted, manipulating people. Meanwhile, he paid for Laura and her sister's studies at the boarding school of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Their mother – who was under the psychological influence of Mora – lived with him without finding the strength to break the bond. However, when Mora began to show signs of improper interest towards Laura herself, and especially when she embarked on the path of preparation for her First Holy Communion, she suddenly understood the gravity of the situation. Unlike her mother – who justified an evil (cohabitation) in view of a good (her daughters' education at the boarding school) – Laura understood that this was a morally illegitimate argument, which put her mother's soul in grave danger. Around this time, Laura also expressed the desire to become a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians herself; but her request was rejected, because she was the daughter of a ‘public concubine’. And it is at this point that a change took place in Laura – received

into the boarding school when 'impulsiveness, ease of resentment, irritability, impatience and propensity to appear' still dominated in her – that only Grace, combined with the person's commitment, can bring about: she asked God for her mother's conversion, offering herself for her. At that moment, Laura could move neither 'forwards' (entering the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) nor 'backwards' (returning to her mother and Mora). With a gesture imbued with the creativity typical of saints, Laura embarks on the only path still available to her: one that reached towards the heights of transcendence and the depths of inner transformation. In her First Holy Communion resolutions she had written down:

I propose to do all that I know and can to [...] repair the offenses that you, Lord, receive every day from people, especially from those of my family; my God, grant me a life of love, mortification, and sacrifice.

Then she finalised her intention in an "Act of Offering", which included the sacrifice of her very life. Her confessor, recognising that the inspiration came from God but ignoring its consequences, consented, and confirmed that Laura was "aware of the offering she had just made". She lived her last two years in silence, joy, and with a smile, and a disposition that was rich in human warmth. Yet the gaze she directed at the world – as confirmed by a photographic portrait quite different from the well-known hagiographic stylisation – revealed all the deep awareness and pain that dwelt within her. In a situation where she lacked both the "freedom from" (conditioning, obstacles, struggles) and the "freedom to" do many things, this pre-adolescent testified to "freedom for": that of the total gift of self.

Laura did not despise but loved life: her own and that of her mother. For this reason, she offered herself. On April 13th, 1902, Good Shepherd Sunday, she asked: "If He gives his life... what prevents me from doing so for my mother?" Dying, she added: "Mom, I am dying, I myself asked Jesus for this... I have been offering my life for you for almost two

years, to obtain the grace of your return!"

These are words free of regret and reproach, but full of great strength, great hope, and great faith. Laura had learned to accept her mother for who she was. She even offered herself to give her what she could not achieve by herself. When Laura died, her mother converted. *Laurita de los Andes*, the daughter, thus contributed to giving life to her mother in faith and grace.

4. Carlo Braga and his mother's shadow

Carlo Braga, who was born two years before Laura, in 1889, was also marked by his mother's fragility: when her husband abandoned her and the children, Matilde "almost stopped eating and was visibly declining". She was then taken to Como, where she died four years later of tuberculosis, although everyone was convinced that her depression had turned into a real madness. Carlo then began to be "pitied as the son of an irresponsible [father] and an unhappy mother". However, three providential events helped him.

He later rediscovered the meaning of the first event, which occurred when he was very small: he had fallen into the hearth and his mother Matilde, in rescuing him, had consecrated him to the Virgin Mary at that very instant. Thus, the thought of his absent mother became for Carlo as a child 'a painful and consoling memory at the same time': sorrow for her absence; but also, the certainty that she had entrusted him to the Mother of all mothers, Mary Most Holy. Years later, Fr Braga wrote to a Salesian confrere struck by the loss of his own mother:

"Now your mother belongs to you much more than when she was alive. Let me tell you about my personal experience. My mother left me when I was six years old [...]. But I must confess that she followed me step by step, and when I cried desolately at the murmur of the Adda [river], while, as a little shepherd, I felt called to a higher vocation, it seemed to me that Mom was smiling at me and drying my tears".

Carlo then met Sister Giuditta Torelli, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians who “saved little Carlo from the disintegration of his personality when at nine he realised he was just tolerated and sometimes heard people say about him, ‘Poor child, why is he even in the world?’” There were indeed those who claimed that his father deserved to be shot for the betrayal of abandonment, and regarding his mother, many schoolmates replied to him, “Shut up, your mother was crazy, anyway”. But Sr Giuditta loved him and helped him in a special way; she looked at him with a “new” gaze; moreover, she believed in his vocation and encouraged it.

After entering the Salesian boarding school in Sondrio, Carlo experienced the third and decisive event: he met Fr Rua, of whom he had the honour of being the little secretary for a day. Fr Rua smiled at Carlo and, repeating the gesture that Don Bosco had once performed with him (“Little Michael, you and I will always go halves”), he “put his hand inside his own and said to him, ‘we will always be friends’”. If Sr Giuditta had believed in Carlo’s vocation, Fr Rua allowed him to realise it, “helping him overcome all obstacles”. Certainly, Carlo Braga would not lack difficulties at every stage of life – as a novice, young Salesian, and even as Provincial – manifested as *prudent* delays and sometimes taking the form of slander; but he had learned to face them. Meanwhile, he became a man capable of radiating extraordinary joy, humble, active, and marked by a gentle sense of irony—all traits that reflect his personal balance and sense of reality. Under the action of the Holy Spirit, Fr Braga himself developed a radiant fatherhood, joined by a great tenderness for the young entrusted to him. Fr Braga rediscovered love for his father, forgave him, and embarked on a journey to reconcile with him. He underwent countless hardships just to be always among his Salesians and boys. He defined himself as one who had been “put in the vineyard to act as a pole”, that is, without seeking recognition but for the good of others. A father, in entrusting his son to him as a Salesian aspirant, said, “With a man like you, I would let him go even to the

North Pole!” Fr Carlo was not scandalised by the needs of the children; rather, he educated them to express them, to increase their desire, “Do you need some books? Don’t be afraid, write a longer list”. Above all, Fr Carlo learned to look at others with that gaze of love from which he himself had once felt reached thanks to Sr Giuditta and Fr Rua. Fr Joseph Zen, now a cardinal, testified in a long passage that deserves to be read in full and begins with his mother’s words to Fr Braga:

“Look, Father, this boy is not so good anymore. Perhaps he is not suitable to be accepted in this institution. I wouldn’t want you to be deceived. Ah, if you only knew how he troubled me this last year! I really didn’t know what to do anymore. And if he gives you trouble here too, just let me know, and I’ll come to pick him up right away”. Fr Braga, instead of responding, looked me in the eyes; I too looked at him, but with my head down. I felt like a defendant accused by the prosecutor, rather than defended by my own lawyer. But the judge was on my side. With his gaze, he understood me deeply, immediately and better than all my mother’s explanations. He himself, writing to me many years later, applied to himself the words of the Gospel: “*Intuitus dilexit eum* (‘looking at him, he loved him’)”. And, from that day on, I had no more doubts about my vocation.

5. Ana María Lozano Díaz and the fruitful illness of her father

The parents of Laura and Carlo had – in various ways – revealed themselves to be “distant” and “absent”. One final figure, that of Ana María, instead attests to the opposite dynamism: that of a father *too* present, who, with his presence, opened up a new path to sanctification for his daughter. Ana was born on September 24th, 1883, in Oicatà, Colombia, into a large family, characterised by the exemplary Christian life of her parents. When Ana was very young, her father – one day, while washing – discovered a concerning mark on his leg. It was leprosy, which he managed to hide for some

time, but was ultimately forced to acknowledge, first accepting to separate from his family, then reuniting with them at the leper colony of Agua de Dios. His wife heroically told him, "Your fate is our fate". Thus, the healthy accepted the conditions imposed on them by adopting the rhythm of life of the sick. In this context, her father's illness conditioned Ana María's freedom of choice, forcing her to plan her life within the leper colony. Like Laura before her, she was unable to pursue her religious vocation due to her father's illness. She then experienced, inwardly, the profound rift that leprosy causes in the lives of the sick. However, Ana María was not alone. Just as Don Bosco found help through Fr Calosso, Laura in her confessor, and Carlo in Fr Rua, so she found a friend of the soul in Blessed Luigi Variara, sdb, who assured her, "If you have a religious vocation, it will be realized", and involved her in the founding of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in 1905. It was the first Institute to welcome leprous women or daughters of lepers. When Lozano died on March 5th, 1982, at almost 99 years old, after more than fifty years as Mother General, Fr Variara's insight had fully manifested in an experience that confirmed and reinforced the Salesian charism's *victim and reparative* dimension.

6. The saints teach

In their inescapable difference, the stories of Laura Vicuña (blessed), Carlo Braga, and Ana María Lozano (servants of God) are united by several noteworthy aspects:

a) Laura, Ana, and Carlo, like Don Bosco, suffered situations of discomfort and difficulty, variously related to their parents. One cannot forget Mama Margaret, who was forced to send Johnny away from home when the absence of paternal authority facilitated the clash with his brother Anthony; nor forget that Laura was threatened by Mora and rejected by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians as their aspirant; and that Carlo Braga suffered misunderstandings and slanders; or that her father's leprosy seemed at one point to rob Ana María

of all hope for the future.

A family, wounded in various ways, therefore caused an *objective harm* to those who were part of it: to fail to acknowledge or attempt to downplay the extent of this damage would be as illusory as it is unjust. Indeed, every suffering is associated with an element of loss that the “saints”, with their realism, capture and learn to name.

b) Johnny, Laura, Ana María, and Carlo then took a second, more arduous step: instead of passively enduring the situation or lamenting it, they moved with increased awareness to address the problem. In addition to a lively realism, they demonstrated the ability, which is typical of saints, to react promptly, avoiding any self-centred withdrawal. They expanded through the gift and integrated it into the concrete conditions of life. In doing so, they bound the ‘*da mihi animas*’ to the ‘*cetera tolle*’.

c) The limits and wounds are never erased: they are always recognised and named; in fact, they are ‘lived with’. Even Blessed Alexandrina Maria da Costa and Servant of God Nino Baglieri, Venerable Andrea Beltrami and Blessed Augusto Czaratoryski, were “reached” by the Lord in the debilitating conditions of their illness. Blessed Titus Zeman, Venerable José Vandor, and Servant of God Ignatius Stuchlý – part of larger historical events that seemed to overwhelm them – taught the difficult art of persevering through hardships and allowing the Lord to make the person flourish within them. Here, the freedom of choice takes on the highest form of a freedom of adherence, in the ‘*fiat*’!

Bibliographic Note:

To preserve the character of “witness” rather than “report” of this writing, a critical apparatus of notes has been avoided. However, it should be noted that the quotes present in the text are taken from the *Memoirs of the Oratory* of St John Bosco; from Maria Dosio, *Laura Vicuña. A Path of Salesian Youth Holiness*, LAS, Rome 2004; from *Fr Carlo Braga Recounts His Missionary and Educative Experience*

(autobiographical testimony of the Servant of God) and from the *Life of Fr Carlo Braga, "The Don Bosco of China"*, written by Fr Mario Rassiga, sdb and now available in stencilled form. To these sources are added the materials from the beatification and canonisation causes, which are accessible for Don Bosco and Laura, while still reserved for the Servants of God.

Andrew Beltrami virtuous profile (2/2)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

3. Story of a soul

3.1. Loving and suffering

Fr Barberis sketches Beltrami's life parable very well, interpreting it as the mysterious and transforming action of grace at work "through the main conditions of Salesian life, so that he might be a general model of pupil, cleric, teacher, university student, priest, writer and sick person; a model in every virtue, in patience as in charity, in love of penance as in zeal." And it is interesting that Fr Barberis himself, introducing the second part of his biography dealing with Fr Beltrami's virtues, states: "The life of our Fr Beltrami could be said to be the story of a soul rather than the story of a person. It is all intrinsic; and I do my utmost to make the dear reader penetrate that soul, so that he may admire its heavenly charisms." The reference to "The Story of a Soul" is not accidental, not only because Fr Beltrami was a contemporary of Saint Therese of Lisieux, but we can say that they are truly brother and sister in the spirit that

animated them. The apostolic zeal for salvation is most authentic and fruitful in those who have experienced salvation and, having found themselves saved by grace, live their lives as a pure gift of love for their brothers and sisters, so that they too may be reached by the redemptive love of Jesus. "The whole life, in truth, of our Fr Andrew could be summed up in two words, which are his motto: Loving and suffering – Love and Sorrow. The most tender, the most ardent, and, I would also say, the most zealous love possible for that good in which all good is concentrated. The most vivid, the most acute, the most penetrating sorrow for his sins, and the contemplation of that supreme good which lowered itself to the folly, to the pains and death of the Cross for us. Hence the feverish eagerness for suffering: the more it abounded, the more he felt desire for it. Hence also the taste, the ineffable delight in suffering, which is the secret of the saints, and one of the most sublime marvels of the Church of Jesus Christ."

"And as in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, burning with flames and crowned with thorns, both these affections of love and sorrow find such abundant pasture, and so admirably proportioned to them, so, from the first instant in which he knew this devotion, until the last of his life, his heart was like a vase of elect aromas that always burned before that divine heart, and handed down the perfume of incense and myrrh, of love and sorrow." "To obtain from the Heart of Jesus the longed-for grace of living long years to suffer and atone for my sins. Not die but live to suffer, while always subject to God's will. Only thus will I be able to satisfy this thirst. It is so beautiful, so sweet to suffer when God helps and gives us patience to do so!" These texts are a summary of Fr Beltrami's victim spirituality, which in the perspective of devotion to the Sacred Heart, so dear to 19th century spirituality and to Don Bosco himself, overcomes any sorrowful interpretation or even worse a kind of spiritualistic masochism. It was in fact also thanks to Fr Beltrami that Fr Rua officially consecrated the Salesian Congregation to the

Sacred Heart of Jesus on the final night of the 19th century.

3.2. In the footsteps of Saint Therese of Lisieux

The brevity of his years of life was made up for by the surprising richness of the witness of a virtuous life, which in a short time expressed an intense spiritual fervour and a singular striving for gospel perfection. It is not insignificant that the Venerable Beltrami died exactly three months after the death of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, who was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by John Paul II for the outstanding Divine Love that distinguished her. Through "The Story of a Soul" emerges the inner biography of a life moulded by the Spirit in the garden of Carmel, that blossomed with fruits of holiness and apostolic fruitfulness for the universal Church, so much so that in 1927 she was proclaimed Patroness of the Missions by Pius XI. Fr Beltrami also died of tuberculosis like St Therese, but in the outpourings of blood that quickly brought them to the end, both did not see so much the wasting away of a body and the waning of strength, but grasped a particular vocation to live in communion with Jesus Christ, which assimilated them to his sacrifice of love for the good of their brothers and sisters. On 9 June 1895, on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, St Therese of the Child Jesus offered herself as a holocaust and victim to God's merciful Love. On 3 April of the following year, on the night between Holy Thursday and Good Friday, she had a first manifestation of the illness that would lead to her death. Teresa received it as a mysterious visit from the divine Bridegroom. At the same time she entered the trial of faith, which would last until her death. As her health deteriorated, she was transferred to the infirmary from 8 July 1897. Her sisters and other religious picked up her words, while the pains and trials, endured with patience, intensified until culminating in her death on the afternoon of 30th September 1897. "I am not dying; I am entering life," she had written to her spiritual brother, Fr Bellière. Her final words "My God, I love you" were the seal of her existence.

Until the end of his life, Fr Beltrami too would be faithful to his offering of himself as a victim, as he wrote a few days before his death to his novice director: "I always pray and offer myself as a victim for the Congregation, for all the Superiors and confreres and especially for these novitiate houses, which contain the hopes of our pious Society."

4. Victim Spirituality

Fr Beltrami also relates a sublime degree of charity to this victim spirituality: "No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). This does not only mean the extreme, supreme gesture of the physical gift of one's life for another, but the individual's entire life oriented towards the good of another. He felt called to this vocation: "There are many," he added, "even among us Salesians, who work a lot and do great good; but there are not so many who really love to suffer, and want to suffer a lot for the Lord: I want to be one of these." Precisely because it is not something coveted by most, consequently it is not understood either. But this is nothing new. Even Jesus when he spoke to the disciples about his Passover, about his ascent to Jerusalem, met with incomprehension, and Peter himself turned him away from it. At the supreme hour his "friends" betrayed him, denied him and abandoned him. Yet the work of redemption was and is only accomplished through the mystery of the cross and the offering that Jesus makes of himself to the Father as a victim of atonement, uniting to his sacrifice all those who accept a share in his sufferings for the salvation of their brothers and sisters. The truth of Beltrami's offering lies in the fruitfulness offered by his holy life. In fact he gave efficacy to his words by supporting his confreres in their vocation in particular, urging them to accept the trials of life with a spirit of sacrifice in fidelity to the Salesian vocation. Don Bosco in the first Constitutions presented the Salesian as one who "is ready to endure heat and cold, thirst

and hunger, toil and contempt, whenever it is a matter of the glory of God and the salvation of souls."

The same illness led Fr Beltrami both to increasingly severe tuberculosis and forced isolation, which left his perceptive and intellectual faculties intact, indeed almost refining them with the blade of pain. Only the grace of faith allowed him to embrace that condition that day by day, assimilated him more and more to the crucified Christ and that a statue of *Ecce homo*, with its shocking and repugnant realism, which he wanted in his room, constantly reminded him of. Faith was the rule of his life, the key to understanding people and different situations. "By the light of faith he considered his own sufferings as graces from God, and together with the anniversary of his religious profession and priestly ordination, he celebrated the anniversary of the beginning of his serious illness, which he believed had begun on 20 February 1891. On this occasion he heartily recited the *Te Deum* for having been allowed by the Lord to suffer for him. He meditated and cultivated a lively devotion to the Passion of Christ and to Jesus Crucified: "Great devotion, which can be said to have informed the entire life of the servant of God... This was the almost continuous subject of his meditations. He always had a crucifix before his eyes and mostly in his hands... which he enthusiastically kissed from time to time."

After his death, a purse was found hanging around his neck with the crucifix and the medal of Mary Help of Christians, containing some papers: prayers in memory of his ordination; a map on which the five continents were drawn, to remind the Lord always of the missionaries scattered throughout the world; and some prayers with which he formally made himself a victim to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, especially for the dying, for the souls in purgatory, for the prosperity of the Congregation and the Church. These prayers, in which the prevailing thought echoed Paul's plea "*Opto ego ipse anathema esse a Christo pro fratribus meis*", were signed by him in his own blood and approved by his Rector Fr Luigi Piscetta on 15 November 1895.

5. Is Fr Beltrami relevant today?

The question, not an idle one, was already posed by the young confreres at the International Theological Studentate in the Crocetta, Turin in 1948, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the death of the Venerable Fr Beltrami, when they organised a commemorative day. From the very first lines of the booklet that collected the speeches given on that occasion, one wonders what Beltrami's testimony had to do with Salesian life, a life of apostolate and action. Well, after recalling how he was exemplary in the years in which he was able to throw himself into apostolic work, "he was also Salesian in accepting sorrow when it seemed to crush a career and a future so brilliantly and fruitfully undertaken. Because it was there that Fr Andrew revealed a depth of Salesian feeling and a wealth of dedication that before, in work could be taken for youthful daring, an impulse to act, a wealth of gifts, something normal, ordinary. The extraordinary begins, or rather, reveals itself in and through illness. Fr Andrew, set apart, now forever excluded from teaching, from the fraternal life of collaboration with his confreres and from Don Bosco's great enterprise, felt he was set on a new, solitary path, one that was perhaps repugnant to his confreres; certainly repugnant to human nature, all the more so to his own nature which was so rich and exuberant! Fr Beltrami accepted this path and set out on it with a Salesian spirit: in a Salesian way."

We are struck by the claim that Fr Beltrami somehow began a new path in the wake traced by Don Bosco, a special call to illuminate the deep core of the Salesian vocation and the real energy that is pastoral charity: "We need to have what he had in his heart, what he experienced profoundly in his innermost being. Without that inner wealth our action would be in vain; Fr Beltrami could reproach us for our vain life, saying with Paul: *"nos quasi morientes, et ecce: vivimus!"* He himself was aware that he had started out on a new path, as his brother Giuseppe testified: "Halfway through the lesson he tried to convince me of the need to

follow his way, and not thinking like him, I opposed it, and he suffered because of this." This suffering lived in faith was truly fruitful apostolically and vocationally: "It was a manifestation of the new and original Salesian concept which he desired and implemented, one of physical and moral, active, productive pain, even materially so, for the salvation of souls."

It must also be said that, either due to a certain somewhat pietistic spiritual climate, or perhaps more unconsciously so as not to be provoked too much by his testimony, over time a certain interpretation took root that gradually led to this being forgotten, also due to the major changes that took place. An expression of this process are, for example, paintings of him which those who knew him, like Father Eugenio Ceria, did not really like, because they remembered him as jovial, with an open appearance that inspired confidence and trust in those who approached him. Fr Ceria also recalls that already during his years in Foglizzo, Fr Beltrami lived an intense interior life, a profound union with God nourished by meditation and Eucharistic communion, to such an extent that even in the middle of winter, in freezing temperatures, he did not wear a greatcoat and kept his window open, so that he was called a "polar bear".

5.1. Witness of union with God

This spirit of sacrifice matured into profound union with God: "His prayer consisted of being continually in the presence of God, keeping his eyes fixed on the Tabernacle and seeking with the Lord through constant brief prayers and affectionate aspirations. His meditation could be said to be continuous...it was so much a part of him that he did not notice what was happening around him, and I heard him tell me in confidence that he generally came to understand the mysteries he was meditating on so well that he seemed to see them as if they were appearing before his eyes." This union signified and was realised in a special way in the celebration of the Eucharist, when all the pains and coughs ceased as if by

magic, translated into perfect conformity to God's will, especially by accepting suffering: "He considered the apostolate of suffering and affliction to be no less fruitful than that of the more active life; and while others would have said that those not so brief years were sufficiently occupied in suffering, he sanctified suffering by offering it to the Lord and conforming to the divine will so generally that he was not only resigned to it, but content with it."

The request made by the Venerable himself to the Lord is of considerable value, as can be seen from several letters and in particular the one to his first Rector in Lanzo, Fr Giuseppe Scappini, written just over a month before his death: "Do not be distressed, my sweetest father in Jesus Christ, by my illness; on the contrary, rejoice in the Lord. I myself asked the Good Lord for it, to have the opportunity to expiate my sins in this world, where Purgatory is done with merit. Truly, I did not ask for this illness, for I had no idea of it, but I asked for much to suffer, and the Lord has granted me this. May he be blessed for ever. And help me always to bear the Cross with joy. Believe me, in the midst of my sorrows, I am happy with a full and accomplished happiness, so that I laugh when they offer me condolences and wishes for my recovery."

5.2. Knowing how to suffer

"Knowing how to suffer": for one's own sanctification, for expiation and for the apostolate. He celebrated the anniversary of his own illness: "20 February is the anniversary of my illness: and I celebrate it, as of a day blessed by God; a blessed day, full of joy, among the most beautiful days of my life." Perhaps Fr Beltrami's testimony confirms Don Bosco's words that "there is only one Beltrami", as if to indicate the originality of the holiness of this son of his in having experienced and made visible the secret core of Salesian apostolic holiness. Fr Beltrami expresses the need for the Salesian mission not to fall into the trap of an activism and outward action that in time would lead to the

fatal destiny of death, but to preserve and cultivate the secret core that expresses both depth and breadth of horizon. The translations in practice of this care of interiority and spiritual depth are fidelity to the life of prayer, serious and competent preparation for one's mission, especially for the priestly ministry, fighting against negligence and culpable ignorance; the responsible use of time.

More profoundly, Fr Beltrami's testimony tells us that one does not live off past glories or achievements, but that every confrere and every generation must make the gift received bear fruit and know how to pass it on in a faithful and creative form to future generations. The interruption of this virtuous chain will be a source of damage and ruin. Knowing how to suffer is a secret that gives fruitfulness to every apostolic enterprise. Fr Beltrami's spirit of offering of himself as a victim is admirably associated with his priestly ministry, for which he prepared himself with great responsibility and which he lived in the form of a unique communion with Christ immolated for the salvation of his brothers and sisters: in the struggle and mortification against the passions of the flesh; in the renunciation of the ideals of an active apostolate he had always desired; in the insatiable thirst for suffering; in the aspiration to offer himself as a victim for the salvation of his brothers and sisters. For example, for the Congregation in addition to prayer and the *nominatim* offering for several confreres (holding the Year Book of the Congregation in his hands), houses and missions, he asked for the grace of perseverance and zeal, the preservation of the spirit of Don Bosco and his educational method. One of the books written about him significantly bears the title *La passiflora serafica*, meaning "passionfruit flower", a name given to it by the Jesuit missionaries in 1610, due to the similarity of some parts of the plant with the religious symbols of Christ's passion: the tendrils being the whip with which he was scourged; the three styles the nails; the stamens the hammer; the sepals the crown of thorns. Fr Nazareno Camilleri, a deeply spiritual soul,

says authoritatively: “Fr Beltrami seems to us to eminently represent, today, the divine yearning for ‘the sanctification of suffering’ for the social, apostolic and missionary fruitfulness, through the heroic enthusiasm of the Cross, of Christ’s Redemption in the midst of humanity.”

5.3 Passing the baton

In Valsalice, Fr Andrew was an example to all: a young cleric, Louis Variara, chose him as a model of life: he became a priest and Salesian missionary in Colombia and inspired by Fr Beltrami, founded, the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Born in Viarigi (Asti) in 1875, Louis Variara was taken to Valdocco in Turin by his father when he was 11 years old. He entered the novitiate on 17 August 1891 and completed it by taking perpetual vows. Afterwards he moved to Valsalice, near Turin to study philosophy. There he met the Venerable Andrew Beltrami. Fr Variara was to take inspiration from him when he later proposed “victim consecration” to his Daughters of the Sacred Hearts in Agua de Dios (Colombia).

End

Christmas 2024

We wish all our readers a Holy Christmas, enriched by the Lord’s blessings, and a Happy New Year with peace and serenity!

Wonders of the Mother of God invoked under the title of Mary Help of Christians (13/13)

[*\(continuation from previous article\)*](#)

Graces obtained through the intercession of Mary Help of Christians.

I. Grace received from Mary Help of Christians.

It was the year of our Lord 1866 when my wife, in the month of October, was struck by a very serious illness, namely a severe inflammation combined with great congestion, and a parasitic infection. In these painful circumstances, we first turned to the experts of the art, who quickly declared that the illness was extremely dangerous. Seeing that the illness was getting much worse, and that human remedies were of little or no use, I suggested to my companion that she recommend herself to Mary Help of Christians, and that she would certainly grant her health if it was necessary for the soul; at the same time I added the promise that if she obtained health, as soon as the church was finished, which was being built in Turin, I would take us both to visit her and make some donation. She replied that she could recommend herself to some Shrine closer so as not to be obliged to go so far away; to this I replied that one should not look so much at convenience as at the greatness of the benefit one hopes for.

She then prayed as recommended and promised what she proposed. O power of Mary! Barely 30 minutes after she had made her promise I asked her how she was, and she said: "I am feeling much better, my mind is clearer, my stomach is no

longer oppressed, I feel an aversion to ice which I had so craved before, and I am more inclined to have broth which I previously found so distasteful."

At these words I felt myself born to new life, and if it had not been at night I would immediately have left my room to publish the grace received from the Blessed Virgin Mary. The fact is that she passed the night peacefully, and on the following morning the doctor appeared and declared her free from all danger. Who healed her if not Mary Help of Christians? In fact, after a few days she left her bed and took up domestic chores. Now we anxiously await the completion of the church dedicated to her, and thus fulfil the promise made.

I have written this, as a humble son of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and I desire that all such publicity be given to it as will be judged good for the greater glory of God and the august Mother of the Saviour.

Luigi COSTAMAGNA
of Caramagna.

II. Mary Help of Christians Protectress of the countryside.

Mornese is a small village in the diocese of Acqui, province of Alessandria, of about one thousand inhabitants. This village of ours, like so many others, was sadly plagued by phomopsis cane (a grape disease), which for over twenty years had devoured almost the entire grape harvest, our main wealth. We had already used many kinds of things to ward it off, but to no avail. When word spread that some peasants from neighbouring towns had promised a portion of the fruit from their vineyards for the continuation of the work on the church dedicated to Mary Help of Christians in Turin, they were wonderfully favoured and had grapes in abundance. Moved by the hope of a better harvest and even more by the thought of contributing to a work of religion, the people from Mornese decided to offer the tenth part of the

harvest for this purpose. The protection of the Holy Virgin made itself felt among us in a truly merciful way. We had the abundance of happier times, and we were very happy to be able to scrupulously offer in kind or in money what we had promised. When we invited the construction manager for the church to come and collect the offerings, there was a feast of true joy and public exultation.

He appeared deeply moved by the promptness and selflessness with which the offerings were made, and by the Christian words with which they were accompanied. But one of our patriots spoke loudly in the name of all of what was happening. He said that we owe great things to the Holy Virgin Help of Christians. Last year, many people from this area, having to go to war, placed themselves under the protection of Mary Help of Christians, most of them wearing a medal around their necks. They went bravely, and had to face the gravest dangers, but none fell victim to that scourge of the Lord. Moreover, in the neighbouring districts there was a plague of cholera, hail and drought, and we were spared all of that. Hardly any of our neighbours' harvests survived, and we were blessed with such abundance, more than for or twenty years. For these reasons we are happy to be able to manifest our indelible gratitude to the great Protectress of mankind in this way.

I believe I am a faithful interpreter of my fellow-citizens in asserting that what we have done now, we will also do in the future, convinced that we will thus make ourselves ever more worthy of heavenly blessings.

25 March 1868

An inhabitant of Mornese.

III. Prompt recovery.

Young Giovanni Bonetti from Asti in the College at Lanzo had the following grace. On the evening of the 23rd of December last, he suddenly entered the director's room with

uncertain steps and a distraught face. He approached him, leaned his body against the pious priest, and with his right hand rubbed his forehead without saying a word. The priest, astonished to see him so distressed, supported him bidding him sit down he asked what it was he wanted. In response to the repeated questions, the poor man could only sigh more laboriously and deeply. The priest then looked more closely at his face and saw that his eyes were motionless, his lips pale, and his body, succumbing to the weight of his head, threatened to collapse. Seeing then in what life-threatening danger the young man was, they immediately sent for the doctor. Meanwhile, his condition worsened by the moment; his face became distorted and no longer looked the same as before, his arms, legs, and forehead were cold, phlegm choked him, his breathing grew increasingly shallow, and his pulse could barely be felt. He remained in this state for five agonising hours.

The Doctor arrived, applied various remedies, but always to no avail. No hope, the doctor said sorrowfully, before morning this young man will be dead.

Thus, in defiance of human hopes, the good priest turned to heaven, praying that if it was not his will that the young man should live, he would at least give him a little time for confession and communion. He then took a small medal of Mary Help of Christians. The graces he had already obtained from invoking the Virgin with that medal were many, and increased his hope of obtaining help from the heavenly Protectress. Full of confidence in her, he knelt down, placed the medal on his heart and, together with other pious people who had come, said a few prayers to Mary and the Blessed Sacrament. And Mary listened to the prayers that were raised to her with such confidence. Little John's breathing became freer, and his eyes, which had been as if petrified, turned lovingly around to look at and thank the onlookers for the compassionate care they were giving him. Nor was the improvement short-lived; on the contrary, everyone held his recovery to be ensured. The doctor himself, astonished at what

had happened, exclaimed: "It was the grace of God that wrought his recovery. In my long career I have seen a great number of sick and dying people, but I have never seen any of those who were at Bonetti's point recover. Without the beneficent intervention of heaven, this is for me an inexplicable fact. And science, used nowadays to breaking that admirable bond that unites it to God, paid humble homage to him, judging itself powerless to achieve what God alone had accomplished. The young man who was the object of the Virgin's glory continues to this day to be very well. He tells and preaches to all that he owes his life doubly to God and to his most powerful Mother, from whose valid intercession he obtained this grace. He would consider himself ungrateful of heart if he did not give public testimony of gratitude, and thus invite others and other unfortunates who in this valley of tears suffer and go in search of comfort and help.

(From the newspaper: *La Vergine*).

IV. Mary Help of Christians frees one of her devotees from a severe toothache.

In an educational institution in Turin, there was a young man of 19 or 20 years who had been suffering from severe toothaches for several days. All the usual medical treatments for such cases had already been tried without any success. As a result, the poor young man was reduced to such a state of agony that he aroused the pity of all who heard him. While the day seemed dreadful to him, the night appeared eternal and most wretched, during which he could not close his eyes to sleep except for brief and interrupted moments. What a deplorable state his was! It continued like this for some time, but on the evening of April 29th, the pain seemed to become far worse. The young man groaned incessantly in his bed, sighed and cried out loudly without anyone being able to relieve him. His companions, concerned about his unhappy condition, went to the director to ask if he would come and

comfort him. He came and attempted to soothe him and his companions with words, essential for him to regain calm and for his companions to find rest. However, the intensity of the pain was so overwhelming that, despite being obedient, he couldn't cease his lamenting. He expressed that he doubted if even in hell itself one could endure more excruciating agony. Recognising the severity of the situation, the superior decided to place him under the protection of Mary Help of Christians, whose honour is upheld by a majestic church in our city. We all knelt down and said a short prayer. And? Mary's help was not long in coming. As the priest bestowed the blessing on the desolate young man, he was instantly calm, and fell into a deep and placid sleep. At that instant a terrible suspicion flashed into our minds; that the poor young man had succumbed to illness but no, he had already fallen deeply asleep, and Mary had heard the prayer of her devotee, and God the blessing of his minister.

Several months passed, and the young man subject to the toothache was no longer troubled by it.

(By the same).

V. Some of Mary Help of Christians' wonders.

I believe that your noble periodical will take a good look at some of the events that have taken place among us, which I set out in honour of Mary Help of Christians. I will only select a few that I witnessed in this city, omitting many others that are recounted every day.

The first concerns a lady from Milan who for five months had been consumed by pneumonia combined with the fact that her whole life was ebbing away.

Passing through these parts, Fr B. advised her to have recourse to Mary Help of Christians by means of a novena of prayer in her honour, with the promise of some donation to continue the work on the church which was being built in Turin under the title of Mary Help of Christians. This donation was

only to be made once the grace had been obtained.

How marvellous! On that very day, the sick woman was able to resume her ordinary and serious occupations, eating all kinds of food, going for walks, entering and leaving the house freely as if she had never been ill. When the novena was over, she was in a flourishing state of health, such as she never remembered having enjoyed before.

Another Lady had been suffering from palpitations for three years, with many of the problems that go hand in hand with this illness. A fever and a kind of dropsy had rendered her immobile in bed. Her illness had reached such a point that when the aforementioned priest gave her his blessing, her husband had to hold her hand so that she could make the sign of the holy cross. A novena in honour of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and Mary Help of Christians was also recommended, with the promise of some donation for the aforementioned sacred edifice, but only after the grace had been given. On the very day on which the novena ended, the sick woman was free of all illness, and she herself was able to compile the narrative of her illness, in which I read the following:

“Mary Help of Christians has cured me of an illness, for which all doctors’ advice and ministrations has been useless. Today, the last day of the novena, I am free from all illness, and I can join my family at table, something I had not been able to do for three years. As long as I live, I shall not cease to glorify the power and goodness of the august Queen of Heaven, and I shall endeavour to promote devotion to her, especially in the church that is being built in Turin.”

Let me add yet another fact, which is even more marvellous than the preceding ones.

A young man in the prime of life was in the midst of one of the most luminous careers in the sciences when he was struck down by a cruel illness in one of his hands. In spite of every treatment, every solicitude of the most accredited doctors, no improvement could be achieved, nor

could the progress of the disease be halted. All the conclusions of the experts in this skill concurred that amputation was necessary to prevent the total ruin of the body. Frightened by this judgement, he decided to have recourse to Mary Help of Christians, applying the same spiritual remedies that others had practised so fruitfully. The acuteness of the pains ceased instantly, wounds were mitigated, and in a short time the healing appeared complete. Whoever wished to satisfy his curiosity could admire that hand with the indentations and holes of the healed sores, which recall the severity of his illness and the marvellous healing of it. He wanted to go to Turin to offer his donation in person, to further demonstrate his gratitude to the august Queen of Heaven.

I have many other stories of this kind which I will tell you in other letters, if you judge this to be appropriate for your periodical. I beg you to omit the names of the persons to whom the facts refer, so as not to expose them to importunate questions and observations. However, may these facts serve to revive trust in the protection of Mary Help of Christians more and more among Christians, to increase her devotees on earth, and to have one day a more glorious crown of her devotees in heaven.

(From the *Vera Buona Novella*, Florence).

With Ecclesiastical approval.

End

Blessed Maria Troncatti, a

Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, will be canonised

On November 25th, 2024, Pope Francis authorised the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints to promulgate the decree regarding the miracle attributed to the intercession of Blessed Maria Troncatti, a professed Sister of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, born in Corteno Golgi (Italy) on February 16th, 1883, and who died in Sucúa (Ecuador) on August 25th, 1969. With this act of the Holy Father, the path to the canonisation of Blessed Maria Troncatti is opened.

Maria Troncatti was born in Corteno Golgi (Brescia) on February 16th, 1883. Devoted to parish catechesis and the sacraments, the adolescent Maria developed a deep Christian sense that opened her to a religious vocation. The *Salesian Bulletin* arrived in Corteno, and Maria thought about her religious vocation. However, out of obedience to her father and the parish priest, she waited until she was of age before asking for admission to the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. She made her first profession in 1908 in Nizza Monferrato. During World War I (1915-1918), Sister Maria attended health assistance courses in Varazze and worked as a Red Cross nurse in the military hospital. During a flood in which she risked drowning, Maria promised the Madonna that if she saved her life, she would go to the missions.

In 1922, Mother General, Caterina Daghero assigned her to the missions in Ecuador. She spent three years in Chunchi. Accompanied by the missionary Bishop Mons. Comin and a small expedition, Sister Maria and two other sisters ventured into the Amazon rainforest. Their mission field was the land of the Shuar Indians, in the south-eastern part of Ecuador. They settled in Macas, a village of colonists surrounded by the

collective homes of the Shuar. Together with her sisters, she carried out a difficult work of evangelization amidst various risks, including those posed by forest animals and the dangers of swirling rivers. Macas, Sevilla Don Bosco, and Sucúa are some of the “miracles” still flourishing out of Sister Maria Troncatti’s work: nurse, surgeon and orthopaedic doctor, dentist, and anaesthetist... But above all, she was a catechist and evangeliser, rich in wonderful resources of faith, patience, and fraternal love. Her work for the promotion of Shuar women flourished in hundreds of new Christian families, formed for the first time by the free personal choice of the young spouses. She was nicknamed “the doctor of the jungle”, fighting for human promotion, especially of women. **She was the “little mother” (*madrecita*)**, always eager to reach out not only to the sick but to all those in need of help and hope. From a simple and poor clinic, she founded a real hospital and personally trained the nurses. With maternal patience, she listened, fostered communion among the people, and educated both natives and colonists in forgiveness. “A glance at the Crucifix gives me life and courage to work”, this is the certainty of faith that sustained her life. In every activity, sacrifice, or danger, she felt supported by the maternal presence of Mary Help of Christians.

On August 25th, 1969, in Sucúa (Ecuador), the small plane carrying Sister Maria Troncatti to the city crashed a few minutes after take-off, on the edge of that jungle which had been for almost half a century her “heart’s homeland”, the space of her tireless donation among the “Shuar”. Sister Maria experienced her last take-off: the one that took her to Paradise! She was 86 years old, all spent as a gift of love. She had offered her life for reconciliation between the colonists and the Shuar. She wrote, “I am increasingly happy with my missionary religious vocation!”

She was declared Venerable on November 12th, 2008, and **beatified during the pontificate of Benedict XVI in Macas**

(Apostolic Vicariate of Méndez – Ecuador) on November 24th, 2012. In the beatification homily, Cardinal Angelo Amato outlined her figure as a consecrated and missionary woman. In the ordinariness and simplicity of her maternal and merciful gestures, Card. Amato highlighted the extraordinary nature of the “example of dedication to Jesus and his Gospel of truth and life” for which, more than forty years after her death, she was remembered with gratitude. “Sister Maria, animated by grace, became an untiring messenger of the Gospel, expert in humanity and a profound knower of the human heart. She shared the joys and hopes, the difficulties and sorrows of her brothers and sisters, both great and small. She was able to transform prayer into apostolic zeal and concrete service to others”. Cardinal Amato concluded the homily by reassuring those present, including the Shuar, that “from heaven, Blessed Maria Troncatti continues to watch over your homeland and your families. Let us continue to ask for her intercession, to live in fraternity, concord, and peace. Let us turn to her with confidence, so that she may assist the sick, console the suffering, enlighten parents in the Christian education of their children, and bring harmony to families. Dear faithful, as she was on earth, so from heaven Blessed Maria Troncatti will continue to be our Good Mother”.

The biography written by Sister Domenica Grassiano, “Jungle, Homeland of the Heart”, helped to make the testimony of this great missionary known and to spread her fame of holiness. This Daughter of Mary Help of Christians singularly embodied the pedagogy and spirituality of the preventive system, especially through that motherhood that marked her entire missionary witness throughout her life.

As a young Sister in the 1920s: while continuing as a nurse, she dedicated particular attention to the oratory girls, especially to a group of them who were rather neglected, noisy, and intolerant of any discipline. Sister Maria welcomed and treated them in such a way that “they had a veneration for

her: they knelt before her, so great was their esteem. They felt in her a soul belonging entirely to God and entrusted themselves to her prayer".

She also reserved **special attention for the postulants**, communicating trust and courage, "Be brave, do not let yourself be taken by regret for what you have left behind... Pray to the Lord, and He will help you realise your vocation". The forty postulants of that year all reached to receiving the habit and making their profession, attributing this result to Sister Maria's prayers, which instilled hope, especially when she saw difficulties in adapting to the new way of life or in accepting separation from one's family.

As Mother of the poor and needy. With her example and message, she reminds us that "we do not only care for the body, but also for the needs of the human soul: for those who suffer from the violation of rights or from a broken love; for those who find themselves in darkness regarding the truth; who suffer from the absence of truth and love. We care for the salvation of people in body and soul". How many souls she saved! How many children she saved from certain death! How many girls and women she defended in their dignity! How many families she formed and safeguarded in the truth of marital and family love! How many fires of hatred and revenge she extinguished with the strength of patience and the giving of one's life! And she lived all this with great apostolic and missionary zeal.

The testimony of Father Giovanni Vigna, who worked for 23 years in the same mission, illustrates very well the heart of Sister Maria Troncatti, "Sister Maria stood out for her exquisite motherhood. She found a solution to every problem that proved always the best, in light of the facts. She was always willing to discover the positive side of people. I saw her treat human nature in all its aspects, even the most miserable: she treated them with that excellence and gentleness that were spontaneous and natural in her. She

expressed motherhood as affection among the Sisters in the community: it was the vital secret that sustained them, the love that united them to one another; the full sharing of labours, pains, and joys. She exercised her motherhood especially towards the younger ones. Many Sisters experienced the sweetness and strength of her love. This was also true for the Salesians who frequently fell ill because they did not spare themselves in their work and effort. She cared for them, supported them morally, sensing crises, fatigue, and turmoil. Her transparent soul saw everything through the love of a Father who cares for us and saves us. She served as God's instrument for wonderful works!"

St Francis de Sales, personal companion

'My spirit always accompanies yours,' wrote Francis de Sales one day to Jeanne de Chantal, at a time when she felt assailed by darkness and temptations. He added: 'Walk therefore, my dear Daughter, and advance in bad weather and during the night. Be courageous, my dear Daughter; with God's help, we shall do much.' Accompaniment, spiritual direction, guidance of souls, direction of conscience, spiritual assistance: these are more or less synonymous terms, as they designate this particular form of education and formation exercised in the spiritual sphere of the individual conscience.

Formation of a future companion

The formation he received as a young man had prepared Francis de Sales to become a spiritual director in turn. As a student of the Jesuits in Paris he most likely had

a spiritual father whose name we do not know. In Padua, Antonio Possevino had been his director; with this famous Jesuit Francis would later rejoice at having been one of his 'spiritual sons'. During his tormented path to the clerical state, his confidant and support was Amé Bouvard, a priest friend of the family, who then prepared him for ordination.

At the beginning of his episcopate, he entrusted the care of his spiritual life to Father Fourier, rector of the Jesuits in Chambéry, 'a great, erudite and devout religious', with whom he established 'a very special friendship' and who was very close to him 'with his advice and warnings'. For several years, he went to confession regularly to the cathedral penitentiary, whom he called 'dear brother and perfect friend'.

His stay in Paris in 1602 profoundly influenced the development of his gifts as a director of souls. Sent by the bishop to negotiate some diocesan affairs at court, he had little diplomatic success, but this prolonged visit to the French capital allowed him to establish contacts with the spiritual elite who came together around Madam Acarie, an exceptional woman, mystic and hostess at the same time. He became her confessor, observed her ecstasies and listened to her without question. 'Oh! what a mistake I made,' he would later say, 'for not having taken sufficient advantage of her most holy company! She did indeed open her soul to me freely; but the extreme respect I had for her meant that I did not dare to inform myself of the slightest thing.'

A, insistent activity 'that reassures and heartens'

Helping each individual, personally accompanying them, advising them, possibly correcting their mistakes, encouraging them, all this requires time, patience and a constant effort of discernment. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* speaks from experience when he states in the preface:

I grant that the guidance of individual souls is a labour, but

it is a labour full of consolation, even as that of harvesters and grape-gatherers, who are never so well pleased as when most heavily laden. It is a labour which refreshes and invigorates the heart by the comfort which it brings to those who bear it.

We know this important area of his formative work especially from his correspondence, but it should be pointed out that spiritual direction is not only done in writing. Personal meetings and individual confessions are part of it, although one must distinguish them properly. In 1603, he met the Duke of Bellegarde, a great figure in the kingdom and a great sinner, who a few years later asked him to guide him on the path to conversion. The Lenten series that he preached in Dijon the following year was a turning point in his 'career' as a spiritual director, because he met Jeanne Frémyot, widow of the Baron de Chantal.

From 1605 onwards, the systematic visitation of his vast diocese brought him into contact with an endless number of people of all circumstances, mainly peasants and mountain people, most of whom were illiterate and left us no correspondence. Preaching Lent at Annecy in 1607, he found a twenty-one year old lady, 'but all gold', named Louise Du Chastel, who had married the bishop's cousin, Henri de Charmois. The letters of spiritual direction that Francis sent to Madame de Charmois would serve as basic material for the drafting of his future work, the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Preaching in Grenoble in 1616, 1617 and 1618 brought him a considerable number of daughters and spiritual sons who, having heard him speak, would seek closer contact. New women followed him on his last trip to Paris in 1618-1619, where he was part of the Savoy delegation that was negotiating the marriage of the Prince of Piedmont, Victor Amadeus, to Christine of France, sister of Louis XIII. After the princely wedding, Christine chose him as her confessor and 'great chaplain'.

The director is father, brother, friend

When addressing the people he directed, Francis de Sales made abundant use, according to the custom of the time, of titles taken from family and social life, such as *father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, niece, godfather, godmother, or servant*. The title of father signified authority and at the same time love and confidence. The father 'assists' his son and daughter with advice using wisdom, prudence and charity. As a spiritual father, the director is the one who in certain cases says: I do! Francis de Sales knew how to use such language, but only in very special circumstances, as when he ordered the baroness not to avoid meeting with her husband's murderer:

You asked me how I wanted you to behave in the meeting with the one who killed your lord husband. I answer in order. It is not necessary for you to seek the date and occasion yourself. However, if this arises I want you to welcome it with a gentle, kind and compassionate heart.

He once wrote to a distressed woman: 'I command you in the name of God', but it was to remove her scruples. His authority was always humble, good, even tender; his role with regard to the people he directed, he specified in the preface to the *Introduction*, consisted of a special 'assistance', a term that appears twice in this context. The intimacy that was established between him and the Duke of Bellegarde was such that Francis de Sales was able to respond to the duke's request, hesitatingly using the epithets 'my son' or 'monsignor my son', knowing full well that the duke was older than him. The pedagogical implication of spiritual direction is underlined by another significant image. After recalling the tiger's swift race to save her cub, moved by the power of natural love, he goes on to say:

And how much more willingly will a paternal heart care for a soul that it has found full of desire for holy perfection, carrying it on its breast, like a mother her child, without

feeling the weight of the dear burden.

With regard to the people he directed, women and men, Francis de Sales also acted like a brother, and it is in this capacity that he often presented himself to the people who had recourse to him. Antoine Favre was constantly called 'my brother'. At first he addressed the Baroness de Chantal as '*madame*' (lady), but later he switched to 'sister', 'this name, which is the one by which the apostles and the first Christians used to express their mutual love'. A brother does not command, he gives advice and practices fraternal correction.

But what best characterises the Salesian style is the friendly and reciprocal atmosphere that united the director and the directee. As André Ravier said so well, 'there is no true spiritual direction if there is no friendship, that is, exchange, communication, mutual influence'. It is not surprising that Francis de Sales loved his referents with a love that he witnessed to them in a thousand ways; it is surprising, instead, that he desired to be equally loved by them. With Jeanne de Chantal, the reciprocity became so intense as to sometimes turn 'mine' and 'yours' into 'ours': 'It is not possible for me to distinguish *mine* and *yours* in what concerns us is *ours*'.

Obedience to the director, but in an atmosphere of confidence and freedom

Obedience to the spiritual director is a guarantee against excesses, illusions and missteps made more often than not for one's own sake; it maintains a prudent and wise attitude. The author of the *Introduction* considered it necessary and beneficial, without resorting to it; 'humble obedience, so much recommended and so much practised by all the ancient devotees', is part of a tradition. Francis de Sales recommended it to the Baroness de Chantal with regard to her first director, but indicating the way to live it:

I greatly commend the religious respect you feel for your

director, and I urge you to preserve it with great care; but I must also say one more word to you. This respect must undoubtedly induce you to persevere in the holy conduct to which you have so happily adapted yourself, but it must by no means impede or stifle the just liberty which the Spirit of God gives to whomever he possesses.

In any case, the director must possess three indispensable qualities: 'He must be full of charity, knowledge and prudence: if one of these three is lacking, there is danger' (*I I 4*). This does not seem to be the case with Mme de Chantal's first director. According to her biographer, Mother de Chaugy, he 'bound her to his direction' warning her never to think of changing it; they were 'inappropriate ties that kept her soul trapped, cooped up and without freedom'. When, after meeting Francis de Sales, she wanted to change her director, she was plunged into a sea of scruples. To reassure her, he showed her another way:

Here is the general rule of our obedience, written in very large letters: YOU MUST DO EVERYTHING OUT OF LOVE, AND NOTHING BY CONSTRAINT; YOU MUST LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE. I leave you the spirit of freedom: not the one that excludes obedience, for then one would have to speak of the freedom of the flesh, but the one that excludes compulsion, scruple and haste.

The Salesian way is founded on the respect and obedience due to the director, without any doubt, but above all on confidence: 'Have the greatest confidence in him, together with sacred reverence, so that reverence does not diminish confidence and confidence does not impede reverence; trust him with the respect of a daughter towards her father, respect him with the confidence of a daughter towards her mother'. Confidence inspires simplicity and freedom, which foster communication between two people, especially when the one being directed is a fearful young novice:

I will tell you, in the first place, that you must not use words of ceremony or apology in my regard, for, by God's will, I feel for you all the affection you could desire, and I would not know how to forbid myself to feel it. I love your spirit deeply, because I think God wills it, and I love it tenderly, because I see you still weak and too young. Write to me, therefore, with all confidence and freedom, and ask all that seems useful for your good. And let this be said once and for all.

How should one write to the Bishop of Geneva? 'Write to me freely, sincerely, simply,' he said to one of the souls he directed. 'On this point, I have nothing more to say, except that you must not put *Monsignor* on the letter either alone or accompanied by other words: it is enough for you to put *Sir*, and you know why. I am a man without ceremony, and I love and honour you with all my heart.' This refrain returns frequently at the beginning of a new epistolary relationship. Affection, when it is sincere and especially when it has the good fortune to be reciprocated, authorises freedom and utmost frankness. 'Write to me whenever you feel like it,' he said to another woman, 'with full confidence and without ceremony; for this is how one should behave in this sort of friendship.' He told one of his correspondents: 'Do not ask me to excuse you for writing well or badly, because you owe me no ceremony other than that of loving me. This means speaking "heart to heart".' The love of God as well as the love of our neighbour makes us go on "in a good way, without a lot of fuss" because, as he put it, 'true love does not need a method'. The key to this is love, for 'love makes lovers equal', that is, love works a transformation in the people one loves, making them equal, similar and on the same level.

'Every flower requires special care'.

While the goal of spiritual direction is the same for everyone, namely the perfection of the Christian life, people are not all the same, and it belongs to the skill of

the director to know how to indicate the appropriate path for each person to reach the common goal. A man of his time, aware that social stratifications were a reality, Francis de Sales knew well the difference between the gentleman, the artisan, the valet, the prince, the widow, the girl and the married woman. Each, in fact, should produce fruit 'according to his qualification and profession'. But the sense of belonging to a particular social group went well, in him, with the consideration of the peculiarities of the individual: one must 'adapt the practice of devotion to the strengths, activities and duties of each one in particular'. He also believed that 'the means to achieve perfection are different according to the diversity of vocations'.

The diversity of temperaments is a fact which must be taken into account. One can detect in Francis de Sales a 'psychological flair' that predates modern discoveries. The perception of the unique characteristics of each person is very pronounced in him and is the reason why each subject deserves special attention from the spiritual father: 'In a garden, each herb and each flower requires special care. Like a father or mother with their children, he adapts to the individuality, temperament, and particular situations of each individual. To this person, impatient with himself, disappointed because he is not progressing as he would like, he recommends self-love; to this other, attracted by the religious life but endowed with a strong individuality, he advises a lifestyle that takes into account these two tendencies; to a third, wavering between exaltation and depression, he suggests peace of heart through the struggle against distressing imaginations. To a woman in despair because of her husband's 'spendthrift and frivolous' character, the director will have to advise 'the right means and moderation' and the means to overcome her impatience. Another, a woman with a head on her neck, with an 'all in one piece' character, full of anxieties and trials, will need 'holy sweetness and tranquillity'. Still another is distressed by the thought of death and often depressed: her director

inspires her with courage. There are souls who have a thousand desires for perfection; it is necessary to calm their impatience, the fruit of their self-love. The famous Angélique Arnauld, abbess of Port-Royal, wanted to reform her monastery with rigidity: he needed to recommend flexibility and humility to her.

As for the Duke de Bellegarde, who had meddled in all the political and amorous intrigues of the court, the bishop encouraged him to acquire 'a masculine, courageous, invariable devotion to serve as a mirror to many, exalting the truth of heavenly love, worthy of reparation for past faults'. In 1613 he drew up a *Reminder for making a good confession*, containing eight general 'warnings', a detailed description 'of sins against the ten commandments', an 'examination concerning capital sins', 'sins committed against the precepts of the Church', a 'means of discerning mortal sin from venial sin', and finally 'means of turning the great away from the sin of the flesh'.

Regressive method

The art of direction of conscience very often requires the director to take a step back and leave the initiative to the recipient, or to God, especially when it comes to making choices that require a demanding decision. 'Do not take my words too literally,' he wrote to Baroness de Chantal, 'I do not want them to be an imposition on you, but that you retain the freedom to do what you think best. He wrote, for example, to a woman who was very attached to 'vanities':

When you left, it came into my mind to tell you that you should renounce musk and perfumes, but I restrained myself, in order to follow my system, which is gentle and seeks to await those movements which, little by little, the exercises of piety tend to arouse in souls who consecrate themselves entirely to divine Goodness. My spirit, in fact, is extremely friendly to simplicity; and the billhook with which it is

customary to cut off useless suckers, I habitually leave in God's hand.

The director is not a despot, but one who 'guides our actions with his warnings and counsels', as he says at the beginning of the *Introduction*. He refrains from commanding when he writes to Madame de Chantal: 'These are good and suitable counsels for you, but not commands'. She would also say, at his canonisation process, that she sometimes regretted that she was not guided enough with commands. In fact, the role of the director is defined by the following response of Socrates to a disciple: 'I will therefore take care to return you to yourself better than you are'. As he always declared to Madame de Chantal, Francis had 'devoted himself', put himself at the 'service' of the 'most holy Christian freedom'. He fought for freedom:

You will see that I speak the truth and that I fight for a good cause when I defend the holy and lovable freedom of the spirit, which, as you know, I honour in a very special way, provided it is true and free from dissipation and libertinism, which are nothing but a mask of freedom.

In 1616, during a retreat, Francis de Sales had the mother of Chantal do an exercise of 'undressing', to reduce her to 'the lovely and holy purity and nakedness of children'. The time had come for her to take the step towards the 'autonomy' of the directee. He urged her, among other things, not to 'take any nurse' and not to keep telling him – he specified – 'that I will always be her nurse', and, in short, to be willing to renounce Francis' spiritual direction. God alone suffices: 'Have no other arms to carry you but God's, no other breasts on which to rest but His and Providence. [...] Think no more of the friendship or unity that God has established between us'. For Madame de Chantal the lesson is harsh: 'My God! My true Father, whom you have cut deeply with your razor! Can I remain in this state of mind for long'? She now sees herself 'stripped and naked of all that

was most precious to her'. Francis also confesses: 'And yes, I too find myself naked, thanks to Him who died naked to teach us to live naked'. Spiritual direction reaches its peak here. After such an experience, spiritual letters would become rarer and affection would be more restrained in favour of a wholly spiritual unity.

Missionary Appeal 2025

Dear confreres,

A fraternal and warm greeting from the "Sacro Cuore" in Rome.

Today, 18 December, as is the case every year, in memory of the foundation of our Congregation in 1859 I am addressing this letter to you, renewing the spirit of our origins, the missionary spirit that has made the Congregation what it is from the beginning.

It is with emotion that I give voice to the heart of the Congregation this year, on the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition. The celebration of this anniversary marks our heart and soul. It asks us to renew the missionary spirit that has always been at the heart of the charism, so that in thanking God for his fidelity, he may give future energy to evangelisation and the Congregation.

Celebrating the 150th anniversary of Don Bosco's first missionary expedition is a great gift to:

Give thanks for, recognising God's grace.

Gratitude makes the authorship of every beautiful achievement clear. Without gratitude there is no capacity to welcome. Every time we fail to recognise a gift in our personal and

institutional lives we seriously risk jeopardising it and “taking it over”. In speaking of the spirit of mission we are at the heart of the life of a disciple: something infinitely greater than us, which is the founding and original dynamic of the Church, for every generation.

Rethink, because “*nothing is forever*”.

Fidelity also involves the ability to change, in obedience, to a perspective that comes from God and from reading the “signs of the times”. Nothing is forever: from a personal and institutional point of view, true fidelity is the ability to change, recognising what the Lord calls each of us to. Rethinking, then, becomes a productive act in which faith and life come together; a moment in which to ask ourselves: what do you want to tell us, Lord, with this person, with this situation in the light of the signs of the times that ask that we have the very heart of God to be able to interpret it?

Relaunch, starting over every day.

Gratitude leads to looking far ahead and welcoming new challenges, relaunching missions with hope. Missionary activity is bringing the hope of Christ with a lucid and clear awareness linked to faith, which makes me recognise that what I see and live “is not my own”, and gives me the strength to move forward, personally and institutionally.

All this requires the courage to be oneself, to recognise one’s identity in the gift of God and to invest one’s energies in a precise responsibility. Aware that what has been entrusted to us is not ours, and that we have the task of passing it on to the next generations.

This is the heart of God; this is the life of the Church.

In recent times the Holy Father has given us the Encyclical Letter “*Dilexit Nos*” on the human and Divine love of the heart of Jesus Christ. This gift from Pope Francis enlightens our missionary heart.

The Pope shows us social action and the whole world as a natural destination of authentic devotion to the Sacred Heart. In number 205 of the Encyclical he says: *"What kind of worship would we give to Christ if we were to rest content with an individual relationship with him and show no interest in relieving the sufferings of others or helping them to live a better life? Would it please the heart that so loved us, if we were to bask in a private religious experience while ignoring its implications for the society in which we live?"*

Pope Francis tells us clearly that those who are intimate with the Lord's heart cannot but be endowed with a missionary spirit that embraces the whole world, because their heart has expanded, widened! There is a direct relationship: the more we inhabit the intimacy of the Heart of Christ, the more we will be able to reach the most distant corners of the earth.

The heart of Christ urges me to be attentive to the wounds of humanity's heart In a word: the heart of the mission is the heart of God.

What strength and energy the Holy Father is passing on to us in this year that introduces us to the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition!

The story continues with us. Today Don Bosco needs Salesians who make themselves available as "simple tools" to realise the missionary dream. This is my appeal to the confreres who feel the call of God in the depths of their heart within our common Salesian vocation, to make themselves available as missionaries with a lifelong commitment (*ad vitam*) wherever the Rector Major will send them.

48 Salesians replied to Father Angel's last appeal in December 2023, and 24 were chosen as members of the 155th missionary expedition. In this year of preparation for the 150th of the first missionary expedition, my prayer and my hope is that there can be even more.

Discussion with the General Councillor for the Missions and reflection shared within the General Council on the basis of the missionary project presented to the Council (AGC 437, p. 66) allows me to specify the urgent needs identified for 2025, where I would like a significant number of confreres to be sent:

- North Africa, Southern Africa (AFM), North West Africa (AON), Mozambique;
- the new presence that we will start in Vanuatu;
- Albania, Romania, for the 'Calabria-Basilicata Project' (IME);
- Chile, Mongolia, Uruguay, and other frontiers and any other urgent needs.

I invite Provincials, and with them the Provincial Delegates for mission animation, to be the first to help the confreres to facilitate their discernment, inviting them, after discussion with them personally, to make themselves available to the Rector Major to respond to the missionary needs of the Congregation. Then the General Councillor for the Missions will continue the discernment that will lead to the choice of missionaries for the next and 156th missionary expedition, which will be held in Valdocco on 11 November 2025.

May the Lord bless us and may Our Lady accompany all of us. A blessed Christmas to you all and a Happy New Year in the name of Hope, which is the presence of God.

Rome, 18 December 2024

Fr. Stefano Martoglio

Vicar (ex. art. 143 cost. S.D.B.)

Prot. n. 24/0575

The perfume

One cold March morning, in a hospital, due to serious complications, a baby girl was born much earlier than expected, after only six months of pregnancy.

She was a tiny little creature and the new parents were painfully shocked by the doctor's words: "I don't think the baby has much chance of survival. There is only a 10 per cent chance that she will survive the night, and even if that happens by some miracle, the probability that she will have future complications is very high." Paralysed with fear, the mother and father listened to the doctor's words as he described to them all the problems the child would face. She would never be able to walk, talk, see. She would be mentally retarded and much more.

Mum, dad and their five-year-old boy had waited so long for that child. Within a few hours, they saw all their dreams and wishes broken forever.

But their troubles were not over, the little one's nervous system was not yet developed. So, any caress, kiss or hug was dangerous, the disconsolate family members could not even convey their love to her, they had to avoid touching her.

All three held of them held hands and prayed, forming a small beating heart in the huge hospital:

"Almighty God, Lord of life, do what we cannot do: take care of little Diana, hold her to your breast, cradle her and make her feel all our love."

Diana was like a vibrant little baby doll and slowly began to improve. Weeks passed and the little one continued to gain weight and become stronger. Finally, when Diana turned two months old, her parents were able to hold her for the first time.

Five years later, Diana had become a serene child who looked towards the future with confidence and a zest for life. There were no signs of physical or mental deficiency, she was a normal child lively and full of curiosity.

But that is not the end of the story.

One warm afternoon, in a park not far from home, while her brother was playing football with friends, Diana was sitting in her mother's arms. As always she was chatting happily when suddenly she fell silent. She tightened her arms as if hugging someone and asked her mum: "Do you smell that?"

Smelling rain in the air, Mum replied: "Yes. It smells like when it's going to rain."

After a while, Diana raised her head and stroking her arms exclaimed: "No, it smells like Him. It smells like when God hugs you tightly."

The mother began to cry hot tears, as the little girl scampered towards her little friends to play with them.

Her daughter's words had confirmed what the woman had known in her heart for a long time. Throughout her time in hospital, as she struggled for life, God had taken care of the little girl, embracing her so often that his perfume had remained imprinted in Diana's memory.

God's perfume remains in every child. Why are we all in such a hurry to erase it?

The Cardinal Protectors of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco

From the very beginning, the Salesian Society had, like many other religious orders, a cardinal protector. Over time, up to the Second Vatican Council, there were nine cardinal protectors, a role of great importance for the growth of the Salesian Society.

The institution of cardinal protectors for religious congregations is an ancient tradition dating back to the early centuries of the Church, when the Pope appointed defenders and representatives of the faith. With the passage of time, this practice extended to religious orders, to which a cardinal was assigned with the task of protecting their rights and prerogatives at the Holy See. The Salesian Society of St John Bosco also enjoyed such favour, having several cardinals to represent and protect it in ecclesiastical offices.

Origin of the role of Cardinal Protector

The custom of having a protector dates back to the first centuries of the Roman Empire, when Romulus, the founder of Rome, created two social orders: patricians and plebeians. Each plebeian could elect a patrician as protector, establishing a system of mutual benefit between the two social classes. This practice was later adopted by the Church as well. One of the earliest examples of an ecclesiastical protector is St Sebastian, appointed by Pope Caius in 283 A.D. as defender of the Church of Rome.

In the 13th century, the assignment of cardinal protectors to religious orders became an established practice. St Francis of Assisi was one of the first to request a cardinal protector for his order. Following a vision in which his friars were being attacked by birds of prey, Francis asked the Pope to assign a cardinal as their protector. Innocent III agreed and appointed Cardinal Ugolino Conti, the Pope's nephew. From then on, religious orders followed this tradition to obtain protection and support in their dealings with the Church.

This practice spread almost as a necessity, since the new mendicant and itinerant orders had a different lifestyle from that of the monks with fixed abode, well known to the local bishops. The geographic distances, the different political systems of the places where the new religious orders operated and the difficulties in communication at the time required an authoritative figure who was thoroughly familiar with their

problems and needs. This figure could represent them at the Roman Curia, defend their rights and interests and intercede with the Holy See in case of need. The cardinal protector had no ordinary jurisdiction over religious orders; his role was that of a benevolent protector, although in particular circumstances he could receive delegated powers.

This practice also extended to other religious orders and, in the case of the Salesian Society, the cardinal protectors played a crucial role in ensuring the recognition and protection of the young congregation, especially in its early years when it was trying to consolidate itself within the structure of the Catholic Church.

The choice of the Cardinal Protector

The relationship between Don Bosco and the ecclesiastical hierarchy was complex, especially in the early years of the congregation's foundation. Not all the cardinals and bishops viewed favourably the educational and pastoral model proposed by Don Bosco, partly because of his innovative approach and partly because of his insistence on addressing the poorer and disadvantaged classes.

The choice of a cardinal protector was not random, but was made with great care. Usually, a cardinal was sought who was familiar with the order or who had shown an interest in the type of work carried out by the Congregation. In the case of the Salesians, this meant looking for cardinals who had a particular focus on youth, education or missions, since these were the Society's main areas of activity. Of course, the final appointment depended on the Pope and the Secretariat of State.

The role of the Cardinal Protector for the Salesians

For the Salesian Society, the Cardinal Protector was a key figure in its interaction with the Holy See, helping to mediate any disputes, ensuring the correct interpretation of canonical rules and ensuring that the needs of the Order were

understood and respected. Unlike some older Congregations, which had already established a strong relationship with the ecclesiastical authorities, the Salesians, born in an era of rapid social and religious change, needed significant support to face the initial challenges, both internally and externally.

One of the most important aspects of the Cardinal Protector's role was his ability to support the Salesians in their relations with the Pope and the Curia. This role of mediator and protector provided the congregation with a direct channel to the higher echelons of the Church, allowing them to express concerns and requests that might otherwise have been ignored or postponed. The cardinal protector was also responsible for ensuring that the Salesian Society complied with the directives of the Pope and the Church, ensuring that their mission remained in line with Catholic teaching.

On one of his visits to Rome in February 1875, Don Bosco asked the Holy Father Pius IX for the grace of having a cardinal protector:

"During the same audience he asked the Pope if the Salesians should request a Cardinal Protector as was customary with religious Congregations. The Pope replied, 'As long as I live, I myself shall be Protector both to you and to your Congregation.'"(BM XI, 102).

However, realising the need for a reference person who had the authority to carry out various tasks for the Salesian Society, in 1876 Don Bosco returned to ask the Pope for a Cardinal Protector:

'Then, when I asked him to appoint a cardinal protector for our Congregation to expedite communication with the Holy See – as other congregations have – he smilingly answered, "How many protectors do you want? Aren't you satisfied with one?" meaning: I want to be your cardinal protector. Isn't that

enough? Before such graciousness, I thanked him with all my heart and said, "Holy Father, I need no other protector." (BM XII, 161).

After this satisfying reply, Don Bosco still obtained a Cardinal Protector in the same year, 1876:

'3. I asked that a cardinal protector be appointed to act as our spokesman to the Holy Father. At first it seemed as if he himself wished to be our protector, but I pointed out that this cardinal would act as our representative with the Pope on matters which we could not personally discuss with the Holy See's congregations because of distance. Actually, the Holy Father himself would be our real protector, while the cardinal would manage our affairs with the Holy See. Hearing this explanation, he concluded, "Then it's all right. I shall so inform the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars." And so, His Eminence Cardinal Oreglia will become the protector of our missions, the Salesian cooperators, the Sons of Mary, the archconfraternity of Mary, Help of Christians, and the whole Salesian Congregation in all matters which have to be cleared through the Holy See.' (BM XIII, 386)

Don Bosco mentioned this cardinal in his writing 'The loveliest flower of the apostolic college' or rather the election of Leo XIII (pp. 193-194):

"XXVIII. Card. Luigi Oreglia Luigi Oreglia dei Baroni di S. Stefano honours Piedmont as does Cardinal Bilio, as he was born in Benevagienna in the diocese of Mondovì on 9 July 1828. He did his theological studies in Turin under the teaching of our valiant professors, who admired his discerning mind and indefatigable love for work. He then went to Rome to the Ecclesiastical Academy, where he commendably completed his religious education, and devoted himself to the study of languages, especially German, in which he is very good. Having entered the prelature, he was appointed on 15 April 1858 as the reference point for the Signatura, then was sent as

internuncio to The Hague in Holland, from whence he went to Portugal, after having been proclaimed Archbishop of Damietta, succeeding the most eminent Cardinal Perrieri in that important diplomatic office. He found certain traditions of Pombal still alive in Portugal, which he fought against with great intelligence and courage. For which he was not too pleasing to those who then ruled. And he returned to Rome and the Holy Father, to show that if he ceased to represent the Holy See in Portugal it was not for any fault of his, created and made him a Cardinal in the Consistory of 22 December 1873, as titular of Saint Anastasia and appointing him Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Indulgences and Sacred Relics. Cardinal Oreglia added the virtues of the exemplary priest to his noble manners of the gentleman. Pius IX always held him dear and loved his conversation full of reserve and grace. He sets about matters slowly, but when he puts in a word, he does not care about labours and troubles as long as it succeeds. He is very frugal. The new Pontiff holds him in high regard and has confirmed him in the office of prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Indulgences and Sacred Relics."

Cardinal Luigi Oreglia remained protector of the Salesians from 1876 to 1878, although he had already performed this task informally before 1876.

However, officially, the first Cardinal Protector of the Salesians was Lorenzo Nina, who held this office from 1879 to 1885. Leo XIII agreed to Don Bosco's request to have a cardinal protector for the Society, and the official notification came after an audience on 29 March 1879:

"Six days after his audience with the Pope, Don Bosco was officially informed that his cardinal protector had been appointed in a communication from the secretariat of state, signed by Monsignor Seraphim Cretoni, and couched in words of praise: 'The Salesian Congregation daily merits greater thoughtful consideration from the

Holy See because of its works of mercy and its accomplishments in evangelizing various areas of the world. It is the Holy Father's wish that it be granted a special protector, and he has graciously appointed Cardinal Lawrence Nina, his secretary of state.' At the time of Pius IX, Cardinal [Louis] Oreglia had been the nominal protector of the Salesians since that Pope had taken the Salesian Congregation under his personal protection because at its origins it needed his special fatherly assistance. Now it had a true cardinal protector as did the other religious congregations. Nor could his choice have fallen on a more benevolent prelate, for, having known Don Bosco before he became cardinal, the secretary of state had a lofty admiration and a warm love for him, having declared himself more than willing when Don Bosco had first asked him to be the Salesians' protector. "I could not volunteer for this to the Holy Father on my own," he told Don Bosco, "but if he asks, I shall accept immediately." He gave eloquent proof of his good intentions when Don Bosco proposed that, in view of His Eminence's responsibilities, he might appoint an official of his with whom Don Bosco could deal in matters concerning the foreign missions. 'No,' the cardinal replied, 'I want to handle this myself. Come tomorrow at half past four so we can discuss this at greater ease. It is a wonder that your Congregation can thrive in such times as these others fall to pieces and everything is threatened.' Don Bosco frequently experienced the benefits of such a loving patronage. After he returned to Turin and told the superior chapter that the Pope had appointed a protector, he wrote a letter of thanks to the cardinal on behalf of the entire Congregation, paying him a most cordial tribute and soliciting his help for the Salesian missions and perhaps also for the granting of privileges. This seems to be brought out by His Eminence's reply. (BM XIV, 56-57)

From then on, the Salesian Congregation would always have a cardinal protector with great influence in the Roman Curia.

In addition to this official figure, there were always other cardinals and high prelates who understand the importance of education, and supported the Salesians. These include Cardinals Alessandro Barnabò (1801-1874), Giuseppe Berardi (1810-1878), Gaetano Alimonda (1818-1891), Luigi Maria Bilio (1826-1884), Luigi Galimberti (1836-1896), Augusto Silj (1846-1926) and many others.

List of the Protectors of the Salesian Society of St. John Bosco:

	Cardinal Protector SDB	Period	Appointment
	<u>Blessed Pope Pius IX</u>		
1	<u>Luigi OREGLIA</u>	1876-1878	
2	<u>Lorenzo NINA</u>	1879-1885	29.03.1879 (MB XIV,78-79)
3	<u>Lucido Maria PAROCCHI</u>	1886-1903	12.04.1886 (ASV, Segr. Stato, 1886, prot. 66457; ASC D544, Cardinal Protectors, Parocchi)
4	<u>Mariano RAMPOLLA DEL TINDARO</u>	1903-1913	31.03.1093 (Cardinal Rampolla's card to Don Rua)
5	<u>Pietro GASPARRI</u>	1914-1934	09.10.1914 (AAS 1914-006, p. 22)
6	<u>Eugenio PACELLI (Pius XII)</u>	1935-1939	02.01.1935 (AAS 1935-027, p.116)
7	<u>Vincenzo LA PUMA</u>	1939-1943	24.05.1939 (AAS 1939-031, p. 281)
8	<u>Carlo SALOTTI</u>	1943-1947	29.12.1943 (AAS 1943-036, p. 61)
9	<u>Benedetto Aloisi MASELLA</u>	1948-1970	10.02.1948 (AAS 1948-040, p.165)

The last protector of the Salesians was Cardinal Benedetto Aloisi Masella, as the role of the protectors was annulled by

the Secretariat of State at the time of the Second Vatican Council in 1964. The incumbent protectors remained until their death, and with them the office they received also died.

This happened because, in the contemporary context, the role of the cardinal protector lost some of its formal relevance. The Catholic Church underwent numerous reforms during the 20th century, and many of the functions that were once delegated to the cardinal protectors were incorporated into the official structures of the Roman Curia or were made obsolete by changes in ecclesiastical governance. However, even if the figure of the cardinal protector no longer exists with the same prerogatives as in the past, the concept of ecclesiastical protection remains important.

Today, the Salesians, like many other Congregations, maintain a close relationship with the Holy See through various dicasteries and curial offices, in particular the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. In addition, many cardinals continue to personally support the mission of the Salesians, even without the formal title of protector. This closeness and support remain essential to ensure that the Salesian mission continues to respond to the challenges of the contemporary world, particularly in youth education and missions.

The institution of cardinal protectors for the Salesian Society was a crucial element in its growth and consolidation. Thanks to the protection offered by these eminent ecclesiastical figures, Don Bosco and his successors were able to carry out the Salesian mission with greater serenity and security, knowing they could count on the support of the Holy See. The work of the cardinal protectors proved to be essential not only in defending the rights of the congregation, but also in favouring its expansion throughout the world, helping to spread Don Bosco's charism and his educational system.