

Blessed Michael Rua, an outstanding bloom from the garden of the Immaculate Conception Sodality

Dominic Savio arrived at the Valdocco Oratory in the autumn of 1854, at the end of the deadly plague that had decimated the city of Turin. He immediately became friends with Michael Rua, John Cagliero, John Bonetti and Joseph Bongiovanni, with whom he went to school in the city. In all likelihood he knew nothing of the “Salesian Society” that Don Bosco had begun to speak about to some of his young men in January of that year. But the following spring he had an idea that he confided to Joseph Bongiovanni. There were wonderful boys in the Oratory, but there were also lukewarm ones who behaved badly, and there were boys who were struggling with their studies, homesick. Everyone tried to help them individually. Why couldn’t the more willing young people join together, in a ‘secret society’, to become a compact group of little apostles in the mass of others? Joseph agreed. They talked about it with some others. They liked the idea. It was decided to call the group the Immaculate Conception Sodality. Don Bosco gave his consent: they would try it out, draw up a small set of rules. From the minutes of the Sodality preserved in the Salesian Archives, we know that there were about ten members who met once a week: Michael Rua (who was elected president), Dominic Savio, Joseph Bongiovanni (elected secretary), Celestine Durando, John B. Francesia, John Bonetti, cleric Angelo Savio, Joseph Rocchietti, John Turchi, Louis Marcellino, Joseph Reano, Francis Vaschetti. John Cagliero was absent because he was convalescing after a serious illness and was living at home with his mother. The concluding article of the rules, approved by everyone including Don Bosco, said, “A sincere, filial, unlimited trust in Mary, a special tenderness towards her, constant devotion will help us overcome every obstacle, be tenacious in our resolutions, strict with ourselves, loving towards our neighbour, exact in everything.”

The members of the Sodality chose to “look after” two categories of boys, who in the secret language of the minutes were called “clients”. The first category were the unruly ones, those who easily used bad language and their fists. Each member would take one of them in and act as his “guardian angel” for as long as necessary (Michele Magone had a persevering “guardian angel”!). The second category were the newcomers. They helped them through the first few days when they did not yet know anyone, did not know how to

play, spoke only the dialect of their hometown, and were homesick. (Francesco Cerruti had Dominic Savio as his “guardian angel”, and recounted their first encounters with simple enchantment).

In the minutes one can see the unfolding of each meeting: a moment of prayer, a few minutes of spiritual reading, a mutual exhortation to go to Confession and Communion; “then the entrusted clients are discussed. Patience and trust in God was urged for those who seemed entirely deaf and insensitive; prudence and gentleness towards those who were easy to persuade.”

Comparing the names of the participants in the Immaculate Conception Sodality with the names of the first to enrol in the Pious Society, one has the moving impression that the “Sodality” was the “dress rehearsal” for the Congregation that Don Bosco was about to found. It was the small field where the first seeds of Salesian flourishing germinated. The “Sodality” became the leaven of the Oratory. It turned ordinary boys into little apostles with a very simple formula: a weekly meeting with a prayer, listening to few good pages, a mutual exhortation to go to the Sacraments, a concrete programme on how and whom to help in the environment where they lived, a good-natured chat to share successes and failures of the days just gone by. Don Bosco was very pleased. And he wanted it to be transplanted in every new Salesian work, so that there too it would be a focus for committed youngsters and future Salesian and priestly vocations. In the four pages of advice that Don Bosco gave to Michael Rua who was going to found the first Salesian house outside Turin, at Mirabello (they are one of the best summaries of his educational system and would be given to every new Salesian director) we read these two lines: “Try to start the Immaculate Conception Sodality, but you will only be its promoter and not its director; consider it as a work of the young people themselves.” In every Salesian work a group of committed young people, named as we see fit, but a photocopy of the ancient “Immaculate Conception Sodality”! Would this not be the secret that Don Bosco confided to us to make Salesian and priestly vocations germinate again? It is a certainty: the Salesian Congregation was founded and expanded by involving young people, who allowed themselves to be convinced by Don Bosco’s apostolic passion and his dream of life. We must tell young people the story of the Congregation’s beginnings, of which young people were the “co-founders”. The majority (Rua, Cagliero, Bonetti, Durando, Marcellino, Bongiovanni, Francesia, Lazzerio) were companions of Dominic Savio and members of the Sodality; and twelve were faithful to Don Bosco until their death. It is to be hoped that this “founding” fact will help us to involve today’s young people more and more in the apostolic commitment for the salvation of other young people.

Alexandre Planas Saurí, the deaf martyr (1/2)

Alexandre Planas Sauri, born in Mataró (Barcelona) on 31 December 1878, was a lay collaborator of the Salesians until his glorious death as a martyr in Garraf (Barcelona) on 19 November 1936. His beatification took place together with other Salesians and members of the Salesian Family on 11 March 2001, by Pope Saint John Paul II.

The list of Spanish martyrs beatified by Pope John Paul II on 11 March 2001 includes layman Alexandre PLANAS SAURÍ. His name is one of the Salesian martyrs of the Tarraconense Province, a subgroup of Barcelona. The testimonies about his life also describe him as “of the family” or “cooperator”, but everyone describes him as “a genuine Salesian”. The village of Sant Vicenç dels Horts, where he lived for 35 years, knew him by the nickname “El Sord’” “El Sord dels Frares” (The Deaf man of the friars). And this is the expression that appears on the beautiful plaque in the parish church, placed on at the back, on the exact spot where Alexandre stood when he went to pray.

His life was cut short on the night of 18 November 1936, along with a Salesian Brother, Eliseo García, who stayed with him so as not to leave him alone, as Alexandre did not want to leave the village and seek a safer place. Within hours both were arrested, condemned by the anarchist committee in the municipality, and taken to the banks of the Garraf, on the Mediterranean, where they were shot. Their bodies were not recovered. Alexandre was 58 years old.

This is a note that could have made it onto the events page of any newspaper and fallen into utter oblivion. But it did not. The Church proclaimed them both blessed. For

the Salesian Family they were and always will be “signs of faith and reconciliation”. Reference will be made in these pages to Mr Alexandre. Who was this man whom people nicknamed “*el Sord dels frares*”?

The circumstances of his life

Alexandre Planas Saurí was born in Mataró (province of Barcelona) in 1878, six years before the train that took Don Bosco to Barcelona (to visit and meet with the Salesians and the young people at the Sarrià house), stopped at the station in this city to pick up Doña Dorotea de Chopitea and those from Martí Codolar who wanted to accompany him on the last leg of the journey to Barcelona.

Very little is known of his childhood and adolescence. He was baptised in the city’s most popular parish, St Joseph and St John. He was, without a doubt, a regular attender at Sunday celebrations, activities and parish celebrations. Judging by the trajectory of his later life, he was a young man who was able to develop a solid spiritual life.

Alexandre had a significant physical impairment: he was totally deaf and had an ungainly body (short in stature, and curvature of the spine). The circumstance that brought him to Sant Vicenç dels Horts, a town about 50 km from his home town, is unknown. The truth is that in 1900 he was among the Salesians in the small town of Sant Vicenç as an employee in the daily activities of the Salesian house: gardening, cleaning, farming, running errands... A clerver and hard working young man. And, above all, “good and very pious”.

The house in Sant Vicenç dels Horts was bought by Fr Philip Rinaldi, former Provincial of Spain, in 1895, to house the novitiate and the philosophy studies that were to be carried out later. It was the first Salesian formation centre in Spain. Alexandre arrived there in 1900 as an employee, immediately earning the respect of everyone. He felt very comfortable, fully integrated in the spirit and mission of the house.

At the end of the 1902-1903 school year, the house underwent a major change of direction. The Rector Major, Fr Michael Rua, had created the three provinces of Spain. Madrid and Seville Provinces decided to organise formation in their respective provinces. Barcelona also transferred the novitiate and philosophy to Girona. The house in Sant Vicenç dels Horts remained practically empty within a few months, inhabited only by Mr Alexandre.

From that year until 1931 (28 years!), he became the guardian of the house. Not only of the property, but above all of the Salesian traditions that had become strongly rooted in the population in just a few years. His was a benevolent presence and work, living like an anchorite but in no way foreign to the friends of the house who protected him, for the sick of the town he visited, life in his parish, the parishioners he edified with the example of his piety, and for the children at parish catechesis and the festive oratory he animated together with a young man from the town, Joan Juncadella, with whom he formed a strong friendship. Distant yet close at the same time, with no small influence on people. A singular character. The reference person for Salesian spirit in the village. *"El sord dels frares"*.

The man

Alexandre, a handicapped and deaf person who understood others thanks to his penetrating gaze, of the movement of their lips, always answered lucidly, even if he spoke softly. A man with a good and bright heart: *"A treasure in an ugly earthenware jar, but we, the children, were able to perceive his human dignity perfectly."*

He dressed as a poor person, always with his bag slung over his shoulder, sometimes accompanied by a dog. The Salesians let him stay at the house. He could live on what the garden produced and the help he received from a few people. His poverty was exemplary, more than evangelical. And if he had stoo much, he gave it to the poor. In the midst of this

kind of life, he carried out the task of caretaker of the house with absolute fidelity.

As well as the faithful and responsible man, was the good, humble, self-sacrificing man of an invincible, though firm, warmth. "He would not allow anyone to be spoken ill of." Then there was the gentleness of his heart. "The comforter of all families." A man of transparent heart, and upright intention. A man who made himself loved and respected. The people were with him.



The artist

Alexandre also had the soul of an artist, an artist and a mystic. Isolated from outside noise he lived absorbed in constant mystical contemplation. And he was able to capture the innermost feelings of his religious experience in material things, which almost always revolved around the passion of Jesus Christ.

In the courtyard at the house he created three clearly visible monuments: Christ nailed to the cross, being laid in Mary's hands and the holy sepulchre. Among the three, the cross presided over the courtyard. Passengers on the train that ran past the farm could see it perfectly. On the other hand, he set up a small workshop in one of the outbuildings of the house where he carried out the orders he received or small images with which he satisfied the tastes of popular piety and distributed them freely among his neighbours.

The believer

But what dominated his personality was his Christian faith. He professed it in the depths of his being and manifested it with total clarity, sometimes even ostentatiously, by professing it in public. "*A true saint*" a "*man of God*" people said. "*When we arrived at the chapel in the morning or in the afternoon we would always unfailingly*

find Alexandre praying, on his knees, doing his pious practices." "His piety was very deep." A man totally open to the voice of the Spirit, with the sensitivity that saints possess. The most admirable thing about this man was his thirst and hunger for God, "seeking ever more spirituality."

Alexandre's faith was first of all open to the mystery of God, before whose greatness he would fall on his knees in profound adoration: *"Bowed down by his body, his eyes lowered, full of interior life... placed at one side of the church, his head bowed, kneeling, absorbed in the mystery of God, fully immersed in meditation on holy pleasure, he would give vent to his affections and emotions..."*

"He would spend hours before the tabernacle, kneeling, with his body bent almost horizontally to the ground, after communion." From contemplation of God and his saving greatness, Alexandre drew a great trust in Divine Providence, but also a radical aversion to blasphemy against the glory of God and his holy name. He could not tolerate blasphemy. *"If he sensed a blasphemy he would either become tense as he looked intensely at the person who had uttered it, or he would whisper with compassion, so that the person could hear: 'Our Lady weeps, Our Lord weeps.'"*

His faith was expressed in the traditional devotions of the Eucharist, as we have seen, and the rosary. But where his religious impulse found the channel best suited to his needs was undoubtedly in meditation on the passion of Christ. *"I remember the impression we had of this deaf man on hearing him speak of the Passion of Christ."*

He bore the mystery of the cross in his flesh and in his soul. In its honour he had erected the monuments of the cross, the deposition and the burial of Christ. All accounts also mention the iron crucifix he wore hanging from his chest, and whose chain was embedded in his skin. And he always slept with a large crucifix beside him. He did not want to take off the crucifix even during the months of religious persecution that culminated in his martyrdom. "Am I doing anything wrong?" he would say. "And if they kill me, so much the better, then I

already have heaven open.”

Every day he would make the Stations of the Cross: “When he went up to the study room, Mr Planas would enter the chapel, and when we came down after an hour, he was finishing the Stations of the Cross, which he did totally bent over, until his head touched the ground.”

Founded on this experience of the cross to which was added his profound devotion to the Sacred Heart, the Deaf man’s spirituality was projected towards asceticism and solidarity. He lived as a penitent, in evangelical poverty and a spirit of mortification. He slept on planks without a mattress or pillow, having beside him a skull that reminded him of death and “some instruments of penance”. He did not learn this from the Salesians. He had learnt it previously and explained it by recalling the spirituality of Jesuit St Alphonse Rodríguez, whose manual he used to read in the novitiate house and which he sometimes meditated on during those years.

But his love for the cross also drove him to solidarity. His austerity was impressive. He dressed like the poor and ate frugally. He gave all he could give: not money, because he had none, but always his fraternal help: *“When there was something to be done for someone, he would leave everything and go where it was needed.”* Those who benefited most were the children in catechesis and the sick. *“He never missed the bedside of a seriously ill person: he would watch over him while the family rested. And if there was no one in the family who could prepare the deceased, he was ready for this service. Favoured were the poor, whom, if he could, he helped with the alms he collected or with the fruit of his labour.”*

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don Joan Lluís Playà, sdb

Venerable Constatine
Vendrame: apostle of Christ

The cause for the canonisation of the servant of God, Constantine Vendrame, is advancing. On 19 September 2023, the volume of the “Positio super Vita, Virtutibus et Fama Sanctitatis” was delivered to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in the Vatican. Let us briefly introduce this professed priest of the Society of St Francis de Sales.

From the hills of Veneto to the hills of North-East India

The Servant of God Fr Constantine Vendrame was born in San Martino di Colle Umberto (Treviso) on 27 August 1893. San Martino, a hamlet of the larger town of Colle Umberto, is a charming Italian town in the Veneto region in the province of Treviso: From its hills, San Martino faces both the plains furrowed by the Piave river, and the foothills of the Alps in the Belluno area. This same dual nature – a hill town that looks towards the mountains and the plains, the proximity to the larger population centres and ideal projection to the more sober world of the mountains, is what the future missionary Fr Costantino would find in North-East India, squeezed between the first spurs of the Himalayan chain and the Brahmaputra valley.

His family also belonged to the world of simple people: his father Pietro, a blacksmith by profession, and his mother Elena Fiori, originally from Cadore, whom he most likely met in the mountains. Fr Vendrame's ties with his siblings were strong: Giovanni, of whom he retained faithful memories; Antonia, the mother of a large family; his beloved Angela, to whom he was united by deep affection, in harmony of works and intentions. Angela would remain – with exuberant creativity –

at the service of the parish and would offer her suffering and merits for her brother's apostolic, missionary enterprise. Vivid in the family was also the memory of her elder brother Canciano, who flew to heaven at only 13 years of age. He was baptised the day after his birth (28 August) and confirmed in November 1898, and then lost his father. Constantine Vendrame made his first communion on 21 July 1904 and spent his childhood with the usual routine tasks. And this is how the priestly vocation took shape as a child. It perhaps has its roots in little Constantino's entrustment to Our Lady – through his mother's initiative: an entrustment that then matured into a more complete gift of self.



However, the reality of the seminary – which the Servant of God attended in Ceneda (Vittorio Veneto) with complete success – lacked the missionary inspiration that he felt was his. So, he turned to the Salesians and it was in the Salesian house at Mogliano Veneto that “in the small porter's lodge in 1912 with the good Fr Dones that my Salesian and missionary vocation was decided.”

He completed the stages of formation as a religious among the Sons of Don Bosco, in particular as an aspirant (from October 1912 in Verona), novice (from 24 August 1913 in Ivrea), temporary professed (in 1914) and perpetual professed confrere (from 1 January 1920 in Chioggia). He was ordained a priest in Milan on 15 March 1924. From the time he was admitted to the novitiate, he was described as “very firm in practice, and well educated.” His marks at the seminary had always been excellent and he did well in the Society of St Francis de Sales.

His preparatory course was marked by compulsory military service. These were the years of the Great War: 1914-1918 (for Italy: 1915-1918). In those moments Vendrame as a cleric did not go backwards; he opened up to his superiors; he kept his

commitments. The years of the First World War further forged in him the courage that would be so useful to him in his missions.

Missionary of fire



Fr Constantine Vendrame received the missionary crucifix in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin on 5 October 1924. A few weeks later he embarked from Venice for India: destination Assam, in the North-East. He arrived there in time for Christmas. On a little picture he wrote, “Sacred Heart of Jesus, everything I have confided in you, everything I have hoped for from you and I have not been deceived.” With the confreres, he meditated during the journey on *Meeting the King of Love*: “Everything is here: the whole Gospel, the whole Law. I have loved you [...]”, “I have loved you more than my life, because I gave my life for you – and when one has given one’s life, one has given everything”. This is the programme of his missionary commitment.

Compared to the younger Salesians – who would have completed most of their formation in India – he arrived there already complete, in full vigour: he was 31 years old and was able to benefit not only from his tough experience in the war, but also from his practical training in the Italian oratories. A beautiful and difficult land awaited him, where paganism of an “animist” stamp dominated and some Protestant sects were openly prejudiced towards the Catholic Church. He chose contact with the people, decided to take the first step: he started with the children, whom he taught to pray and allowed to play. It was these “‘little friends” (a few Catholics, some Protestants, almost all non-Christians) who talked about Jesus and the Catholic missionary in the family, who helped Father Vendrame in his apostolate. He was flanked by his confreres – who over the years would recognise him as the “pioneer” of

Salesian missionary activity in Assam – and by valid lay collaborators, trained over time.

Of this early period, traces remain of a missionary of “fire”, animated by the sole interest in the glory of God and the salvation of souls. His style became that of the Apostle to the Gentiles, to whom he would be compared for the propulsive efficacy of his proclamation and the strong attraction of the pagans to Christ. “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!” (cf. 1 Cor 9:16), says Fr Vendrame with his life. He exposed himself to all wear and tear, as long as Christ is proclaimed. Truly for him too “Countless journeys, dangers from the rivers [...], dangers from the pagans [...]; hardship and toil, vigils without number, hunger and thirst, frequent fasting, cold and nakedness” (cf. 2 Cor 11:26-27). The Servant of God became a walker in North-East India with all kinds of dangers; he supported himself with a very meagre diet; he faced late night returns or nights spent almost freezing cold.

Always in the trenches

At the outbreak of the Second World War and in the years that followed, Fr Costantino Vendrame was able to benefit from – at times of particular “environmental” fatigue (military camps; extreme poverty in South India) and “ecclesial” hardship (harsh opposition in North East India) – a whole range of prior training: in the custody of the Gurkhas; in Deoli; in Dehra Dun; missionary in Wandiwash in Tamil Nadu; in Mawkhar in Assam. In Deoli he was “rector” of the religious in the camp; also in Dehra Dun he set an example.

Liberated at the end of the war, but prevented by political reasons completely foreign to him as a person from returning to Assam, Fr Vendrame – who was over 50 and worn out by privations – was assigned by Louis Mathias, Archbishop of Madras, to Tamil Nadu. There Fr Costantino had to start all over again: once again, he knew how to make himself deeply loved, aware – as he wrote in a 1950 letter to his brother priests in the Diocese of Vittorio Veneto – of the extremely harsh conditions of his missionary mandate:

He was convinced that there was good to be done everywhere and wherever there were souls to be saved. Remaining “ad experimentum”, so as to guarantee continuity to the poor mission, he finally returned to Assam: he could rest, but plans were made to establish a Catholic presence in Mawkhar, a district of Shillong then considered the “fort” of the Protestants.

And it was precisely in Mawkhar that the Servant of God achieved his “masterpiece”: the birth of a Catholic community that is still flourishing today, in which – in years far removed from today’s ecumenical sensibility – the Catholic presence was first harshly opposed, then tolerated, then accepted and finally esteemed. The unity and charity witnessed by Fr Vendrame was for Mawkhar an unprecedented and “scandalous” proclamation, which won over the hardest hearts and attracted the benevolence of many: he had brought the “honey of St Francis”- that is, Salesian loving-kindness, inspired by the gentleness of Salesian – to a land where souls had closed.

Towards the finish line

When pain became insistent, he admitted in a letter: “with difficulty I was able to manage the work of the day.” The last stretch of the earthly journey unfolded. The day arrived when he asked to check if there was any food left: a unique request for Fr Vendrame, who made himself enough of the essentials and, returning late, never wanted to disturb for dinner. That evening he could not even articulate a few sentences: he was exhausted, aged prematurely. He had kept silent until the very end, prey to an arthritis that also affected his spine.

Hospitalization then loomed, but at Dibrugarh: it would spare him the constant flocking of people; the pain of helplessly witnessing their father’s agony. The Servant of God would go so far as to faint from pain: every movement became terrible for him.

Bishop Orestes Marengo – his friend and former cleric, Bishop of Dibrugarh, the Sisters of the Child Mary, some lay people,

the medical staff including many nurses, won over by his gentleness.

Everyone recognised him as a true man of God: even non-Christians. Fr Vendrame in his suffering could say, like Jesus “I am not alone, for the Father is with me”(cf. Jn 16:32).

Tried by illness and complications from pneumonia, he died on 30 January 1957 on the eve of the feast of St John Bosco. Just a few days earlier (24 January), in his last letter to his sister Angela he was still thinking of his apostolate, lucid in suffering but a man of hope always.

He was so poor that he did not even have a suitable burial robe: Bishop Marengo gave him one of his own so that he could be more worthily clothed. One witness recounts how handsome Fr Costantino looked in death, even better than in life, finally freed from the “fatigues” and “strains” that had marked so many decades.

After an initial funeral / farewell service in Diburgarh, the wake and solemn funeral took place in Shillong. The people flocked with so many flowers that it looked like a Eucharistic procession. The crowd was immense, many approached the sacraments of Reconciliation and Communion: this generalised attitude of drawing closer to God, even on the part of those who had turned away from Him, was one of the greatest signs that accompanied Fr Constantine’s death.

Venerable Archbishop Antônio de Almeida Lustosa “father and friend of the poor”

On 22 June 2023, the Holy Father Francis received Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Causes of

Saints in audience, and during the Audience the Supreme Pontiff authorised the same Dicastery to promulgate the Decree concerning the heroic virtues of the Servant of God Antônio de Almeida Lustosa, of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco, Archbishop of Fortaleza; born 11 February 1886 in São João del Rei (Brazil) and died 14 August 1974 in Carpina (Brazil).

A life in the light of the Immaculate

Antônio de Almeida Lustosa was born in the city of São João del Rei, in Minas Gerais (Brazil), on 11 February 1886, on the anniversary of the first apparition of the Immaculate at Lourdes, a circumstance that marked him profoundly, giving him a filial devotion to Our Lady, so much so that he was described, by now a priest, as the poet of the Virgin Mary.

He received a good Christian and human upbringing from his parents, João Baptista Pimentel Lustosa and Delphina Eugênia de Almeida Magalhães, exemplary Christians. An intelligent boy with a good and generous disposition, the son of a judge, he showed visible signs of a strong priestly vocation at an early age. That is why at the age of sixteen he entered the Salesian College at Cachoeira do Campo, in Minas Gerais, and three years later he was in Lorraine as a novice and assistant to his companions. After his first religious profession in 1906, he also became a teacher of philosophy, while studying theology.

Perpetual profession took place three years later, while 28 January 1912 marked the date of his priestly ordination.

After a number of assignments within his Religious Congregation, in 1916 he was rector and master of novices at Lavrinhas, in the Colégio São Manoel, to which those from Lorraine had been transferred, and where he had taught the year before. In the five years he spent there, the young Lustosa expressed the best of himself both as a priest and as a Salesian, leaving, according to those who knew him, indelible traces.

Episcopal ministry

After his role as Rector at the Mary Help of Christians secondary school in Bagé and his appointment as assistant parish priest in the adjoining parish, he was consecrated Bishop of Uberaba on 11 February 1925, the day he chose to commemorate the presence of Our Lady in his life.

In 1928 he was transferred to Corumbá, in Mato Grosso, and in 1931 he was promoted to Archbishop of Belém do Pará, where he remained for 10 years.

On 5 November 1941, he became Archbishop of Fortaleza, capital of the State of Ceará.

Together with an unusually large number of initiatives and activities of a social and charitable nature, he created more than 30 new parishes, 45 schools for the needy, 14 health centres on the outskirts of Fortaleza, the School of Social Services, the São José and Cura d'Ars hospitals, to mention only a few of the most significant works attributed to his episcopate.



Monsignor Lustosa enters the Archdiocese of Belém do Pará (15.12.1931)

His pastoral activity developed particularly in the field of catechesis, education, pastoral visits, an increase in vocations, enhancement of Catholic action, improvement of the living conditions of the poorest, defence of workers' rights, renewal of the clergy, the establishment of new religious orders in Ceará, not to mention his rich and fruitful activity as a poet and writer.

Even before the Second Vatican Council, Fr Antônio had described catechesis as the primary objective of his pastoral action. To this end, he founded two religious Congregations, the Institute of Cooperators of the Clergy and the Congregation of the Josefinas. Today, the Josefinas are spread throughout Northeast Brazil, as well as in the Diocese of Rio Branco in Acre.

Wherever he went, and wherever he worked, his name and memory were remembered with respect and veneration, as a man of God, a true model of virtue and holiness.

Eleven years after his resignation from the Archdiocese, following which he retired to the Salesian House in Carpina, and confined to a wheelchair due to a disastrous fall that caused him to fracture his femur, he died on 14 August 1974, demonstrating, even during his illness and suffering, an exemplary attitude of complete and unconditional acceptance of God's will.

His body was transported to Fortaleza, where his funeral was celebrated with an incalculable number of faithful and ecclesiastical and civil authorities paying their last respects. His burial became to all intents and purposes a true popular consecration of a life, such as that lived by the Servant of God Bishop Lustosa, entirely devoted to God and the good of his neighbour.

Abandoned to the will of God

A virtuous, ascetic bishop, marked by obedience and a strong desire to do the Father's will, always and in everything, Bishop Lustosa demanded the most total abandonment of himself to the cause of God and neighbour.

His great concern was indeed to live up to God's and the Church's expectations in the exercise of his episcopal ministry.

He travelled in various regions of Brazil, from north to south, always bringing with him the gifts that Divine Providence had reserved for him.

In this fruitful activity he left significant legacies, not only for the material works he accomplished, but especially for the memory of his luminous and evangelising presence.

A humble and simple man, who shunned any ostentation or any quest for public recognition of his pastoral actions in the service of the Church and the society in which he was embedded, he was endowed with an extraordinary charisma,

tireless perseverance, and a rich and fruitful religious and social vision.

He strove to lift the people of the regions in which he served, from the precarious and poor conditions in which they found themselves. The greater the challenge, the greater his dedication to finding alternatives that would at least minimise the suffering of those he came into contact with.



Monsignor Lustosa blesses the foundation stone of the agricultural school (09.02.1932)

He tried to offer and create opportunities for the most disadvantaged people to take care of their families, he worked to provide them with a religious and cultural background, so as to free them from illiteracy and provide them with the tools to gain a place in society.

Pastor with a big heart

For 22 years in the Ceará region, Bishop Lustosa showed the full force of his cultural, religious and social work, anticipating and realising works that would later be incorporated by government authorities, both at state and municipal level.

He made the working classes aware of their value and importance, welcoming those who were on the margins of society, including single mothers, domestic helpers, orphaned and abandoned children, the homeless, those in need of housing, the illiterate, the sick, exalting the rights and duties of each and every person and restoring and/or recognising their dignity.

He placed himself totally at the service of God and humanity, faithfully responded to the divine inspiration that guided his steps and actions towards a society closer to justice, supported by the Church's social doctrine – *sub umbra alarum tuarum*.

He radiated holiness to all those who had the privilege of

knowing him and living with him, continuing to this day to spread his radiance over all those who come more or less directly into contact with his figure and works.

With his meritorious pastoral action, he not only guided souls, but also hearts in a harmonious action that led to a true Christian spiritualisation of the immense flock of which he was Pastor.

His work of spiritual guidance was considered and recognised then, and even more so today, as a work of social harmony, and spiritual balm in difficult conflict situations. His personal action worked the miracle of disarming spirits, going beyond the limits of dogmatic, liturgical and theological preaching, succeeding in instilling in people a heightened religious sense and giving them a greater and/or new awareness of the right to freedom and justice.

Bishop Lustosa's work, which exalts the popular soul, ennoble the sense of faith, spreads the feeling of human solidarity and the virtue of brotherhood, crosses geographic borders and asserts itself internationally.

A rich personality



Monsignor Lustosa receives the visit of the Rector Major, don Luigi Ricceri in Carpina (27.06.1970)

The personality of the illustrious Archbishop Antônio de Almeida Lustosa is multifaceted, generated from a very young age and consolidated throughout his earthly life, always guided by the common good and the defence and promotion of Christian principles and values.

Archbishop Antônio left a trail of spirituality, both through the books he published and the catechetical work he took to the most distant and inaccessible regions.

A salient feature of his rich spirituality was his extraordinary spirit of prayer, intimately rooted in him and never flaunted. He was also a man who imposed upon himself mortification, sacrifices and fasts.

Another noble dedication of his spirit was his literary verve, and his work in literature was great, from pastoral letters to articles in newspapers and periodicals and numerous works, published and unpublished, of a historical, folkloristic, religious, geographical, cultural, anthropological, spiritual and ascetic nature.

He was, like Don Bosco, a prolific writer in various fields, in theology, philosophy, spirituality, hagiography, literature, geology, botany.

His literary works reveal his deep spirituality and the extent of his social concerns in evangelising his flock. With his pen, he brought the Gospel to all.

Archbishop Antônio de Almeida Lustosa was a faithful example of a fully realised vocation. He proved this over his long pastoral activity in the dioceses he led and guided with the hands of a spiritual master.

He was a model bishop of his time, characterised by unshakeable fervour and firmness of mind.

A true man of God, he was always concerned about people's welfare, which is why he was known as "the father and friend of the poor".

Archbishop Lustosa sought to be faithful to the founder of the Salesian Congregation – St John Bosco – by following in his footsteps, embracing his examples, thus implementing the Salesian charism in Brazil, so much so that he was recognised as the Bishop of social justice.

The following words paid tribute to the Servant of God on the 19th anniversary of his death, by the then Postulator General of the Cause, Fr Pasquale Liberatore, and eloquently and effectively summarise the importance and significance of his message in the Church and society of his time, as well as its relevance today: "He was a great ascetic (even from his external appearance: 'an airy shell' was said of his physical person), but with an adamant will, which belied the fire that burned within him. Thanks to his inner strength he was able to do exceptional work, traces of which remain in the most diverse fields: a passionate seeker of truth, a serious

scholar, a writer and poet, the creator of many works: the Cure d'Ars pre-seminary, the Cardinal Frings Institute, the São José Hospital, the shrine of Nossa Senhora de Fátima, the Assunção Cearense radio station, the Casa do Menino Jesus, schools, workers' groups, etc., and above all – he was the founder of a religious congregation.

Both great yet simple, he knew how to combine the Bishop's many commitments with catechism to children and – in the last years of his life – his erudite Latin lessons with the humble collection of stamps. A zealous pastor, he loved his people, never left his flock, felt the urgency of vocations and filled his seminaries with them.

In his heart he always remained Salesian. He was said to be “an eternal Salesian”. Already Master of Novices as soon as he was ordained a priest, he remained a forger of souls in Salesian style throughout his life.

An ascetic, I said at the beginning. In reality he personified the motto left to us by Don Bosco: work and temperance.

The secret of his holiness is to be found in his having abhorred all forms of mediocrity. He was an athlete of the spirit – perhaps that is why we like to remember him “always on his feet’” (even though in his later years he was confined to a wheelchair). Always on his feet! Even today. Like one who continues to teach a lesson. The most difficult and most demanding lesson: that of holiness.

Dr Cristiana Marinelli

Colleague in the Salesian General Postulator's Office

Venerable Dorotea Chopitea

Who was Dorotea de Chopitea? She was a Salesian cooperator, a true mother of the poor in Barcelona, creator of numerous

institutions at the service of charity and the apostolic mission of the Church. Her figure takes on special importance today and encourages us to imitate her example of being "merciful like the Father".

A Biscayan in Chile

In 1790, during the reign of Charles IV, a Biscayan, Pedro Nicolás de Chopitea, a native of Lequeitio, emigrated to Chile, then part of the Spanish Empire. The young migrant prospered and married a young Creole woman, Isabel de Villota.

Don Pedro Nolasco Chopitea and Isabel Villota settled in Santiago de Chile. God granted them 18 children, although only 12 survived, five boys and seven girls. The youngest of these was born, baptised and confirmed on the same day: 5 August 1816, taking the names Antonia, Dorotea and Dolores, although she was always known as Dorotea (Dorothy), which in Greek means "gift of God". Peter and Elizabeth's family was wealthy, Christian, and committed to using their wealth for the benefit of the poor people around them.

In 1816, the year of Dorotea's birth, Chileans began to openly demand independence from Spain, which they achieved in 1818. The following year, Don Pedro, who had aligned himself with the royalists, i.e. in favour of Spain, and had been imprisoned for it, moved his family across the Atlantic to Barcelona, so that the political turmoil would not compromise his older children, although he continued to maintain a dense network of relations with political and economic circles in Chile.

In the large house in Barcelona, the three-year-old Dorotea was entrusted to the care of her twelve-year-old sister Josefina. Thus Josefina, later "Sister Josefina", was Dorotea's "little young mother". She entrusted herself to her with total affection, allowing herself to be guided by her.

When she was thirteen years old, on Josefina's advice she took

Father Pedro Nardó, from the parish of Santa María del Mar, as her spiritual director. For 50 years Pedro was her confessor and counsellor in delicate and difficult moments. The priest taught her with kindness and strength to “separate her heart from riches”.

Throughout her life, Dorotea considered the riches of her family not as a source of amusement and dissipation, but as a great means placed in her hand by God to do good for the poor. Fr Pedro Nardó had her read the Gospel parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus many times. As a distinctive Christian sign, he advised Josefina and Dorotea to always dress modestly and simply, without the cascade of ribbons and light silk gauze that the fashion of the time imposed on young aristocratic women.

Dorotea received the solid home schooling which at that time was given to girls from well-to-do families. In fact, she later helped her husband many times in his profession as a merchant.

Wife at the age of sixteen

The Chopiteas had met up in Barcelona with friends from Chile, the Serra family, who had returned to Spain for the same reason, independence. The father, Mariano Serra i Soler, came from Palafrugell and had also carved out a brilliant financial position for himself. Married to a young Creole girl, Mariana Muñoz, he had four children, the eldest of whom, José María, was born in Chile on 4 November 1810.

At the age of sixteen, Dorotea experienced the most delicate moment of her life. She was engaged to José María Serra, although the marriage was spoken of as a future event. But it happened that Don Pedro Chopitea had to return to Latin America to defend his interests, and shortly afterwards his wife Isabel prepared to cross the Atlantic to reach him in Uruguay together with their youngest children. Suddenly, Dorotea was faced with a fundamental decision for her life: to

break the deep affection that bound her to José María Serra and leave with her mother, or to marry at the age of sixteen. On the advice of Fr Pedro Nardó, Dorotea decided to marry. The marriage took place in Santa Maria del Mar on 31 October 1832.

The young couple settled in Carrer Montcada, in the palace belonging to her husband's parents. The understanding between them was perfect and a source of happiness and well-being.

Dorotea was a slim, lanky individual with a strong and determined character. The "I will always love you" sworn by the two spouses before God, developed into an affectionate and solid married life which gave birth to six daughters: all of them receiving the name Maria with various complements: Maria Dolores, Maria Ana, Maria Isabel, Maria Luisa, Maria Jesus and Maria del Carmen. The first came into the world in 1834, the last in 1845.

Fifty years after the "yes" pronounced in the church of Santa Maria del Mar, José Maria Serra would say that in all those years "our love grew day by day".

Dorotea, mother of the poor

Dorotea was the lady of the house, in which several families of employees worked. She was José María's intelligent co-worker, who soon achieved fame in the business world. She was by his side in times of success and in times of uncertainty and failure. Dorotea was by her husband's side when he travelled abroad. She was with him Tsar Alexander II' Russia, in the Savoy family's Italy and Pope Leo XIII's Rome.

On her visit to Rome, at the age of sixty-two, she was accompanied by her niece Isidora Pons, who testified at the apostolic process: "She was received by the Pope. The deference with which Leo XIII treated my aunt, to whom he offered her a white sundress as a gift, has stayed with me."

Affectionate and strong

The employees of the Serra house felt like part of the family.

Maria Arnenos declared under oath: "She had a motherly affection for us, her employees. She cared for our material and spiritual welfare with real love. When someone was ill, she saw to it that they lacked nothing, she took care of even the smallest details." "Her salary was higher than that given to the employees of other families.

A delicate person, a strong and determined character. This was the battlefield on which Dorotea struggled throughout her life to acquire the humility and calm that nature had not given her. As great as her impetus was, greater was her strength to live always in the presence of God. Thus she wrote in her spiritual notes: "I will make every effort to ensure that from morning all my actions are directed to God", "I will not give up meditation and spiritual reading without serious reason", "I will make twenty daily acts of mortification and as many acts of love of God", "To do all actions from God and for God, frequently renewing purity of intention.... I promise God to purify my intention in all my actions."

Salesian Cooperator

In the last decades of the 1800s, Barcelona was a city in the throes of the "industrial revolution". The outskirts of the city were full of very poor people. There was a lack of shelters, hospitals and schools. During the retreat she made in 1867, Doña Dorotea wrote among her resolutions: "My favourite virtue will be charity towards the poor, even if it costs me great sacrifices." And Adrián de Gispert, Dorotea's nephew, testified: "I know that Aunt Dorotea founded hospitals, shelters, schools, workshops for arts and trades and many other works. I remember visiting some of them in her company. When her husband was alive, he helped her in these charitable and social works. After his death, she first of all saw to the patrimony of her five daughters; then, her "personal" goods (her very rich dowry, the patrimony received personally in inheritance, the goods that her husband wanted to register in his name), she used for the poor with careful

and prudent administration.” A witness stated under oath: “After having provided for her family, she dedicated the rest to the poor as an act of justice.”

Having heard from Don Bosco, she wrote to him on 20 September 1882 (she was sixty-six, Don Bosco sixty-seven). She told him that Barcelona was an “eminently industrial and mercantile” city, and that his young and dynamic Congregation would find plenty of work among the boys in the suburbs. She offered a school for apprentice workers.

Fr Philp Rinaldi arrived in Barcelona in 1889, and he writes: “We went to Barcelona at her call, because she wanted to provide especially for young workers and abandoned orphans. She bought a plot of land with a house, the extension of which she took care of. I arrived in Barcelona when the construction had already been completed... With my own eyes I saw many cases of assistance to children, widows, the elderly, the unemployed and the sick. Many times I heard it said that she personally performed the most humble services for the sick.”

In 1884 she thought of entrusting a nursery school to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: it was necessary to think of the children in the outer suburbs.

Don Bosco was not able to go to Barcelona until the spring of 1886, and the chronicles amply report the triumphant welcome he was given in the Catalan metropolis, and the affectionate and respectful attentions with which Doña Dorotea, her daughters, grandchildren and relatives surrounded the saint.

On 5 February 1888, when he was informed of Don Bosco’s death, Blessed Michael Rua wrote to her: “Our dearest father Don Bosco has flown to heaven, leaving his children full of sorrow.” He always showed a lively esteem and grateful affection for our mother of Barcelona, as he called her, the mother of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Moreover, before he died, he assured her that he was going to prepare a good place for her in heaven. That same year, Doña Dorotea handed over the oratory and the schools in Rocafort Street, in the heart of Barcelona to the Salesians.

The last handing over to the Salesian Family was the Santa Dorotea school entrusted to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. 60,000 pesetas were needed for its purchase, and she handed it over saying: "God wants me poor." That sum was her provision for her old age, what she kept to live modestly together with Mary, her faithful companion.

On Good Friday 1891, in the cold church of Marie Reparatrice, as she was taking up the collection she contracted pneumonia. She was seventy-five years old, and it was immediately clear that she would not overcome the crisis. Fr Rinaldi came to her and stayed for a long time at her bedside. He wrote: "In the few days he was still alive, she did not think of her illness but of the poor and her soul. She wanted to say something in particular to each of her daughters, and blessed them all in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, like an ancient patriarch. As we stood around her bed commending her to the Lord, at a certain moment she raised her eyes. The confessor presented the crucifix to her to kiss. Those of us who were present knelt down. Doña Dorotea recollected herself, closed her eyes and gently breathed her last."

It was 3 April 1891, five days after Easter.

Pope John Paul II declared her "Venerable" on 9 June 1983, i.e. "a Christian who practised love of God and neighbour to an heroic degree,"

Fr Echave-Sustaeta del Villar Nicolás, sdb
Vice-Postulator of the Cause of the Venerable

St Francis de Sales. Mary's presence (8/8)

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

THE PRESENCE OF MARY IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (8/8)

The first information we have about devotion to Mary in the de Sales family refers to his mother, the young Françoise de Sionnaz, a devotee of the Virgin, faithful to the Rosary. She passed love for this pious practice on to her son, who, as a young boy in Annecy, enrolled in the Confraternity of the Rosary, committing himself to say all or part of it every day. Fidelity to this would accompany him throughout his life.

Devotion to the Virgin continued during his Parisian years. "He entered the Congregation of Mary, which brought together the spiritual elite of the students at their college."

Then there was the **spiritual crisis** that broke out at the end of 1586: for several weeks he did not eat, sleep, and was in despair. He had the idea in his head that he had been abandoned by God's love and would "never be able to see your sweet face again". Until one day, in January 1587, on his return from college, he entered the church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès and made an act of abandonment before the Virgin: he said the Salve Regina and was freed from temptation and regained his serenity.

His prayer and devotion to the Mother of God certainly continued during his years in Padua: he would entrust his vocation to the priesthood to her, and on 18 December 1593, he was ordained a priest and would certainly have celebrated a few masses in the church at Annecy, dedicated to Notre Dame de

Liesse (Our Lady of Joy), to thank Her for taking him and leading him by the hand during those long years of study.

Years passed and August 1603 came, when Francis received the letter of invitation from the Archbishop of Bourges to preach for the upcoming Lent in Dijon.

"Our Congregation is the fruit of the journey to Dijon," he wrote to his friend Fr Pollien.

It would be during this Lent, which began on 5 March 1604, that Francis would meet Baroness Jane Frances Frémyot de Chantal. He would begin a journey towards God in search of His will, a journey that would last six years and end on 6 June 1610, the day on which the Visitation was born with Jane Frances and two other women entering the novitiate.

"Our little Congregation is truly a work of the Heart of Jesus and Mary," and after a short time he confidently added: "God takes care of his servants and Our Lady provides them with what they need."

His Daughters would be called Religious of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Four hundred years after its foundation, the Monastery of the Visitation in Paris writes that the Order has never ceased to draw all the best of its spirituality from this Gospel scene.

"Contemplation and praise of the Lord, united to the service of one's neighbour; the spirit of thanksgiving and the humility of the Magnificat; real poverty that throws itself with infinite confidence on the goodness of the Father; availability to the Spirit; missionary ardour to reveal the presence of Christ; joy in the Lord; Mary who faithfully keeps all these things in her heart."

Jane Frances de Chantal summarises the Salesian spirit as follows: "a spirit of profound humility towards God and of great gentleness towards one's neighbour", which are precisely the virtues that immediately arise from the lived contemplation of the mystery of the Visitation.

In the Treatise on the spirit of simplicity, Francis to his said to his Visitandines:

“We must have a totally simple trust which makes us remain quiet in the arms of our Father and our dear Mother, confident that Our Lord and Our Lady, our dear Mother, will always protect us with their care and motherly tenderness.”

The Visitation is the living monument of Francis’ love for the Mother of Jesus.

His friend Bishop J.P. Camus sums up Francis’ love for the Virgin in this way: “His devotion to the Mother of splendid love, of wisdom, of chaste love and of holy hope was truly great. From his earliest years he devoted himself to honouring her.”

Mary’s presence is like yeast in the dough for his letters: discreet, silent, active and effective. There is no lack of prayers composed by Francis himself.

On 8 December (!) 1621, he sent one to a Visitandine:

“May the most glorious Virgin fill us with her love, so that together, you and I, who have had the good fortune to be called and have embarked under her protection and in her name, may accomplish our voyage in humble purity and simplicity, so that one day we may find ourselves in the port of salvation, which is Paradise.”

When he wrote letters around some Marian feast, he did not miss an opportunity to mention her or make a point for reflection. Thus,

– for the Assumption of Mary into heaven: “May this holy Virgin, with her prayers, have us live in this holy love! May this love always be the sole object of our heart.

– for the Annunciation: it is the day “of the most blessed greeting ever given to anyone. I beseech this glorious Virgin to grant you some of the consolation she received.”

Who was Mary for Francis?

a. She was the Mother of God

Not only Mother, but also... grandmother!

"Honour, reverence and respect the holy and glorious Virgin Mary with a special love: she is the Mother of our sovereign Father and therefore also our dear grandmother. Let us have recourse to her as grandchildren, let us throw ourselves upon her knees with absolute trust; at all times, in all circumstances, let us appeal to this sweet Mother, let us invoke her maternal love and, making every effort to imitate her virtues, let us have the sincere heart of children for her."

She leads us to Jesus: "Do whatever He tells you!"

"If we want Our Lady to ask her Son to change the water of our lukewarmness into the wine of His love, we must do all that He will tell us. Let us do what the Saviour will tell us well, let us fill our hearts well with the water of penance, and this lukewarm water will be changed for us into the wine of fervent love."

b. She was the model we must imitate

In listening to the Word of God.

"Receive it in your heart like a precious ointment, following the example of the Blessed Virgin, who carefully kept all the praises spoken in honour of her Son in her own,"

Model for living in humility.

"The Most Blessed Virgin, Our Lady, gave us a most remarkable example of humility when she pronounced these words: Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word; in saying that she is the handmaid of the Lord, she expresses the greatest act of humility that can be done and immediately performs an act of most excellent generosity, saying: Let it be done to me according to your word."

Model for living *common* holiness.

"If one wants to be a saint of true holiness, it must be common, daily, everyday holiness like that of Our Lord and Our

Lady.”

Model for living in serenity:

“If you feel excessively worried, soothe your soul and try to give it back its tranquillity. Imagine how the Virgin worked calmly with one hand, while with the other she held Our Lord, during her childhood: she held Him on one arm, never taking her gaze away from Him.”

Model for giving ourselves to God in time:

“Oh how happy are the souls who, in imitation of this holy Virgin, consecrate themselves as first fruits, from their youth, to the service of Our Lord.”.

c. Strength in suffering

Madame de Granieu’s husband suffered very painful attacks of gout.

Francis shared in the gentleman’s suffering sayings:

“A pain that our Blessed Lady and Abbess (the Virgin Mary) can greatly alleviate by leading you to Mount Calvary, where she holds the novitiate of her monastery, teaching you not only to suffer well, but to suffer everything that happens both for us and for our loved ones with love.”

Let me conclude with this beautiful passage that underlines the bond that unites Mary and the believer every time we approach the Eucharist:

“Do you want to become relatives of the Virgin Mary? Go to communion! For in receiving the Holy Sacrament you receive the flesh of her flesh and the blood of her blood, since the precious body of the Saviour, which is in the divine Eucharist, was made and formed with her most pure blood and with the collaboration of the Holy Spirit. Since you cannot be related to Our Lady in the same way as Elizabeth, be so by imitating her virtues and holy life.”

Servants of God John Świerc and eight Companions Martyrs. Pastors who gave their lives

Extremist ideologies, that is, ideas raised to the rank of absolute truths, always bring suffering and death when they seek to impose themselves at any cost on those who do not accept them. Sometimes it is enough to belong to a nation or social group to suffer the consequences. This is the case of the Polish Salesian martyrs presented in this article.

Nine Polish Salesian priests also belong to the number of victims of Nazism, Servants of God Fr Jan Świerc and his 8 Companions: Fr Ignacy Antonowicz, Fr Karol Golda, Fr Włodzimierz Szembek, Fr Franciszek Harazim, Fr Ludwik Mroczek, Fr Ignacy Dobiasz, Fr Kazimierz Wojciechowski and Fr Franciszek Miśka, who were killed *in odium fidei* in the Nazi death camps in 1941–1942. As priests, all the Servants of God were engaged in Poland in various pastoral and governmental activities and in teaching. They were completely uninvolved in the political tensions that agitated Poland during the wartime occupation. Nevertheless, they were arrested and martyred *in odium fidei* for the very fact of being Catholic priests.

The strength and serene perseverance preserved by the Servants of God in carrying out their priestly ministry even during their imprisonment represented a real act of defiance for the Nazis: although exhausted by humiliation and torture, in defiance of any prohibition, the Servants of God were guardians to the end of the souls entrusted to them and showed themselves ready, despite human weakness, to accept death with God and for God.

The concentration camp at Auschwitz, known to all as the death

camp, and the camp at Dachau for Fr Miśka, thus became places of priestly commitment for these Salesian priests: Fr Jan Świerc and 8 companions responded to the denial of human dignity and life, by offering the power of grace and the hope of eternity through the sacraments. They welcomed many fellow prisoners, sustained them through the Eucharist and confession and prepared them for a peaceful death. This service was not infrequently rendered in hiding, taking advantage of the darkness of the night and under the constant and pressing threat of severe punishment or more often death.

The Servants of God, as true disciples of Jesus, never uttered words of scorn or hatred towards their persecutors. Arrested, beaten, humiliated in their human and priestly dignity, they offered their suffering to God and remained faithful to the end, certain that whoever places everything before the divine will is not disappointed. Their inner serenity and their demeanour, which they showed even at the hour of death, were so extraordinary that they left their torturers astonished, and in some cases outraged.

Here are their biographical profiles.

Fr Ignacy Antonowicz

Ignacy Antonowicz was born in 1890 in Więśławice, Włocławek County, north-central Poland. In 1901 he entered the Salesian Secondary School in Oświęcim, where he remained until 1905. Between 1905 and 1906 he completed his novitiate in Daszawa. He made his perpetual profession in August 1909 in Italy, in Lanzo Torinese. He was ordained a priest on 22 April 1916 in Rome. Fr Ignacy taught dogmatics at the Theological Studentate in Foglizzo (Turin) between 1916 and 1917. In 1919, during the Russo-Polish War, he was a military chaplain in the Polish army. Between 1919 and 1920 he was in Krakow as a professor in the Theological Studentate. On 1 July 1934 he was appointed councillor of the Polish Province of St Hyacinth in Krakow

until the end of 1936. In 1936 he took up the post as Rector of the Salesian Immaculate Conception Theological Studentate in Krakow, which he held until his arrest on 23 May 1941. He was detained for a month in the Montelupich prison in Cracow, then taken to the concentration camp at Oświęcim. He was killed on 21 July 1941. He was 51 years old, with 34 years of religious profession and 25 years of priesthood.



Fr Karol Golda

Karol Golda was born on 23 December 1914 in Tychy, Upper Silesia. After finishing fourth grade, he moved to the Boleslaw Chrobry Secondary School in Pszczyna. He attended sixth grade at the Salesian school in Oświęcim. In June 1931 he went to the House in Czerwińsk to begin his novitiate. On 15 January 1937 he made his perpetual religious profession in Rome. On 18 December 1938 he was ordained a priest in Rome, where he stayed for a further six months to obtain a Licentiate in Theology. In July 1939 he returned to Poland. The Second World War broke out and Fr Karol went to Silesia in October 1939 and then to Oświęcim where he stayed, as the occupying authorities did not allow him to travel to Italy. Fr Karol Golda was entrusted with teaching theology at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim and was appointed Prefect of Studies there. He was arrested by Gestapo officials on 31 December 1941 and killed on 14 May 1942, after only three and a half years of priesthood.



Fr Włodzimierz Szembek

The Servant of God Fr Włodzimierz Szembek, son of Count

Zygmunt and Klementyna of the Dzieduszycki family, was born on 22 April 1883 in Poręba Żegoty, near Cracow. In 1907, he graduated from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow with a degree in agricultural engineering. For about twenty years he was involved in the administration of his mother's estates and in the lay apostolate. When he turned 40, the Servant of God's religious vocation came to maturity. On 4 February 1928 he entered the aspirantate in Oświęcim. At the end of 1928 he began his novitiate in Czerwińsk. He made his religious profession on 10 August 1929. On 3 June 1934 he received priestly ordination in Cracow. On 9 July 1942 he was arrested by the Gestapo and taken to Nowy Targ. The following 19 August he was taken to Auschwitz concentration camp, where he died on 7 September 1942, exhausted by suffering and as a result of the mistreatment he had endured. He was 59 years of age, 13 of profession and 9 of priesthood.



Fr Franciszek Harazim

Franciszek Ludwik Harazim was born on 22 August 1885 in Osiny, Rybnik district in Silesia. He attended primary school first in Baranowicze, then in Osiny. In 1901, he entered the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim to attend secondary school there. He completed his novitiate in Daszawa in 1905/1906. On 24 March 1910 he made his perpetual vows. He was ordained a priest in Ivrea on 29 May 1915. Between 1915 and 1916 he taught at the Oświęcim High School, of which he was appointed headmaster between 1916 and 1918. In the years 1918-1920 he taught philosophy in the Salesian major seminary in Cracow (Łosiówka). From 1922-1927 the Servant of God held the post of headmaster at the Salesian High School in Aleksandrów Kujawski. In 1927 he returned again to the major seminary in Krakow as a councillor, teacher and educator of clerics. In July 1938 Fr Franciszek was appointed professor at the Krakow-

Łosiówka house. He was arrested by the Gestapo in Krakow on 23 May 1941. He was first taken to Konfederacka Street and then, together with the other confreres, to Montelupich Prison. A month later, on 26 June 1941, he was taken to Auschwitz concentration camp. He was killed on 27 June 1941 on the famous Ghiaione. He had not yet turned 56 years of age: of these 34 were of religious profession and 26 of priesthood.



Fr Ludwik Mroczek

Ludwik Mroczek was born in Kęty (Kraków) on 11 August 1905. In 1917, after attending school in Kęty, he was admitted to the Salesian institute in Oświęcim where he completed his secondary school studies. He did his novitiate in Klecza Dolna completing this on 7 August 1922. He made his perpetual vows on 14 July 1928 in Oświęcim. In Przemyśl he received priestly ordination on 25 June 1933. Ordained a priest, he worked in Oświęcim (in 1933), in Lvov (in 1934), in Przemyśl (in 1934 and 1938/39), in Skawa (in 1936/37), in Częstochowa (in 1939). On 22 May 1941, as soon as he had finished celebrating Mass, he was arrested and transferred with other confreres to the concentration camp at Oświęcim. Here he died on 5 January 1942: he was 36 years old, 18 years of religious profession and 8 years of priesthood.



Fr Jan Świerc

Jan Świerc was born in Królewska Huta (today Chorzów, in Upper Silesia) on 29th April 1877. He completed his secondary school studies at Valsalice, Turin. Between 1897 and 1898 he did his novitiate in Ivrea. Here he took his perpetual vows on 3

October 1899. On 6 June 1903 he was ordained a priest in Turin. In 1911 he was appointed Rector of the Krakow House by the then Rector Major Fr Paul Albera. From September 1911 to April 1918, he was Rector of the Lubomirski Institute in Krakow. In 1924, for a period of seven months, he was engaged as a missionary in the Americas. From November 1925 to October 1934, he was Rector and Parish Priest in Przemyśl. On 15 August 1934 he was appointed Rector of the Lviv House. In July 1938 he took up the post as Rector and Parish Priest of the house at 6 Konfederacka Street in Krakow from 1938-1941. On 23 May 1941 he was arrested by the Gestapo together with other confreres and taken to prison in Montelupich. On 26 June 1941 he was transferred to the Auschwitz concentration camp and, after just one day, he was killed: he was 64 years old, 42 years of religious profession and 38 years of priesthood.



Fr Ignacy Dobiasz

Ignacy Dobiasz was born in Ciechowice (Upper Silesia) on 14th January 1880. Having completed primary school, in May 1894 he went to Italy, to Turin Valsalice, to do his secondary school studies there. On 16 August 1898 he entered the Salesian novitiate in Ivrea. He made his perpetual vows at San Benigno Canavese on 21 September 1903. He completed his philosophical and theological studies at San Benigno Canavese and at Foglizzo between 1904 and 1908. On 28 June 1908 he was ordained a priest in Foglizzo. He then returned to Poland: he carried out his pedagogical and pastoral activities in Oświęcim (in 1908, 1910, 1921 and 1923), in Daszawa (in 1909), in Przemyśl (1912-1914) and in Krakow (between 1916 and 1920 and in 1922). In 1931 he was in Warsaw as Vice-Rector. In November 1934 he went to Krakow where he remained as confessor and assistant parish priest. Here he was arrested together with other Salesian confreres on 23 May 1941. After a short

detention in the prison in Montelupich, he was deported to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. On 27 June 1941, he died of ill-treatment and inhuman labour. He was 61 years of age, 40 years of profession and 32 years of priesthood.



Fr Kazimierz Wojciechowski

Kazimierz Wojciechowski was born in Jasło (Galicia) on 16 August 1904. Orphaned by his father when he was only five years old, he was taken into the institute of Prince Lubomirski in Cracow. He began secondary school in 1916 at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim. In 1920 he began his novitiate in Klecza Dolna. He made his perpetual vows on 2nd May 1928 in Oświęcim. Between 1924 and 1925 he taught music and mathematics in Łąd. On 19th May 1935 he was ordained a priest in Cracow. In 1935-1936 he was in Daszawa and in Cracow, where he taught religion and was appointed director of the oratory and of the Catholic Youth Association. The Servant of God was arrested in Krakow on 23 May 1941 with other Salesian confreres. On 26 June 1941 he was deported to Auschwitz concentration camp where, after just one day, he was killed. He was 37 years of age, 19 of profession and 6 of priesthood.



Fr Franciszek Miśka

Franciszek Miśka was born in Swierczyniec (Upper Silesia) on 5 December 1898. He completed his secondary schooling at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim. He entered the novitiate in Pleszów in 1916. He made his perpetual profession in Oświęcim on 25 July 1923. He completed his theological studies in Turin-Crocetta. He was ordained a priest on 10 July 1927 in

Turin. He then returned to Poland. In 1929 he was appointed counsellor and catechist at the orphanage in Przemyśl. In 1931 and for the next five years he was in Jaciążek as the Rector. In 1936 he was appointed parish priest of the parish of Łąd. In 1941 he became Rector of the house of the Sons of Mary and parish priest of Łąd. On 6 January 1941, the Salesian institute in Łąd was transformed by the Gestapo into a prison for priests of the diocese of Włocławek and Gniezno-Poznań. Fr Franciszek was entrusted by the German authorities with the task of maintaining order and providing for the prisoners. For unspecified reasons he was transferred several times to Inowrocław and brutally tortured there. On 30 October 1941, the Servant of God was transported to Dachau concentration camp (Germany). Here, subjected to forced labour and inhuman living conditions, he died on 30 May 1942, the day of the Most Holy Trinity, in the camp's barracks hospital. He was 43 years old, almost 25 years of religious profession and almost 15 years of priesthood.



The reputation for holiness and martyrdom of the Servants of God Fr Jan Świerc and 8 Companions, although hindered during the communist period, spread as soon as they died and is still alive today. They were considered to be exemplary priests, dedicated to pastoral work and works of charity, warm and friendly, always available, interested in giving glory only to God, for whose sake they were faithful even to the shedding of their blood.

On 28 March 2023, the Historical Consultors of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints cast affirmative votes on the *Positio super martyrio* of the Servants of God John Świerc and VIII Companions, Professed Priests of the Society of St Francis de Sales, who were killed in *odium fidei* in the Nazi death camps in the years 1941-1942. We pray that they will be raised to

the honours of the altars as soon as possible.

Mariafrancesca Oggianu

Member of the General Postulation

St Francis de Sales. Gentleness (7/8)

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

GENTLENESS IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (7/8)

Some episodes from Francis's life leads us to contemplate "Salesian gentleness".

In order to improve the situation of the clergy in the parishes, Francis had decided that at least three candidates for a parish would be named. The best would be chosen.

Now, it had happened that a Knight of Malta, furious because one of his servants had been excluded from the selection (this candidate knew more about courting women than commenting on the Gospel!) had abruptly entered the bishop's study and had insulted and threatened him, and Francis had remained standing, hat in hand. The bishop's brother then asked him if anger had ever taken hold of him at any time and the holy man did not hide from him that "then and often anger boiled in his brain like water boiling in a pot on the fire; but that by the grace of God, even if he had to die for having violently resisted this passion, he would never have said a word favour of it."

The first monastery was being built in the city (the *Sainte Source*) and work was not progressing because the Dominicans

were protesting with the workers. According to them, there was not the required distance between the two buildings. The protests were lively and the bishop kindly and patiently rushed in to calm tempers. This calmness and gentleness did not please Jane de Chantal, who blurted:

“Your gentleness will only increase the insolence of these malicious people.” “Not so, not so” Francis replied, “so, Mother, do you want me to destroy the inner peace I have been working on for more than eighteen years in just a quarter of an hour?”

There is an important premise for understanding what Salesian gentleness is. An expert, Salesian Fr Pietro Braido, tells us about it:

“It is not sentimentalism, which evokes mushy kinds of expressions; it is not the kindness that is typical of people who are happy to close their eyes to reality so as not to have problems and annoyances; it is not the short-sightedness of people who see everything beautiful and good and for whom everything is always fine; it is not the inert attitude of people who have no suggestions to offer... Salesian gentleness (Don Bosco would use the term loving-kindness) is something else: it undoubtedly stems from a deep and solid charity and demands careful control of one’s emotional and affective resources; it expresses itself in constant, serene humour, sign of someone with a rich humanity; it requires a capacity for empathy and dialogue and creates a serene atmosphere, free of tension and conflict. So Francis’ gentleness is not to be confused with weakness; on the contrary, it is strength that requires control, goodness of mind, clarity of purpose and a strong presence of God.”

But Francis was not born this way! Endowed with marked sensitivity, he was easy given to mood swings and outbursts of anger.

Lajeunie writes:

“Francis de Sales was a true Savoyard, habitually calm and

gentle, but capable of terrible rages; a volcano beneath the snow. By nature he was very quick to anger, but committed himself daily to correction.

Given his lively and sanguine temperament, his habitual gentleness was often put to the test. He was much hurt by insolent and unpleasant words and vulgar gestures. In 1619 in Paris, he confessed that he still had outbursts of anger in his heart and had to rein it in with both hands! 'I made a pact with my tongue not to say a word when I was in a rage. By the grace of God I was able to have the strength to curb the passion of anger, to which I was naturally inclined.' It was by the grace of God that he had acquired the ability to master the angry passions to which his temper was prone. His gentleness was thus a strength, the fruit of a victory."

It is not difficult to discover the saint's personal experience in the following quotations, made up of patience, self-control, inner struggle ...

He said to one woman:

"Be very gentle and affable in the midst of the occupations you have, because everyone expects this good example from you. It is easy to steer the boat when it is not hindered by the winds; but in the midst of troubles, problems, it is difficult to remain serene, just as it is difficult to steer a course in the midst of gales."

To Madame de Valbonne, whom Francis described as "a pearl", he wrote:

"We must always remain steadfast in the practice of our two dear virtues: gentleness towards our neighbour and loving humility towards God."

We find the two virtues dear to the Heart of Jesus together: gentleness and humility.

It is necessary to practise gentleness **to self as well**.

"Whenever you find your heart without gentleness, content yourself with taking it very gently in your fingertips to put it back in its place, and do not take it with closed fists or

too abruptly. We must be willing to serve this heart in its illnesses and also to use some kindness in its regard; and we must bind our passions and inclinations with chains of gold, that is, with the chains of love.

“He who can maintain meekness amid pain and weariness, and peace amid worry and over-whelming cares, is well nigh perfect. Perfect evenness of temper, true gentleness and sweetness of heart, are more rare than perfect chastity, but they are so much the more to be cultivated. I commend them to you, my dearest daughter, because upon these, like the oil of a lamp, depends the flame of good example. Nothing is so edifying as a loving good temper.”

Francis reminded parents, educators, teachers, superiors in general to practise gentleness especially when it comes to making some **remark or reproaching** someone. Here the Salesian spirit emerges:

“Even when reprimanding them, as is necessary, one must use much love and gentleness with them. In this way, reprimands easily obtain some good results.

Correction dictated by passion, even when it has a reasonable basis, is much less effective than that which comes solely from reason.”

“I assure you that every time I have resorted to sharp retorts, I have had to regret them. People do much more out of love and charity than out of severity and rigour.”

Gentleness goes hand in hand with another virtue: **patience**. Here, then, are a few letters recommending it:

“As long as we remain down here [on earth], we must resign ourselves to putting up with ourselves until God takes us to heaven. We must therefore be patient and never think that we can correct in a day the bad habits we have contracted because of the meagre care we have taken of our spiritual health [...]. We must, let us admit it, be patient with everyone, but first of all with ourselves.”

To Madame de Limonjon he wrote: “It is not possible to get to

where you aspire to in one day: we must gain a point today, tomorrow another; and so, step by step, we will arrive at being masters of ourselves; and it will be no small victory.”

Patience, for Francis, is the first virtue to be put in place in building a solid spiritual edifice.

“The effect of patience is to possess one’s soul well, and patience is all the more perfect the more it is free from restlessness and haste.”

“Have patience with regard to your inner cross: the Saviour allows it so that, one day, you may better know who you are. Do you not see that the restlessness of the day is calmed by the rest of the night? This means that our soul needs nothing more than to abandon itself completely to God and be willing to serve Him amidst roses as well as thorns.”

Here are two practical letters: to Madame de la Fléchère he wrote:

‘What do you want me to say about the return of your miseries, except that you must take up arms and courage again and fight more decisively than ever? You will have to use a lot of patience and resignation to get your affairs in order. God will bless your work.”

And to Madame de Travernay he said:

“You must know how to accept the annoyances that touch you in the course of the day with patience and gentleness, and for the love of Him who permits them. Therefore lift up your heart often to God, implore his help, and consider the good fortune you have to be his as the main foundation of your consolation!”

Finally, this text I call **the hymn to charity according to St Francis de Sales**.

“He who is gentle offends no one, bears willingly those who do him harm, suffers with patience the blows he receives, and does no evil for evil. He who is gentle never becomes upset, but conforms all his words to humility, overcoming evil with

good. Always make corrections from the heart and with gentle words.

In this way corrections will produce better effects. Never resort to retaliation against those who have displeased you. Never resent or be angry for any reason, for that is always an imperfection.”

[\(continued\)](#)

Father Carlo Crespì “apóstol de los pobres”

On 23 March 2023, the Church – after the examination of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity shown God and neighbour, and the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance and the other related virtues, practised to a heroic degree –recognised the Servant of God Carlo Crespì Croci, Professed Priest of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco as Venerable.

Like John Bosco a dream marked his life

Going to Cuenca, in the square in front of the shrine of Mary Help of Christians, one’s gaze immediately falls on an interesting and imposing group of sculptures dedicated to an Italian whom the people of Cuenca still remember as the “apóstol de los pobres”. More specifically, it is a monument depicting a priest and a child at his side looking at him with filial affection. This extraordinary man who marked the human, spiritual and cultural rebirth of a people previously brought to its knees by poverty, backwardness and political conflicts

is Father Carlo Crespi, a Salesian missionary. Originally from Legnano (Milan), he was born in 1891 as the third of thirteen children, to a wealthy and influential family. From an early age he showed particular intelligence, curiosity and generosity, which he put at the service of his father, a farmer on a local estate, and his mother Luigia, from whom he learnt at a very early age to pray the rosary and to keep the name of Mary always "on his lips", as one of his former pupils would testify many years later. Like his brother Delfino, also a future missionary, he showed a particular interest in the beauty of creation, an inclination that would come in handy many years later when he found himself in the unexplored forests of Ecuador classifying new plant species. He attended the local school and at the age of twelve had his first encounter with Salesians at the St Ambrose Institute in Milan. During his college years, following the teachings of St John Bosco, he learnt to put into practice the inseparable combination of joy and work. In this same period a "revelatory dream" marked the first important turning point in his life. He wrote in some notebooks: "The Virgin appeared in a dream and showed me a scene: on one side, the devil who wanted to grab me and drag me; on the other, the Divine Redeemer, with the cross, was showing me another way. I was dressed as a priest and had a beard; I stood on an old pulpit, around me a multitude of people eager to hear my words. The pulpit was not in a church, but in a hut." These were the first steps of the call to Salesian life that grew stronger and stronger. In 1903, he completed his studies at the Salesian high school in Valsalice. He told his father, who was worried about his future, confirming his priestly vocation in the Society of St John Bosco: "You see, father, a vocation is not imposed on you by anyone; it is God who calls; I feel called to become a Salesian." On 8 September 1907 he made his first religious profession, in 1910 his perpetual profession. In 1917 he was ordained a priest. These were the years dedicated to the passionate study of philosophy, theology and the teaching of natural sciences, music and mathematics. At the University of

Padua he made an important scientific discovery: the existence of a hitherto unknown microorganism. In 1921 he received a doctorate in natural sciences, specialising in botany, and shortly afterwards a diploma in music.

Missionary in Ecuador

It was 1923 when he left as a missionary and landed in Guayaquil, Ecuador. He reached Quito and finally settled in Cuenca, where he remained until his death. "Bless me in the Lord and pray for me so that I may become a saint, so that I may immolate myself on the altar of pain and sacrifice every moment of my life," he wrote in 1925 to the then Rector Major Fr Philip Rinaldi, manifesting his desire to sacrifice himself completely for the missionary cause. Father Crespi spent the first six months of 1925 in the forests of the Sucúa-Macas area. He set out to gain an in-depth knowledge of the language, territory, culture and spirituality of the Shuar ethnic group. Using his knowledge in the different areas of culture, he began a revolutionary and innovative work of evangelisation, made up of exchange and mutual enrichment of very different cultures. He was initially greeted with distrust, but Father Carlo brought interesting objects with him such as cloth, ammunition, mirrors, needles, and had the manner of someone who cared. He got to know the indigenous myths and re-presented them in a new interpretation, transformed and enriched by the light of the Catholic faith. Father Carlo soon became a friend, and the Christian message, conveyed with care and respect, was no longer the religion of the foreigner, but something that the people recognised as their own. Father Crespi realised that "only the man who approaches others, not to draw them into his own life, but to help them become ever more fully themselves, can truly be called a father" (Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter 'Fratelli tutti', 3 October 2020).

A hundred-year-old child!



The dream dimension marked his life again in 1936 when he fell ill with typhus and, despite the doctors' predictions, recovered saying: "Around three o'clock in the morning, the door opened and Saint Teresa came in and said to me: *puer centum annorum, infirmitas haec non est ad mortem, longa tibi restat vita* (hundred-year-old child: this illness is not for death, you have a long life left)." Father Carlo was then 45 years old, and would live another 46 years. Now settled for good in Cuenca, the Servant of God brought about a real "*Revolución blanca*". He set up an unprecedented work of human development, founding several works: the festive oratory, the Orientalist School for the formation of Salesian missionaries, the Cornelio Merchán primary school, the school of arts and crafts (later the Salesian Technical College), the Quinta Agronomica or the first agricultural institute in the region, the Salesian Theatre, the Gran Casa of the community, the Dominic Savio Orphanage, the Carlo Crespi museum, still famous today for its numerous scientific exhibits. From Italy he brought in means and specialised personnel to invest in his projects.

Using his extraordinary knowledge in science and music, he organised conferences and concerts in embassies, theatres and forged friendships with leading families in Guayaquil and the capital. He established a relaxed relationship with the local government, although the latter was strongly anti-clerical. He obtained free customs clearance and coverage of transport costs to Cuenca for hundreds of crates of materials.

His works quickly became the beating heart of epoch-making social and cultural changes for the benefit of the population, especially the poorest. Father Carlo created new possibilities for life and did so through a project of evangelisation and development that gave the Cuenca population first and foremost autonomy for growth. As St John Paul II authoritatively stated in his 1991 Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, "It is not merely a matter of 'giving from one's surplus', but of helping

entire peoples which are presently excluded or marginalized to enter into the sphere of economic and human development.”

Cuenca took on the face of a Church capable of inserting the teaching of the Gospel into an experiential model: the teaching of scripture and fundamental work activities (farming, livestock breeding and weaving) became the channel of access for making Jesus known to everyone. In perfect adherence to the teaching of St John Bosco, the Servant of God applied the “preventive system”, offering young people in particular a kind of “preventive grace”, an advance of trust to give possibilities for change, conversion, growth. Looking to Don Bosco, he knew how to harmonise pedagogy and theology, animating young people with games, films, theatrical activities, celebrations and not least, catechism. For Father Carli, it was already possible to glimpse future good fathers of families. His exquisitely Eucharistic and Marian spirituality guided him in other exceptional undertakings, such as the organisation of the First Diocesan Eucharistic Congress in Cuenca in 1938 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the death of St John Bosco. By virtue of its devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, Cuenca was once again confirmed as a Eucharistic City in those years. Immersed in apostolic labours and official business, Father Carlo never forgot his poor. Generations of Cuencans found in him a generous heart, capable of hospitality and fatherliness. In one hand he held a bell to “awaken” some young man in need of correction with a tap on the head; in the other he clutched food and money to donate to his poor. The old and faded cassock, the worn-out shoes, the frugal diet, the special dedication to children and the poor did not go unnoticed in the eyes of the Cuencans. Father Crespi was poor among the poor. The people welcomed him as a chosen Cuencan and begin to call him “Saint Carlo Crespi”. The civil authorities, won over by Father Crespi’s work, responded with numerous honours: he was declared “most illustrious inhabitant of Cuenca in the 20th century”. He received a doctorate *Honoris Causa post mortem* from the Salesian Polytechnic University.

Moved by hope

In 1962, a fire, probably the work of an arsonist, destroyed the Cornelio Merchàn Institute, the fruit of many years' hard work. Father Carlo Crespi's certainty that Mary Help of Christians would help him this time too became contagious: the inhabitants of Cuenca regained confidence and participated without hesitation in the reconstruction. A witness will recount years later: "the day after (the fire) Father Crespi was seen with his little bell and his big saucer collecting contributions from the city."

By now elderly and tired, he was still in the shrine of Mary Help of Christians spreading devotion to the Virgin with the same enthusiasm as in the past. He heard confessions and counselled endless lines of faithful. When it came to listening to them, schedules, meals and even sleep no longer counted. It was not even uncommon for Father Carlo to get up in the middle of the night to hear the confession of a sick or dying person. People had no doubts: he only looked at his neighbour with God's eyes. He knew how to recognise sin and weakness, without ever being scandalised or crushed by it. He did not judge, but understood, respected, loved. For the Cuencans, his confessional became the place where, in the words of Pope Francis, Father Carlo alleviated the wounds of humanity "with the oil of consolation" and "bandaged them with mercy" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 2015). And as he healed, he was in turn healed by the experience of mercy received. The programme foretold in his youth by the "revelatory dream" from the Virgin Mary had finally found total fulfilment.

On 30 April 1982, at the age of 90, Father Carlo Crespi, in the silence and seclusion of the Santa Inés Clinic in Cuenca, held the rosary in his hands as his mother had taught him. It was time to close his eyes to this world to open them on eternity. A stream of moved and grieving people attended the funeral. Certain that it was a saint who had died, many flocked to touch his body one last time with some object; they hoped to still receive the protection of the father who had just left them. Even his confessional was stormed to preserve

some small part of him.

Thus ended the earthly life of a man who, although aware of the remarkably comfortable life he could have led in his own home, accepted the Salesian call and, as a true imitator of Don Bosco, became a witness to a Church that exhorts one “to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013). Father Carlo Crespi’s life tells the Christians of yesterday and today how prayer can and must be inserted into the concrete of daily action, stimulating and inspiring it. While remaining totally Salesian and totally Marian, he was a credible witness of an “evangelising style capable of impacting life” (Pope Francis, Address to Italian Catholic Action, 3 May 2014). To this day, his tomb and monument continue to be perennially adorned with fresh flowers and plaques of thanksgiving. While the reputation for sanctity of this illustrious son of Cuenca shows no sign of diminishing, the completion of the *Positio super virtutibus* marks an important step in the Cause of Beatification. All that remains is to await the wise judgement of the Church with confidence.

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Collaborator of the Salesian Postulation



St Francis de Sales. The

Eucharist (6/8)

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

THE EUCHARIST IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (6/8)

Francis received his First Communion and Confirmation at the age of about nine. From then on he received Communion every week or at least once a month.

God took possession of his heart and Francis would remain faithful to this friendship that would gradually become the love of his life.

His fidelity to Christian life continued and was strengthened during the ten years in Paris. "He received communion at least once a month, if he could not do so more often." And this for ten years!

Regarding his time in Padua we know that he went to Mass every day and that he received communion once a week. The Eucharist united with prayer became the nourishment of his Christian life and vocation. It is in this profound unity with the Lord that he perceived His will: it is here that the desire to be "all of God" matured.

Francis was ordained a priest on 18 December 1593 and the Eucharist would be at the heart of his days, and his strength for spending himself for others.

Here are some testimonies taken from the Beatification Process:

"It was easy to notice how he kept himself in deep recollection and attention before God: his eyes modestly lowered, his face recollected with a sweetness and serenity so great that those who observed him carefully were struck and moved by it."

"When he celebrated Holy Mass he was completely different from how he usually was: a serene face, without distraction and, at

the moment of communion, those who saw him were deeply impressed by his devotion."

St Vincent de Paul adds:

"When I repeated his words to myself, I felt such an admiration for him that I was led to see in him the man who best reproduced the Son of God living on earth."

We already know of his departure in 1594 as a missionary to the Chablais.

He spent his first months in the shelter of the Allinges fortress. Visiting what remains of this fortress, one is impressed by the chapel which has remained intact: small, dark, cold, made of stone. Here Francis celebrated the Eucharist every morning at around four o'clock and paused in prayer before going down to Thonon with a heart full of charity and mercy, drawn from the divine sacrament.

Francis treated people with respect, indeed with compassion, and "Some wished to make themselves feared; but he desired only to be loved, and to enter men's hearts through the doorway of affection" (J.P. Camus).

It is the Eucharist that sustained his initial struggles: he did not respond to insults, provocations, lynching; he related to everyone with warmth.

His first sermon as a sub-deacon had been on the subject of the Eucharist and it would certainly serve him well in the Chablais, because "this august sacrament" would be his warhorse: in the sermons he gave in the church of St Hippolytus, he would often address this subject and expound the Catholic point of view with clarity and passion.

The following testimony, addressed to his friend A. Favre, tells of the quality and ardour of his preaching on such an important subject:

"Yesterday M. d'Avully and the elders of the city, as they are called, came openly to my preaching, because they had heard

that I was to speak about the august sacrament of the altar. They had such a desire to hear from me the exposition of what Catholics believe and their proofs concerning this mystery that, not having dared to come publicly, for fear of seeming to be ignoring the law they had imposed on themselves, they listened to me from a place where they could not be seen."

Little by little, the Body of the Lord infused his pastor's heart with gentleness, meekness, goodness, so that even his preacher's voice was affected: a calm and benevolent tone, never aggressive or polemical!

"I am convinced that he who preaches with love, preaches sufficiently against heretics, even if he does not say a single word or argue with them."

More eloquent than any treatise is this experience that took place on 25 May 1595.

At three in the morning, while engrossed in deep meditation on the most holy and august sacrament of the Eucharist, he felt moved to rapture by the Holy Spirit in an abundance of sweetness... and since his heart was overwhelmed by such delight, he was finally forced to throw himself to the ground and exclaim: "Lord, hold back the waves of your grace; withdraw them from me because I can no longer bear the greatness of your sweetness, which forces me to prostrate myself."

In 1596, after more than two years of catechesis, he decided to celebrate the three Christmas Masses. They were celebrated amidst general enthusiasm and emotion. Francis was happy! This midnight Mass on Christmas 1596 was one of the high points of his life. In this Mass was the Church, the Catholic Church re-established in its living foundation.

The Council of Trent had advocated the practice of the **Forty Hour Devotion**, which consisted of the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament for three consecutive days by the entire Christian community.

At the beginning of September 1597, they took place in

Annemasse, on the outskirts of Geneva, in the presence of the bishop, Francis and other collaborators, with **much greater fruit than hoped for**. They were intense days of prayer, processions, sermons, masses. Over forty parishes participated with an incredible number of people.

Given this success, the following year they were held in Thonon. It was a feast lasting several days that exceeded all expectations. Everything ended late at night, with the last sermon given by Francis. He preached on the Eucharist.

Many scholars of the life and works of the saint maintain that only his great love for the Eucharist can explain the 'miracle' of the Chablais, that is, how this young priest was able to bring the entire vast region back to the Church in just four years.

And this love lasted all his life, until the end. In the last meeting he had in Lyons with his Daughters, the Visitandines, by then near to death, he spoke to them about confession and communion.

What was the Eucharist for our saint? It was first and foremost:

The heart of his day, which meant he lived in intimate communion with God

"I have not yet told you about the sun of the spiritual exercises: the most holy and supreme Sacrifice and Sacrament of the Mass, the centre of the Christian religion, the heart of devotion, the soul of piety."

It was the confident handing over of his life to God whom he asks for strength to continue his mission with humility and charity.

"If the world asks you why you receive communion so often, answer that it is to learn to love God, to purify you from your imperfections, to free you from your miseries, to find strength in your weaknesses and consolation in your

afflictions. Two kinds of people must receive communion often: the perfect, because being well-disposed they would do wrong not to approach the fountain and source of perfection; and the imperfect in order to strive for perfection. The strong not to weaken and the weak to strengthen themselves. The sick to seek healing and the healthy not to become sick.”

The Eucharist creates a profound unity in Francis with so many people

“This sacrament not only unites us to Jesus Christ, but also to our neighbour, with those who partake of the same food and makes us one with them. And one of the main fruits is mutual charity and gentleness of heart towards one another since we belong to the same Lord and in Him we are united heart to heart with one another.”

It is a gradual transformation in Jesus

“Those who have good bodily digestion feel a strengthening for the whole body, because of the general distribution that is made of the food. So, My daughter, those who have good spiritual digestion feel that Jesus Christ, who is their food, spreads and communicates to all parts of their soul and body. They have Jesus Christ in their brain, in their heart, in their chest, in their eyes, in their hands, in their ears, in their feet. But what does this Saviour do everywhere? He straightens everything, purifies everything, mortifies everything, enlivens everything. He loves in the heart, understands in the brain, breathes in the chest, sees in the eyes, speaks in the tongue, and so on: he does everything in everyone and then we live, not we, but it is Jesus Christ who lives in us.

It also transforms the days and nights, so that ‘Nights are days when God is in our hearts and days become nights when He is not.’”

[\(continued\)](#)

