 Reading time: 6 min.

Saints Joachim and Anne, oil on canvas by Guido Guidi, 1914. Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Rome.

In the not-so-crowded heaven of Don Bosco's devotions – Mary Help of Christians first of all, and then Saint Joseph, Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, the guardian angels – two discreet figures occupy a place that surprises those who do not look for them: Joachim and Anne, the parents of the Virgin Mary, the grandparents of Jesus. They do not appear in the titles of his congregations nor in the names of his works, yet Don Bosco wanted them by his own hand in the two churches that mark the geographical and spiritual extremes of his life. In Turin, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco, he wanted their statues to be placed on the sides of the presbytery, facing the great image of the Help of Christians: the parents contemplating their glorified daughter. In Rome, in the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at Castro Pretorio, an altar dedicated to the two saints was prepared, on which a canvas depicts the education of the child Mary. Two silent presences that, looking closely at them, reveal much about Don Bosco's faith and his way of understanding the family, education, and the transmission of faith.

Two names that come from afar

The canonical Gospels say nothing about Mary's parents. Their names come to us from a very ancient tradition, from a second-century text that the Church did not accept into the canon but which has nourished popular piety and Christian art for centuries. There it tells of Joachim, a just man, and of Anne, his wife, tried by the pain of sterility – in ancient Israel, a disgrace and almost a sign of divine abandonment. Their persevering prayer is answered, an angel announces to both the birth of a daughter, and Anne promises to consecrate her to the Lord. That child is Mary.

That the story is legendary in its details takes nothing away from the theological

substance that the Church has always read into it: Mary does not spring from nowhere. The Mother of the Saviour has roots, she has a home, she has parents who awaited her, generated her, educated her. The names themselves are a programme. Anne means “grace”, Joachim “God prepares”. In the couple of elderly parents, tradition has seen the threshold between the Old and the New Covenant, the silent hinge between the long wait of Israel and the dawn of Redemption. The cult of Saint Anne flourished in the East from the early centuries and became one of the most beloved popular devotions in the West. Saint Joachim joined her later in liturgical honours, until the reform of the calendar reunited the two spouses in a single memorial, on 26 July: together in life, together in the liturgy.

The Magnificat, fruit of a domestic school

There is indirect, but eloquent, proof of the educational work of Joachim and Anne, and it is on Mary’s own lips. The Magnificat reveals a profound and internalised knowledge of the Scriptures, of one who has breathed them since childhood. The canticle of the Virgin recalls the Canticle of Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1 Sam 2:1-10), but also weaves together the psalms (34; 35; 69; 98; 103), the prophets (Is 41; 61; Mi 7), the wisdom texts (Sir 10:14-15) and even the Pentateuch. No one improvises such a praying synthesis of the history of salvation. It is received, verse after verse, in a home where the Word of God is prayed every day.

It is no coincidence that traditional iconography almost always depicts Saint Anne in a precise attitude: while teaching the little Mary to read, with the book of the Scriptures open in her hands. It is the so-called *Education of the Virgin*, one of the most widespread subjects in Christian art – the same one that stands out on the Roman altar commissioned in Don Bosco’s church. Anne is, par excellence, the mother educator, the one who transmits to her daughter not only life, but faith, the Word, prayer. It is difficult to imagine an icon closer to Don Bosco’s heart, who in the figure of Anne could recognise the face of Mamma Margaret, the illiterate peasant woman from I Becchi who had taught her children the catechism, evening prayer, the fear of God, and trust in Providence. Mary’s Magnificat and Don Bosco’s preventive system are born, after all, from the same source: a faith transmitted in the family with religion, reason, and loving-kindness.

In Valdocco: the statues that look at the Mother

When Don Bosco built the church of Mary Help of Christians between 1865 and 1868, he personally followed not only the building site and the finances, but also the iconographic programme. Nothing was left to chance. The great painting of the Help of Christians, which he described to the painter Tommaso Lorenzone as a spectacle already contemplated, was to depict Mary Queen of the Apostles and Mother of the Church. In this overall design, Don Bosco wanted the statues of Saints Joachim and Anne to be placed on the sides of the presbytery, facing the great image of their daughter, a choice of rare theological finesse. The parents do not stand in the centre, but alongside; they do not draw the gaze to themselves, but lead it to Mary. It is the very position of every true educator.

Devotion to the mother of the Virgin was, moreover, deeply embedded in the spiritual life of the Oratory. In the primitive basilica there was an altar dedicated to Saint Anne, on which the first statue of the Help of Christians venerated by Don Bosco was placed for years. And that very altar was the scene of one of the most moving episodes of the saint's last days. During Don Bosco's last illness, in the winter of 1887-1888, some young people of the Oratory offered their own lives to God so that their father's might be preserved. The sheet of paper with their offering was placed on the altar of Saint Anne while Mass was being celebrated there. In that gesture is all the circularity of Salesian educational love: the father who had spent his life for his children now received from his children the offering of their lives. That pact of love was handed over to God through the hands of Jesus' grandmother, the woman who knew what it means to wait for, give, and hand back a life to the Lord.

In Rome: the altar of the Sacred Heart

Twenty years after Valdocco, now elderly and worn out by his labours, Don Bosco completed the last great enterprise of his life: the church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus near Termini station. Commissioned by Pius IX and left stranded for lack of funds, the construction was entrusted by Leo XIII to Don Bosco in 1880. The saint, in order not to say no to the Pope, took on exhausting fundraising journeys in Italy and France. The temple was consecrated on 14 May 1887. Two days later, Don Bosco celebrated his only Mass there, at the altar of Mary Help of Christians, interrupted several times by tears. In that celebration he understood, as Our Lady had promised him in his childhood dream at the age of nine, the meaning of his whole life.

In the Roman temple too, the altars were arranged as a father prepares the rooms of his own home. Among them, the one dedicated to Saints Joachim and Anne, on which a canvas depicts the education of the child Mary, the parents accompanying the human and spiritual growth of their daughter. The choice also had a nuance of exquisite gratitude. The Pope who had entrusted the church to Don Bosco, Leo XIII, was named Joachim Pecci at baptism and harboured a particular devotion for his patron saint. Honouring Saint Joachim was, for Don Bosco, a delicate way of honouring together the grandfather of Jesus and the Pontiff who had believed so much in him.

Grandparents, depositaries of the values of life

Being the parents of Mary, Joachim and Anne are traditionally venerated as the grandparents of Jesus, and their memorial today strongly recalls the role of grandparents in the family and in the Church. Benedict XVI recalled that grandparents are often “depositaries and witnesses of the fundamental values of life” and play a precious role in the education of new generations. The Church now celebrates, close to 26 July, the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly. Don Bosco, with the intuition of the saints, had understood this more than a century in advance: no young person grows up well without roots, and no faith is kindled without someone – a mother, a grandmother, an old catechist – who hands it on with patience and loving-kindness.

Educating to the freedom of the “yes”

The statues in Turin and the altar in Rome lead, in the end, to the same message: the task of the educator is to prepare a person to pronounce their own “yes” to God. Joachim and Anne educated Mary, but it was she who had to answer the angel of Nazareth. Mamma Margaret educated John, but it was he who had to accept the priestly vocation and the mission among the young. Don Bosco educated thousands of boys, but each of them had to personally choose their own path. Authentic education does not replace freedom: it makes it capable of orienting itself towards the good. It does not produce copies of the educator, but responsible people, mature Christians and honest citizens.

The statues of Joachim and Anne in Valdocco continue to look at Mary Help of Christians. The altar of the Sacred Heart in Rome continues to show the child Mary educated by her parents. They are silent images, but they contain an entire Salesian programme: to guard life, to transmit the faith, to accompany vocations, and to prepare in the hearts of the young a generous response to God.