

Profiles of families wounded in the history of Salesian holiness

1. Stories of wounded families

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

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

Of these boys and girls who grew up in contact with Salesian works, three will be presented, whose story is

to be “grafted” into the biographical legacy of Don Bosco. The main characters are:

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

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

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

2. Don Bosco and the search for the father

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

The *Memoirs of the Oratory* soon dwelt on the early loss of the father: Francesco died at 34, and Don Bosco – not without resorting to an expression that is, in some respects, disconcerting – acknowledged that, “God, *merciful* as He is, struck them all with a great misfortune”. Thus, among the very first memories of the future saint of the young, a lacerating experience emerged: that of his father’s lifeless body, from which his mother tried to take him away, but encountered Johnny’s resistance, “I absolutely wanted to stay”, explains Don Bosco, and then added, “If Dad doesn’t come, I don’t want

to go [away]". Margaret then responded, "Poor son, come with me, you no longer have a father". She cried, and Johnny, who lacked a rational understanding of the situation, intuitively grasped the full extent of the drama. With an emotional intuition, he empathised and shared in his mother's sadness, "I cried because she cried, since at that age I certainly could not understand how great a misfortune the loss of a father was".

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

family, showing that he knew how to contextualize the “moment” of that boy within the “whole” of his story. Moreover, he revealed the world to him, or rather, in some way, he brought him back to life, introducing him to new things, gifting him new words, and showing him that he had the abilities to do much and well. Finally, he *watched over* him with his gestures and gaze, and provided for his most urgent and real needs, “While I spoke, he never took his gaze off me. ‘Be of good cheer, my friend, I will take care of you and of your studies’”.

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

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

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

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

hinder the child's growth: a parent who is indifferent to them and, in the face of difficulties, even abandons them, with an attitude so different from that of the Good Shepherd.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Laura did not despise but loved life: her own and that of her mother. For this reason, she offered herself. On April 13th, 1902, Good Shepherd Sunday, she asked: "If He gives his life... what prevents me from doing so for my mother?"

Dying, she added: "Mom, I am dying, I myself asked Jesus for this... I have been offering my life for you for almost two years, to obtain the grace of your return!"

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

4. Carlo Braga and his mother's shadow

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

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

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

seemed to me that Mom was smiling at me and drying my tears”.

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

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

father, in entrusting his son to him as a Salesian aspirant, said, "With a man like you, I would let him go even to the North Pole!" Fr Carlo was not scandalised by the needs of the children; rather, he educated them to express them, to increase their desire, "Do you need some books? Don't be afraid, write a longer list". Above all, Fr Carlo learned to look at others with that gaze of love from which he himself had once felt reached thanks to Sr Giuditta and Fr Rua. Fr Joseph Zen, now a cardinal, testified in a long passage that deserves to be read in full and begins with his mother's words to Fr Braga:

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

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

The parents of Laura and Carlo had – in various ways – revealed themselves to be "distant" and "absent". One final figure, that of Ana María, instead attests to the opposite dynamism: that of a father *too* present, who, with his presence, opened up a new path to sanctification for his daughter. Ana was born on September 24th, 1883, in Oicatà, Colombia, into a large family, characterised by the exemplary Christian life of her parents. When Ana was very young, her

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

6. The saints teach

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

a) Laura, Ana, and Carlo, like Don Bosco, suffered situations of discomfort and difficulty, variously related to their parents. One cannot forget Mama Margaret, who was forced to send Johnny away from home when the absence of paternal authority facilitated the clash with his brother Anthony; nor forget that Laura was threatened by Mora and rejected by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians as their aspirant; and

that Carlo Braga suffered misunderstandings and slanders; or that her father's leprosy seemed at one point to rob Ana María of all hope for the future.

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

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

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

Bibliographic Note:

To preserve the character of "witness" rather than "report" of this writing, a critical apparatus of notes has been avoided. However, it should be noted that the quotes present in the text are taken from the *Memoirs of the Oratory* of St John Bosco; from Maria Dosio, *Laura Vicuña. A Path of*

Salesian Youth Holiness, LAS, Rome 2004; from *Fr Carlo Braga Recounts His Missionary and Educative Experience* (autobiographical testimony of the Servant of God) and from the *Life of Fr Carlo Braga, "The Don Bosco of China"*, written by Fr Mario Rassiga, sdb and now available in stencilled form. To these sources are added the materials from the beatification and canonisation causes, which are accessible for Don Bosco and Laura, while still reserved for the Servants of God.