 Reading time: 9 min.

The Venerable Fr Andrea Beltrami (1870-1897) is an emblematic expression of a constitutive dimension not only of the Salesian charism, but of Christianity: the self-offering and victim dimension, which in Salesian terms embodies the demands of “caetera tolle”. A testimony that stands out both for its uniqueness or for reasons partly linked to the past or handed down through popular understandings, has been far less visible in the Salesian world. The fact remains that the Christian message intrinsically presents aspects that are incompatible with the world, and if ignored they risk making the gospel message itself and, specifically, the Salesian charism, unprotected in its charismatic roots of a spirit of sacrifice, hard work, and apostolic renunciation. The testimony of Father Andrew Beltrami is paradigmatic of a whole strand of Salesian holiness that, starting with the three candidates for sainthood, Fr Andrew Beltrami, Blessed Augustus Czartoryski, Blessed Louis Variara, continues over time with other family figures such as Blessed Eusebia Palomino, Blessed Alexandrina Maria da Costa, Blessed Laura Vicuña, without forgetting the numerous host of martyrs.

1. Radical understanding of the gospel

1.1 Radical in vocational choice

Andrew Beltrami was born in Omegna (Novara), on the shores of Lake Orta, on 24 June 1870. He received a profoundly Christian upbringing in his family, which was then developed at the Salesian college in Lanzo, where he entered in October 1883. Here his vocation came to maturity. At Lanzo, one day, he had the great good fortune to meet Don Bosco. Fascinated by him, a question arose within him: “Why couldn’t I be like him? Why not spend my life too for the formation and salvation of the young?” In 1885, Don Bosco told him: “Andrew, you too will become a Salesian!” In 1886 he received the clerical habit from Don Bosco at Foglizzo and on 29 October 1886 he began his novitiate year with one resolve: “I want to become a saint”. This was not formal resolution, but became a reason for his life. Especially Fr Eugenio Bianchi, his novice master, in his report to Don Bosco, described him as perfect in every virtue. Such a radical approach right from the novitiate was expressed in obedience to superiors, in the exercise of charity towards his companions, in religious observance that he was described as being the “Rule personified”. On 2 October 1887, at Valsalice (Turin) Don Bosco received his religious vows: he had become a Salesian and immediately undertook studies to prepare for the priesthood.

The firmness and determination in his response to the Lord's call was very striking, a sign of the value he attributed to his vocation: "The grace of vocation was for me a unique, invincible, irresistible, efficacious grace. The Lord had put into my heart a firm persuasion, an intimate conviction that the only way that suited me was to become a Salesian; it was a voice of command that admitted no reply, that removed every obstacle that I would not have been able to resist even if I had wanted to, and therefore I would have overcome a thousand difficulties, even if it had been to pass over the body of my father and mother, as Chantal did when she passed over the body of her son." These expressions are very strong and perhaps not very pleasing to our palate; they are like the prelude to a vocational story lived so radically that is not easy to understand, let alone accept.

1.2. Radical in his journey of formation

An interesting and revealing aspect of prudential action is the capacity to let oneself be advised and corrected, and in turn become capable of correction and advice: "I throw myself like a child into your arms, abandoning myself entirely to your direction. May you lead me along the path of perfection, I am resolved with the grace of God, to overcome any difficulty, to make any effort to follow your advice" is what he told his spiritual director Fr Giulio Barberis. In the exercise of teaching and assistance "he always spoke calmly and serenely… first he carefully read the regulations of the same offices… the rules and regulations on assistance and on the way of teaching… he soon acquired a knowledge of each of his pupils, of their individual needs, then he became all things to all and to each of them". In fraternal correction, he was inspired by Christian principles and intervened by weighing his words well and expressing his thoughts clearly.

It was during this period that Andrew made the acquaintance of the Polish prince Augustus Czartoryski, who had recently entered the Congregation, and with whom he became close friends: they studied foreign languages together and helped each other climb to the summit of holiness. When Augustus fell ill, the superiors begged Andrew to stay close to him and help him. They spent their summer holidays together in the Salesian institutes in Lanzo, Penango d'Asti and Alassio. Augustus, who had meanwhile reached the priesthood, was Andrew's guardian angel, teacher and heroic example of holiness. Fr Augustus passed away in 1893 and Fr Andrew would say of him: "I looked after a saint". When Fr Beltrami in turn fell ill with the same disease, one of the probable causes was the time he had spent with his sick friend.

1.3. Radical in trial

His illness began in a brutal way on 20 February 1891 when, following a very strenuous journey and during days of harsh winter weather, the first symptoms of an illness appeared that would undermine his health and lead him to his grave. If the causes include schooling and contact with Prince Czartoryski who was suffering from the same disease, both the ascetic effort and the offering of self as a victim are worth mentioning. His fellow citizen and novitiate companion Giulio Cane testifies to this struggle with the old man within him: “I was always convinced that the servant of God suffered the most serious blow to his health from the violent and constant way in which he forced himself to renounce all his own will in order to make himself, I would say, a slave to the will of the Superior, in whom he saw God’s will. Only those who were able to know the servant of God in the years of his adolescence and youth, with his impulsive, ardent spirit, when he was almost rebellious to all restraint, and who know how the Beltrami Manera people hold tenaciously to their own opinions, can form a clear idea of the effort the Servant of God had to impose on himself to master himself. From the conversations I had with the Servant of God, I came to this conviction: wary of being able to master himself by degrees in his character, from the very first months of his novitiate, he had the intention of radically renouncing his will, his tendencies, his aspirations. All this he achieved with constant vigilance over himself so as never to fail in his purpose. It is impossible that such an internal struggle did not contribute, more than the labours of study and teaching, to undermining the health of the Servant of God.” Truly the young Beltrami took the words of the Gospel literally: “The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force” (Mt 11:12).

He lived his suffering with inner joy: “The Lord wants me to be a priest and a victim: what could be more beautiful?” His day began with Holy Mass, in which he united his suffering to the Sacrifice of Jesus present on the altar. Meditation became contemplation. Ordained a priest by Bishop Cagliero, he gave himself entirely to contemplation and the apostolate of the pen. With an all-out tenacity of will, and a vehement desire for holiness, he consumed his life in pain and unceasing work. “The mission God entrusts to me is to pray and to suffer,” he said. “I am content and happy and I always celebrate. Neither dying nor healing, but living to suffer: in suffering I have found true contentment,” was his motto. But his truest vocation was prayer and suffering: to be a sacrificial victim with the divine Victim who is Jesus. This is revealed in his luminous and ardent writings: “It is also beautiful in the darkness, when everyone is resting, to keep company with Jesus, in the flickering light of the lamp before the Tabernacle. One knows then the infinite greatness of his

love.” “I ask God for long years of life to suffer and atone, to make reparation. I am content and always rejoice because I can do it. Neither die nor heal, but live to suffer. In suffering lies my joy, suffering offered with Jesus on the cross.” “I offer myself as a victim with Him, for the sanctification of priests, for the people of the whole world.”

2. The secret

In his fundamental text for understanding the story of Fr Andrew Beltrami, Fr Giulio Barberis aligns the holiness of the young Salesian with Don Bosco, apostle of abandoned youth. Barberis speaks of Fr Beltrami as “shining like a distinguished star… who shed so much light as good example and encouraged us to good by his virtues!” It is therefore a matter of grasping what an exemplary life this is and to what extent it is an encouragement to those who look upon it. Fr Barberis’ testimony becomes even more cogent and he states boldly: “I have been in the Pious Salesian Society for over 50 years; I have been the Direcor of Novices for over 25 years: how many holy confreres have I known, how many good young men have passed under me in that time! How many chosen flowers the Lord was pleased to transplant into the Salesian garden in Paradise! And yet, if I have to express myself fully, although I do not intend to make comparisons, my conviction is that no one has surpassed our dearest Fr Andrew in virtue and holiness.” And in the process he said. “I am convinced that it is an extraordinary grace that God wanted to bestow on the Congregation founded by the incomparable Don Bosco, so that by seeking to imitate him, we may achieve in the Church the goal that the venerable Don Bosco had in founding it.” This attestation, shared by many, is based both on an in-depth knowledge of the saints’ lives and on a familiarity with Fr Beltrami over more than ten years.

At a superficial glance, Beltrami’s light of holiness would seem at odds with Don Bosco’s holiness of which it is supposed to be a reflection, but a careful reading allows one to grasp a secret warp upon which authentic Salesian spirituality is woven. It is that hidden invisible part which is nevertheless the backbone of the spiritual and apostolic nature of Don Bosco and his disciples. The tension of the *Da mihi animas* is nourished by the asceticism of the *caetera tolle*; the front of the mysterious character in the famous dream of the ten diamonds, with its gems of faith, hope, charity, work and temperance, demands that the back corresponds to those of obedience, poverty, reward, chastity and fasting. Fr Beltrami’s short life is packed with a message that represents the gospel leaven that ferments all pastoral and educational activity typical of the Salesian mission, and without which apostolic activity is destined to exhaust itself in sterile and inconclusive activism. “Fr

Beltrami's life, spent entirely hidden in God, entirely in prayer, in suffering, in humiliation, in sacrifice, entirely in hidden but constant work, in heroic charity, although restricted to a small circle given his circumstances, all in all seems so admirable to me as to make one say: faith has always worked wonders, it works wonders even today, as it certainly will work wonders as long as the world lasts."

It is a total and unconditional handing over of oneself to God's plan that motivates the authentic radical nature of gospel discipleship, that is to say, of what lies at the basis of a life lived as a generous response to a call. The spirit with which Fr Beltrami lived his life is well expressed by this testimony reported by one of his companions who, while commiserating with him over his illness, was interrupted by Beltrami in these terms: "Leave it," he said, "God knows what he is doing; it is up to each one to accept his place and in that to be a true Salesian. You other healthy people work, we sick people suffer and pray", so convinced was he that he was a true imitator of Don Bosco.

Of course it is not easy to grasp such a secret, such a precious pearl. It was not easy for Fr Barberis, who knew him seriously for ten years as spiritual director; it was not easy for the Salesian tradition, which gradually marginalised this figure; nor is it easy for us today and for an entire cultural and anthropological context that tends to marginalise the Christian message, especially in its core of redemptive work that passes through the scandal of humiliation, passion and the cross. "Describing the unique virtues of a man who always lived locked up in a religious house, and, in his most important years, in a small room, without even being able to go down the stairs because of his illness, of a man of such humility that he carefully got rid of all the documents that could have made his virtues known, and who sought to avoid any shadow of his piety from leaking out; of one who proclaimed himself a great sinner by mentioning his innumerable sins, whereas he had always been held up as the best in whatever school and college he had presented himself, is not only something difficult, but almost impossible." The difficulty in grasping this virtuous profile depends on the fact that such virtues were neither conspicuous nor supported by particular external facts to attract attention or arouse admiration.

(continued)