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3. Story of a soul

3.1. Loving and suffering

Fr Barberis sketches Beltrami's life parable very well, interpreting it as the mysterious and transforming action of grace at work "through the main conditions of Salesian life, so that he might be a general model of pupil, cleric, teacher, university student, priest, writer and sick person; a model in every virtue, in patience as in charity, in love of penance as in zeal." And it is interesting that Fr Barberis himself, introducing the second part of his biography dealing with Fr Beltrami's virtues, states: "The life of our Fr Beltrami could be said to be the story of a soul rather than the story of a person. It is all intrinsic; and I do my utmost to make the dear reader penetrate that soul, so that he may admire its heavenly charisms." The reference to "The Story of a Soul" is not accidental, not only because Fr Beltrami was a contemporary of Saint Therese of Lisieux, but we can say that they are truly brother and sister in the spirit that animated them. The apostolic zeal for salvation is most authentic and fruitful in those who have experienced salvation and, having found themselves saved by grace, live their lives as a pure gift of love for their brothers and sisters, so that they too may be reached by the redemptive love of Jesus. "The whole life, in truth, of our Fr Andrew could be summed up in two words, which are his motto: Loving and suffering - Love and Sorrow. The most tender, the most ardent, and, I would also say, the most zealous love possible for that good in which all good is concentrated. The most vivid, the most acute, the most penetrating sorrow for his sins, and the contemplation of that supreme good which lowered itself to the folly, to the pains and death of the Cross for us. Hence the feverish eagerness for suffering: the more it abounded, the more he felt desire for it. Hence also the taste, the ineffable delight in suffering, which is the secret of the saints, and one of the most sublime marvels of the Church of Jesus Christ."

"And as in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, burning with flames and crowned with thorns, both these affections of love and sorrow find such abundant pasture, and so admirably proportioned to them, so, from the first instant in which he knew this devotion, until the last of his life, his heart was like a vase of elect aromas that always burned before that divine heart, and handed down the perfume of incense and myrrh, of love and sorrow." "To obtain from the Heart of Jesus the longed-for

grace of living long years to suffer and atone for my sins. Not die but live to suffer, while always subject to God's will. Only thus will I be able to satisfy this thirst. It is so beautiful, so sweet to suffer when God helps and gives us patience to do so!"

These texts are a summary of Fr Beltrami's victim spirituality, which in the perspective of devotion to the Sacred Heart, so dear to 19th century spirituality and to Don Bosco himself, overcomes any sorrowful interpretation or even worse a kind of spiritualistic masochism. It was in fact also thanks to Fr Beltrami that Fr Rua officially consecrated the Salesian Congregation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the final night of the 19th century.

3.2. In the footsteps of Saint Therese of Lisieux

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

Until the end of his life, Fr Beltrami too would be faithful to his offering of himself as a victim, as he wrote a few days before his death to his novice director: "I

always pray and offer myself as a victim for the Congregation, for all the Superiors and confreres and especially for these novitiate houses, which contain the hopes of our pious Society."

4. Victim Spirituality

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

The same illness led Fr Beltrami both to increasingly severe tuberculosis and forced isolation, which left his perceptive and intellectual faculties intact, indeed almost refining them with the blade of pain. Only the grace of faith allowed him to embrace that condition that day by day, assimilated him more and more to the crucified Christ and that a statue of *Ecce homo*, with its shocking and repugnant realism, which he wanted in his room, constantly reminded him of. Faith was the rule of his life, the key to understanding people and different situations. "By the light of faith he considered his own sufferings as graces from God, and together with the anniversary of his religious profession and priestly ordination, he celebrated the anniversary of the beginning of his serious illness, which he believed had begun on 20 February 1891. On this occasion he heartily recited the *Te Deum* for having been

allowed by the Lord to suffer for him. He meditated and cultivated a lively devotion to the Passion of Christ and to Jesus Crucified: "Great devotion, which can be said to have informed the entire life of the servant of God... This was the almost continuous subject of his meditations. He always had a crucifix before his eyes and mostly in his hands... which he enthusiastically kissed from time to time."

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

5. Is Fr Beltrami relevant today?

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

We are struck by the claim that Fr Beltrami somehow began a new path in the wake traced by Don Bosco, a special call to illuminate the deep core of the Salesian vocation and the real energy that is pastoral charity: "We need to have

what he had in his heart, what he experienced profoundly in his innermost being. Without that inner wealth our action would be in vain; Fr Beltrami could reproach us for our vain life, saying with Paul: "*nos quasi morientes, et ecce: vivimus!*" He himself was aware that he had started out on a new path, as his brother Giuseppe testified: "Halfway through the lesson he tried to convince me of the need to follow his way, and not thinking like him, I opposed it, and he suffered because of this." This suffering lived in faith was truly fruitful apostolically and vocationally: "It was a manifestation of the new and original Salesian concept which he desired and implemented, one of physical and moral, active, productive pain, even materially so, for the salvation of souls."

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

5.1. Witness of union with God

This spirit of sacrifice matured into profound union with God: "His prayer consisted of being continually in the presence of God, keeping his eyes fixed on the Tabernacle and seeking with the Lord through constant brief prayers and affectionate aspirations. His meditation could be said to be continuous...it was so much a part of him that he did not notice what was happening around him, and I heard him tell me in confidence that he generally came to understand the mysteries he was meditating on so well that he seemed to see them as if they were appearing before his eyes." This union signified and was realised in a special way in the celebration of the Eucharist, when all the pains and coughs ceased as if by magic, translated into perfect conformity to God's will, especially by accepting suffering: "He considered the apostolate of suffering and affliction to be no less fruitful than that of the more active life; and while others would have said that those not so brief years were sufficiently occupied in suffering, he sanctified suffering by offering it to the Lord and conforming to the divine will so generally that he was not only

resigned to it, but content with it.”

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

5.2. Knowing how to suffer

“Knowing how to suffer”: for one’s own sanctification, for expiation and for the apostolate. He celebrated the anniversary of his own illness: “20 February is the anniversary of my illness: and I celebrate it, as of a day blessed by God; a blessed day, full of joy, among the most beautiful days of my life.” Perhaps Fr Beltrami’s testimony confirms Don Bosco’s words that “there is only one Beltrami”, as if to indicate the originality of the holiness of this son of his in having experienced and made visible the secret core of Salesian apostolic holiness. Fr Beltrami expresses the need for the Salesian mission not to fall into the trap of an activism and outward action that in time would lead to the fatal destiny of death, but to preserve and cultivate the secret core that expresses both depth and breadth of horizon. The translations in practice of this care of interiority and spiritual depth are fidelity to the life of prayer, serious and competent preparation for one’s mission, especially for the priestly ministry, fighting against negligence and culpable ignorance; the responsible use of time.

More profoundly, Fr Beltrami’s testimony tells us that one does not live off past glories or achievements, but that every confrere and every generation must make the gift received bear fruit and know how to pass it on in a faithful and creative form to future generations. The interruption of this virtuous chain will be a source of damage and ruin. Knowing how to suffer is a secret that gives fruitfulness to every apostolic enterprise. Fr Beltrami’s spirit of offering of himself as a victim is admirably associated with his priestly ministry, for which he prepared himself with great responsibility and which he lived in the form of a unique communion with Christ immolated for the salvation of his brothers and sisters: in the struggle and mortification against the passions of the flesh; in the renunciation of the ideals of an

active apostolate he had always desired; in the insatiable thirst for suffering; in the aspiration to offer himself as a victim for the salvation of his brothers and sisters. For example, for the Congregation in addition to prayer and the *nominatim* offering for several confreres (holding the Year Book of the Congregation in his hands), houses and missions, he asked for the grace of perseverance and zeal, the preservation of the spirit of Don Bosco and his educational method. One of the books written about him significantly bears the title *La passiflora serafica*, meaning “passionfruit flower”, a name given to it by the Jesuit missionaries in 1610, due to the similarity of some parts of the plant with the religious symbols of Christ’s passion: the tendrils being the whip with which he was scourged; the three styles the nails; the stamens the hammer; the sepals the crown of thorns. Fr Nazareno Camilleri, a deeply spiritual soul, says authoritatively: “Fr Beltrami seems to us to eminently represent, today, the divine yearning for ‘the sanctification of suffering’ for the social, apostolic and missionary fruitfulness, through the heroic enthusiasm of the Cross, of Christ’s Redemption in the midst of humanity.”

5.3 Passing the baton

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

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