 Reading time: 5 min.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Blessed Luigi Variara, an extraordinary priest and Salesian missionary. Born on January 15, 1875, in Viarigi, in the province of Asti, Luigi grew up in an environment enriched with faith, culture, and fraternal love, which shaped his character and prepared him for the extraordinary mission that would lead him to serve those most in need in Colombia. From his childhood spent in Monferrato, in a family marked by the spiritual influence of Don Bosco, to his missionary vocation developed in Valdocco, the life of Blessed Variara represents a commendable example of dedication to others and fidelity to God. Let us retrace the highlights of his childhood and formation, offering a glimpse into the extraordinary spiritual and human legacy he left us.

From Viarigi to Agua de Dios

Luigi Variara was born in Viarigi, in the province of Asti, on January 15, 1875, 150 years ago, to a deeply Christian family. His father, Pietro, had listened to Don Bosco speak in 1856 when he came to the village to preach a mission. When Luigi was born, his father Pietro was forty-two years old and had married for the second time to Livia Bussa. Pietro had obtained a teaching diploma, loved music and singing, and animated parish functions as an organist and as the director of the choir he himself had founded. He was a highly esteemed and appreciated presence in the village of Viarigi. When Luigi was born, it was during a harsh winter, and due to the circumstances of his birth, the midwife deemed it prudent to baptise the newborn. Two days later, the baptismal rites were completed.

Luigi’s childhood was inspired by local traditions and family life, a cultural and spiritual blend that helped shape his character and impart valuable meaning to the growth of the young boy, marking his future missionary vocation in Colombia.

Luigi’s relationship with his father Pietro was important. Pietro was his mentor and teacher and instilled in him the Christian sense of life, the early fundamentals of school, and a love for music and singing—elements that, as we know, would affect the life and mission of Luigi Variara. His younger brother Celso recalls: “Although he never accomplished anything exceptional, Luigi was all goodness and love in the manifestations of his life, both with our parents, and especially with our mother, and with us… I don’t remember my brother ever being less courteous and less fraternal with us, younger siblings. A faithful and devoted attendee of Church and its functions, he spent the rest of his time not having fun in the streets, rather at home, reading and studying his school books and keeping his

mother company.”

It is also nice to remember the relationship of young Luigi with his older sister Giovanna, daughter from the first marriage and godmother at his Baptism. Although she married young, Giovanna always maintained a special bond with little Luigi, helping to strengthen the features of his personality, his inclination towards piety and study. Of Giovanna’s children, one, Ulisse, would become a priest, and Ernestina, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. Furthermore, Giovanna, who would die at ninety in 1947, maintained the epistolary ties between Luigi and their mother Livia during her brother’s missionary life.

Another aspect that would influence the growth of little Luigi is that the Variara home was almost always full of children. His father Pietro, at the end of lessons, would take the students most in need with him, and after doing some tutoring, he would entrust them to the care of mother Livia. Other families did the same. A witness recounts: “Mrs. Livia was the mother of the whole neighbourhood; her yard was always full of boys and girls; she taught us to sew, played with us, and was always in a good mood.” Luigi grew up in this “oratory” atmosphere, where one felt at home, felt loved, and the paternal presence of father Pietro and the maternal presence of mother Livia were top-quality educational and affectionate resources not only for their children, but for many other children and young people, especially the poorest and most disadvantaged.

During these years, Luigi met and dedicated himself to a disabled companion, Andrea Ferrari, taking care of him and making him feel at ease. In this, one can glimpse a seed of that solicitude and closeness that would later mark the life and mission of Luigi Variara in serving leprosy patients in Agua de Dios, Colombia.

Indeed, as a child, Luigi Variara experienced, with his siblings and the neighbourhood children, the sincere love of his parents, and through their example, he came to know the true face of God the Father, the source of authentic love.

Passing through Valdocco

Don Bosco was well known in Monferrato. He had travelled through it in every direction with the well-known autumn walks alongside his boys, who, with their noise and contagious joy, brought festivity wherever they went. The local boys happily joined the cheerful and lively troop, and later, many would leave to find themselves with that priest, eager to be educated by him in the oratory of Turin.

In Viarigi, the visit of Don Bosco in February 1856 left a deeply heartfelt memory. Don Bosco had accepted the invitation of the parish priest, Fr. Giovanni Battista Melino, to preach a mission, as the village was deeply troubled and divided

due to the scandals of a former priest, a certain Grignaschi, who had gathered around himself a true sect, gaining great popularity. Don Bosco managed to attract a very large audience and invited the population to conversion. Thus, Viarigi regained its religious balance and spiritual peace. The spiritual bond that was created between this Asti village and the Saint of the young continued over time. It was young Luigi who, at his First Communion, was prepared by the parish priest Fr. Giovanni Battista Melino, the same one who had invited Don Bosco to preach the popular mission.

In the Variara family, according to the wishes of father Pietro, Luigi was to orient himself towards the priesthood: However, at the end of elementary school, he had no desire or particular vocational concerns. In any case, he had to continue his studies, and at this point, Don Bosco comes into play. The memory he left in Viarigi, his reputation as a man of God, his friendship with the parish priest, the dreams of father Pietro, the fame of the oratory in Turin led Luigi to enter Valdocco on October 1, 1887, having enrolled in his first year of middle school, with the desire of his father who wanted his son to be initiated into the priesthood. However, young Luigi, in all simplicity but firmly speaking, did not hesitate to declare that he felt no vocation, but his father replied: “If you don’t have it, Mary Help of Christians will give it to you. Be good and study!” Don Bosco died four months after the arrival of young Variara at the oratory of Valdocco, but the encounter that Luigi had with him was enough to mark him for life. He himself recalls the event: “We were in the winter season, and one afternoon we were playing in the large courtyard of the oratory when suddenly we heard shouting from one side to the other: ‘Don Bosco, Don Bosco!’ Instinctively, we all rushed towards the point where our good Father appeared, who was being taken out for a walk in his carriage. We followed him to the place where he was to get into the vehicle. Immediately, Don Bosco was seen surrounded by the beloved crowd of children. I was desperately looking for a way to get to a spot where I could see him how I wanted to, since I ardently desired to meet him. I got as close as I could, and the moment they were helping him get into the carriage, he turned to me with a sweet look, and his eyes rested attentively upon me. I do not know what I felt at that moment… it was something I cannot express! That day was one of the happiest for me. I was sure I had met a Saint, and that this Saint had read something in my soul that only God and he could know.”