

□ Reading time: 8 min.

On 23 March 2023, the Church – after the examination of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity shown God and neighbour, and the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance and the other related virtues, practised to a heroic degree – recognised the Servant of God Carlo Crespi Croci, Professed Priest of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco as Venerable.

Like John Bosco a dream marked his life

Going to Cuenca, in the square in front of the shrine of Mary Help of Christians, one's gaze immediately falls on an interesting and imposing group of sculptures dedicated to an Italian whom the people of Cuenca still remember as the "*apóstol de los pobres*". More specifically, it is a monument depicting a priest and a child at his side looking at him with filial affection. This extraordinary man who marked the human, spiritual and cultural rebirth of a people previously brought to its knees by poverty, backwardness and political conflicts is Father Carlo Crespi, a Salesian missionary. Originally from Legnano (Milan), he was born in 1891 as the third of thirteen children, to a wealthy and influential family. From an early age he showed particular intelligence, curiosity and generosity, which he put at the service of his father, a farmer on a local estate, and his mother Luigia, from whom he learnt at a very early age to pray the rosary and to keep the name of Mary always "on his lips", as one of his former pupils would testify many years later. Like his brother Delfino, also a future missionary, he showed a particular interest in the beauty of creation, an inclination that would come in handy many years later when he found himself in the unexplored forests of Ecuador classifying new plant species. He attended the local school and at the age of twelve had his first encounter with Salesians at the St Ambrose Institute in Milan. During his college years, following the teachings of St John Bosco, he learnt to put into practice the inseparable combination of joy and work. In this same period a "revelatory dream" marked the first important turning point in his life. He wrote in some notebooks: "The Virgin appeared in a dream and showed me a scene: on one side, the devil who wanted to grab me and drag me; on the other, the Divine Redeemer, with the cross, was showing me another way. I was dressed as a priest and had a beard; I stood on an old pulpit, around me a multitude of people eager to hear my words. The pulpit was not in a church, but in a hut." These were the first steps of the call to Salesian life that grew stronger and stronger. In 1903, he completed his studies at the Salesian high school in Valsalice. He told his father, who was worried about his future, confirming his priestly vocation

in the Society of St John Bosco: “You see, father, a vocation is not imposed on you by anyone; it is God who calls; I feel called to become a Salesian.” On 8 September 1907 he made his first religious profession, in 1910 his perpetual profession. In 1917 he was ordained a priest. These were the years dedicated to the passionate study of philosophy, theology and the teaching of natural sciences, music and mathematics. At the University of Padua he made an important scientific discovery: the existence of a hitherto unknown microorganism. In 1921 he received a doctorate in natural sciences, specialising in botany, and shortly afterwards a diploma in music.

Missionary in Ecuador

It was 1923 when he left as a missionary and landed in Guayaquil, Ecuador. He reached Quito and finally settled in Cuenca, where he remained until his death. “Bless me in the Lord and pray for me so that I may become a saint, so that I may immolate myself on the altar of pain and sacrifice every moment of my life,” he wrote in 1925 to the then Rector Major Fr Philip Rinaldi, manifesting his desire to sacrifice himself completely for the missionary cause. Father Crespi spent the first six months of 1925 in the forests of the Sucúa-Macas area. He set out to gain an in-depth knowledge of the language, territory, culture and spirituality of the Shuar ethnic group. Using his knowledge in the different areas of culture, he began a revolutionary and innovative work of evangelisation, made up of exchange and mutual enrichment of very different cultures. He was initially greeted with distrust, but Father Carlo brought interesting objects with him such as cloth, ammunition, mirrors, needles, and had the manner of someone who cared. He got to know the indigenous myths and re-presented them in a new interpretation, transformed and enriched by the light of the Catholic faith. Father Carlo soon became a friend, and the Christian message, conveyed with care and respect, was no longer the religion of the foreigner, but something that the people recognised as their own. Father Crespi realised that “only the man who approaches others, not to draw them into his own life, but to help them become ever more fully themselves, can truly be called a father” (Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter ‘Fratelli tutti’, 3 October 2020).

A hundred-year-old child!



The dream dimension marked his life again in 1936 when he fell ill with typhus and, despite the doctors’ predictions, recovered saying: “Around three o’clock in the morning, the door opened and Saint Teresa came in and said to me: *puer centum*

annorum, infirmitas haec non est ad mortem, longa tibi restat vita (hundred-year-old child: this illness is not for death, you have a long life left).” Father Carlo was then 45 years old, and would live another 46 years. Now settled for good in Cuenca, the Servant of God brought about a real “*Revolucìon blanca*”. He set up an unprecedented work of human development, founding several works: the festive oratory, the Orientalist School for the formation of Salesian missionaries, the Cornelio Merchán primary school, the school of arts and crafts (later the Salesian Technical College), the Quinta Agronomica or the first agricultural institute in the region, the Salesian Theatre, the Gran Casa of the community, the Dominic Savio Orphanage, the Carlo Crespi museum, still famous today for its numerous scientific exhibits. From Italy he brought in means and specialised personnel to invest in his projects.

Using his extraordinary knowledge in science and music, he organised conferences and concerts in embassies, theatres and forged friendships with leading families in Guayaquil and the capital. He established a relaxed relationship with the local government, although the latter was strongly anti-clerical. He obtained free customs clearance and coverage of transport costs to Cuenca for hundreds of crates of materials.

His works quickly became the beating heart of epoch-making social and cultural changes for the benefit of the population, especially the poorest. Father Carlo created new possibilities for life and did so through a project of evangelisation and development that gave the Cuenca population first and foremost autonomy for growth. As St John Paul II authoritatively stated in his 1991 Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, “It is not merely a matter of ‘giving from one’s surplus’, but of helping entire peoples which are presently excluded or marginalized to enter into the sphere of economic and human development.”

Cuenca took on the face of a Church capable of inserting the teaching of the Gospel into an experiential model: the teaching of scripture and fundamental work activities (farming, livestock breeding and weaving) became the channel of access for making Jesus known to everyone. In perfect adherence to the teaching of St John Bosco, the Servant of God applied the “preventive system”, offering young people in particular a kind of “preventive grace”, an advance of trust to give possibilities for change, conversion, growth. Looking to Don Bosco, he knew how to harmonise pedagogy and theology, animating young people with games, films, theatrical activities, celebrations and not least, catechism. For Father Carli, it was already possible to glimpse future good fathers of families. His exquisitely Eucharistic and

Marian spirituality guided him in other exceptional undertakings, such as the organisation of the First Diocesan Eucharistic Congress in Cuenca in 1938 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the death of St John Bosco. By virtue of its devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, Cuenca was once again confirmed as a Eucharistic City in those years. Immersed in apostolic labours and official business, Father Carlo never forgot his poor. Generations of Cuencans found in him a generous heart, capable of hospitality and fatherliness. In one hand he held a bell to “awaken” some young man in need of correction with a tap on the head; in the other he clutched food and money to donate to his poor. The old and faded cassock, the worn-out shoes, the frugal diet, the special dedication to children and the poor did not go unnoticed in the eyes of the Cuencans. Father Crespi was poor among the poor. The people welcomed him as a chosen Cuencan and began to call him “Saint Carlo Crespi”. The civil authorities, won over by Father Crespi’s work, responded with numerous honours: he was declared “most illustrious inhabitant of Cuenca in the 20th century”. He received a doctorate *Honoris Causa post mortem* from the Salesian Polytechnic University.

Moved by hope

In 1962, a fire, probably the work of an arsonist, destroyed the Cornelio Merchàn Institute, the fruit of many years’ hard work. Father Carlo Crespi’s certainty that Mary Help of Christians would help him this time too became contagious: the inhabitants of Cuenca regained confidence and participated without hesitation in the reconstruction. A witness will recount years later: “the day after (the fire) Father Crespi was seen with his little bell and his big saucer collecting contributions from the city.”

By now elderly and tired, he was still in the shrine of Mary Help of Christians spreading devotion to the Virgin with the same enthusiasm as in the past. He heard confessions and counselled endless lines of faithful. When it came to listening to them, schedules, meals and even sleep no longer counted. It was not even uncommon for Father Carlo to get up in the middle of the night to hear the confession of a sick or dying person. People had no doubts: he only looked at his neighbour with God’s eyes. He knew how to recognise sin and weakness, without ever being scandalised or crushed by it. He did not judge, but understood, respected, loved. For the Cuencans, his confessional became the place where, in the words of Pope Francis, Father Carlo alleviated the wounds of humanity “with the oil of consolation” and “bandaged them with mercy” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 2015). And as he healed, he in turn healed by the experience of mercy received. The programme foretold in his youth by the “revelatory dream” from the Virgin Mary

had finally found total fulfilment.

On 30 April 1982, at the age of 90, Father Carlo Crespi, in the silence and seclusion of the Santa Inés Clinic in Cuenca, held the rosary in his hands as his mother had taught him. It was time to close his eyes to this world to open them on eternity. A stream of moved and grieving people attended the funeral. Certain that it was a saint who had died, many flocked to touch his body one last time with some object; they hoped to still receive the protection of the father who had just left them. Even his confessional was stormed to preserve some small part of him.

Thus ended the earthly life of a man who, although aware of the remarkably comfortable life he could have led in his own home, accepted the Salesian call and, as a true imitator of Don Bosco, became a witness to a Church that exhorts one “to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013). Father Carlo Crespi’s life tells the Christians of yesterday and today how prayer can and must be inserted into the concrete of daily action, stimulating and inspiring it. While remaining totally Salesian and totally Marian, he was a credible witness of an “evangelising style capable of impacting life” (Pope Francis, Address to Italian Catholic Action, 3 May 2014). To this day, his tomb and monument continue to be perennially adorned with fresh flowers and plaques of thanksgiving. While the reputation for sanctity of this illustrious son of Cuenca shows no sign of diminishing, the completion of the *Positio super virtutibus* marks an important step in the Cause of Beatification. All that remains is to await the wise judgement of the Church with confidence.

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