 Reading time: 4 min.

Stories of wounded families

We are used to imagining the family as a harmonious reality, characterised by the co-presence of several generations and by the guiding role of parents who set the norm and of children who – when they learn this – are guided by them in life's experiences. Nonetheless, families often find themselves beset by dramas and misunderstandings, or marked by wounds that attack their optimal configuration and give them a distorted and false image.

The history of Salesian holiness also has stories of wounded families: families where at least one of the parental figures is missing, or the presence of the mother and father becomes, for different reasons (physical, psychic, moral and spiritual), penalising for their children, now on their way to the honours of the altars. Don Bosco himself, who had experienced the premature death of his father and the estrangement from the family by the prudent wish of Mamma Margaret, wanted – and this is no coincidence – the Salesian work to be particularly dedicated to "poor and abandoned youth" and did not hesitate to reach out to the young people formed in his oratory with an intense vocational pastoral (demonstrating that no wound from the past is an obstacle to a full human and Christian life). It is therefore natural that Salesian holiness itself, which draws on the lives of many of Don Bosco's young people later consecrated through him to the cause of the Gospel, bears within itself – as a logical consequence – traces of wounded families.

Of these boys and girls who grew up in contact with Salesian works, we present Blessed Laura Vicuña, born in Chile in 1891, fatherless and whose mother began a cohabitation in Argentina with the wealthy landowner Manuel Mora; Laura, therefore, hurt by her mother's situation of moral irregularity, was ready to offer her life for her.

A short but intense life

Born in Santiago de Chile on 5 April 1891, and baptised on the following 24 May, Laura was the eldest daughter of José D. Vicuña, a fallen nobleman who had married Mercedes Pino, the daughter of modest farmers. Three years later a little sister, Julia Amanda, arrived, but soon her father died, after suffering a political defeat that undermined his health and compromised, along with the family's financial support, also his honour. Deprived of any "protection and prospect of a future", the mother landed in Argentina, where she resorted to the guardianship of the landowner Manuel Mora: a man "of proud and haughty character" who "did not hide his hatred hatred and contempt for anyone who opposed his plans." A man, in

short, who guaranteed protection only on the surface, but was actually used to taking what he wanted by force if necessary, exploiting people. In the meantime, he payed for the studies for Laura and her sister at the boarding school run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Their mother – who was under Mora's psychological influence – lived with him without finding the strength to break the bond. However, when Mora began to show signs of unhealthy interest in Laura herself, and especially when the latter embarked on the path of preparation for her First Communion, she suddenly realised the gravity of the situation. Unlike her mother – who justified one evil (cohabitation) in view of a good (her daughters' education at boarding school) – Laura understood that this was a morally illegitimate argument, which put her mother's soul in grave danger. At this time, Laura also wanted to become a Sister 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 wanting to be seen" still dominated in her) that only Grace, combined with her own commitment, could 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 then charged with the creativity typical of saints, Laura embarked on the only road still accessible to her: one of height and depth. In her First Communion resolutions she had noted:

I resolve to do all I know and can to […] make reparation for the offences that you, Lord, receive every day from people, especially from people in my family; my God, give me a life of love, mortification and sacrifice.

The intention in an "Act of Offering" was now finalised, which includes the sacrifice of her very life. Her confessor, recognising that the inspiration was from God, but ignorant of the consequences, agreed, and confirmed that Laura was "aware of the offering she has just made". She spent the last two years in silence, cheerfulness and with a smile. And yet, the gaze she cast on the world – as confirmed by a photographic portrait, very different from the familiar hagiographic stylisation – also speaks of the painful awareness and pain that she felt. In a situation where she lacked both the "freedom from" (conditioning, obstacles, hardships) and the "freedom to" do many things, this pre-teen testified to the "freedom for" of total self-giving.
Laura did not despise, but loved life: her own and her mother's. For this she offered

herself. On 13 April 1902, Good Shepherd Sunday, she asked herself, “If He gives life… what is stopping me from giving mine for Mum?” Dying, she added. “Mum, I am dying, I myself have asked Jesus… for almost two years I have been offering Him my life for you…, to obtain the grace of your return!”

These are words devoid of regret and reproach, but loaded with great strength, great hope and great faith. Laura had learnt to accept her mother for what she was. Indeed, she offered herself to give her what she alone could not achieve. When Laura died, her mother converted. Laurita de los Andes, the daughter, had thus helped to generate her mother in the life of faith and grace.