 Reading time: 5 min.

**‘Founded’ in a glance that marked a lifetime**

Louis Variara was born on 15 January 1875 in Viarigi (Asti). Don Bosco had come to this village in 1856 to preach a mission. And it was to Don Bosco that the father, on 1 October 1887, entrusted his son to take him to Valdocco. Don Bosco would die four months later, but the knowledge that Louis had of him was enough to mark him for life. He himself remembered the event as follows: “It was in the winter season and one afternoon we were playing in the large courtyard of the oratory when suddenly there was a shout from one side to the other: ‘Don Bosco, Don Bosco!’ Instinctively we all rushed towards the spot where our good Father appeared, whom they were taking out for a ride in his carriage. We followed him to the place where he was to get into the vehicle; immediately Don Bosco was surrounded by a crowd of his beloved boys. I was anxiously searching for a way to put myself in a place where I could see him at my leisure, for I longed to meet him. I got as close as I could, and as they helped him into the carriage, he gave me a gently look, and his eyes rested intently on me. I don’t 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 that I had met a saint, and that that saint had read in my soul something that only God and he could know.”

He asked to become a Salesian: he entered the novitiate on 17 August 1891 and completed it on 2 October 1892 with perpetual vows in the hands of Blessed Michael Rua, who whispered in his ear: “Variara, don’t vary!” He studied philosophy at Valsalice, where he met the Venerable Fr Andrea Beltrami. Here, in 1894, Fr Michael Unia, the famous missionary who had recently started working among the lepers in Agua de Dios, Colombia, passed by. “What an astonishment and joy” Frn Variara recounts” when, among the 188 companions who had the same aspiration, fixing his gaze on me, he said ‘This one is mine’”.

He arrived at Agua de Dios on 6 August 1894. The place had a population of 2,000, 800 of whom were lepers. He immersed himself totally in his mission. Gifted with musical skills, he organised a band that immediately created a festive atmosphere in the “City of Sorrow”. He transformed the sadness of the place with Salesian cheerfulness, with music, theatre, sport and the lifestyle of the Salesian oratory.

On 24 April 1898, he was ordained a priest and soon proved to be an excellent spiritual director. Among his penitents were members of the Association of the Daughters of Mary, a group of about 200 girls, many of whom were lepers. It was in the face of this realisation that the first idea of consecrated young women,

albeit lepers, was born in him. The Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary began on 7 May 1905. It was “founded” in full submission to religious obedience and, a unique case in the history of the Church. He founded the first religious community made up of people affected by leprosy or daughters of leprosy sufferers. He wrote: “Never have I felt as happy to be a Salesian as I do this year, and I bless the Lord for sending me to this leprosarium, where I have learnt not to let heaven be stolen from me.”

Ten years had passed since he arrived at Agua de Dios: a happy decade full of achievements, including the completion of the”Don Miguel Unia” kindergarten. But now a period of suffering and misunderstandings was beginning for the generous missionary. This period would last 18 years, until his death at Cúcuta in Colombia on 1 February 1923 at 48 years of age and 24 of priesthood.

Fr Variara knew how to combine in himself both fidelity to the work that the Lord asked of him, and submission to the orders that his legitimate superior imposed on him and that seemed to lead him away from the ways willed by God. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 14 April 2002.

**Founded in spiritual friendship**

In Turin-Valsalice, Fr Variara got to know the Venerable Andrea Beltrami, a Salesian priest stricken with consumption, who had offered himself as a victim to God for the conversion of all sinners in the world. A spiritual friendship was born between Fr Variara and Fr Beltrami, and Fr Variara was to be inspired by him when he founded the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Colombia, to whom he proposed ‘victim consecration’.

The Venerable Andrea Beltrami is the forerunner of the victim-oblative dimension of the Salesian charism, “The mission that God entrusts to me is to pray and to suffer” he said. “Neither to heal nor to die, but to live to suffer”, was his motto. Very exact in his observance of the Rule, he had a filial openness to his superiors and an ardent love for Don Bosco and the Congregation. His bed became an altar and pulpit, where he immolated himself together with Jesus and from which he taught how to love, how to offer and how to suffer. His little room became his whole world, from which he wrote and in which he celebrated his bloody Mass: “I offer myself as a victim with Him, for the sanctification of priests, for the people of the whole world”, he repeated; but his Salesianity also led him to have relationships with the outside world. He offered himself as a victim of love for the conversion of sinners and for the consolation of the suffering. Fr Beltrami fully grasped the sacrificial dimension of the Salesian charism, desired by the founder Don Bosco.

Fr Variara’s daughters wrote of Fr Beltrami as follows: “We are poor young

people struck down by the terrible disease of leprosy, violently torn and separated from our parents, deprived in a single moment of our liveliest hopes and our most ardent desires… We felt the caressing hand of God in the holy encouragements and pitiful industries of Fr Louis Variara in the face of our acute pains of body and soul. Persuaded that it is the will of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and finding it easy to accomplish, we began to offer ourselves as victims of expiation, following the example of Fr Andrea Beltrami, a Salesian."

**Founded in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary**

Founder … founded, of the Institute of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. In his life he encountered great difficulties, such as in 1901 when the "Don Miguel Unia" house was being built, but he entrusted himself to the Virgin, writing: "Now more than ever I have confidence in the success of this work, Mary Help of Christians will help me"; "I only have money to pay for one week, so … it is up to Mary Help of Christians, because the work is in her hands." In painful moments, Father Variara renewed his devotion to the Virgin, thus finding the serenity and trust in God to continue his mission.

In the great obstacles he encountered in founding the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts, Father Variara acted in the same way as at other times. At the time he had to leave Agua de Dios. In the same way he acted when he was told he had contracted leprosy. "Some days" he confessed, "despair assails me, with thoughts that I hasten to banish by invoking the Virgin." And to his spiritual daughters, far away and removed from his paternal guidance, he wrote: "… Jesus will be your strength, and Mary Help of Christians will spread her mantle over you." "I have no illusions" he wrote on another occasion, "I leave everything in the hands of the Virgin." "May Jesus and Mary be blessed a thousand times over, live always in our hearts."