 Reading time: 8 min.

Nino Baglieri was born in Modica Alta on 1 May 1951 to his mother Giuseppa and father Pietro. After just four days he was baptised in the Parish of St Anthony of Padua. He grew up like many boys, with a group of friends, some struggles during his school years and the dream of a future made up of work and the possibility of forming a family.

A few days after his seventeenth birthday, celebrated at the seaside with friends, on 6 May 1968, the liturgical memorial of Saint Dominic Savio, during a day of ordinary work as a bricklayer, Nino fell 17 metres when the scaffolding of the building – not far from home – on which he was working collapsed: 17 metres, Nino points out in his Diary-Book, “1 metre for every year of life.” “My condition” he recounts, “was so serious that the doctors expected my death at any moment (I even received extreme unction). [A doctor] made an unusual proposal to my parents: ‘if your son managed to get through these moments, which would only be the result of a miracle, he would be destined to spend his life on a bed; if you believe, with a lethal injection both you and he will be spared so much suffering.’ ‘If God wants him’ replied my mother, ‘let him take him, but if he lets him live, I will be happy to look after him for the rest of his life.’ So my mother, who has always been a woman of great faith and courage, opened her arms and heart and embraced the cross first.”

Nino would face difficult years of wandering through different hospitals, where painful therapies and operations would try him hard, though not resulting in the desired recovery. He would remain a tetraplegic for the rest of his life.

Back home, followed by the affection of his family and the heroic sacrifice of his mother, who was always at his side, Nino Baglieri was once again seen by friends and acquaintances, but all too often with a feeling of pity that disturbed him: “mischinu poviru Ninuzzu…!” (“poor poor Nino…!”). He thus ended up closing in on himself for ten painful years of loneliness and anger. These were years of despair and blasphemy since he did not accept his condition and asked questions like “Why did all this happen to me?”

The turning point came on 24 March 1978, the eve of the Annunciation and – that year – Good Friday: a priest from the Renewal in the Holy Spirit went to visit him with some people and they prayed over him. In the morning Nino, still bedridden, had asked his mother to dress him: “If the Lord heals me I will not be naked in front of people.”. We read from his Diary: “Father Aldo immediately began the Prayer, I was anxious and excited, he placed his hands on my head, I did not understand this gesture; he began to invoke the Holy Spirit to come down on me.

After a few minutes, under the laying on of hands, I felt a great warmth in my whole body, a great tingling, like a new force entering me, a regenerating force, a living force, and something old going out. The Holy Spirit had come down upon me, with power he entered my heart, it was an Effusion of Love and Life. In that instant I accepted the Cross, I said my Yes to Jesus and I was reborn to New Life, I became a new man, with a new heart; all the despair of 10 years erased in a few seconds, my heart was filled with a new and true joy that I had never known. The Lord healed me, I wanted physical healing and instead the Lord worked something greater, the Healing of the Spirit, so I found Peace, Joy, Serenity, and so much strength and so much will to live. When I finished praying, my heart overflowed with joy, my eyes shone and my face was radiant; even though I was in the same condition as a sufferer, I was happy."

A new period then began for Nino Baglieri and his family, a period of rebirth marked in Nino by the rediscovery of faith and love for the Word of God, which he read for a year page by page. He opened up to those human relationships from which he had shied away without others ever ceasing to love him.

One day, urged on by some children who were close to him and asked him to help them draw a picture, Nino realised that he had the gift of writing with his mouth: in a short time he was able to write very well – better than when he wrote by hand – and this allowed him to objectify his own experience, both in the very personal form of numerous Diary Notebooks and through poems/short essays that he began to read on the Radio. Then, with the expansion of his network, thousands of letters, friendships, meetings…, through which Nino would express a special kind of apostolate until the end of his life.

In the meantime, he deepened his spiritual journey through three guidelines which guided his experience of the Church as part of his obedience to the encounters that God placed in his path: his closeness to the Renewal in the Holy Spirit; his link with the Camillians (Ministers of the Sick); his journey with the Salesians, first becoming a Salesian Cooperator and then a consecrated layman in the Secular Institute of Volunteers with Don Bosco (and when asked by the delegates of the Rector Major, he also gave a contribution to the drafting of the CDB Project of Life). It was the Camillians who first suggested a form of consecration to him: humanly speaking, it seemed to capture the specific nature of his life marked by suffering. Nino's place, however, was to be in Don Bosco's house and he discovered it over time, not without moments of fatigue, but always entrusting himself to those who guided him, and learning to compare his own desires with the ways through which the Church calls us. And while Nino went through the stages of formation and consecration (until his perpetual profession on 31 August 2004), there were many other

vocations – including to the priesthood and consecrated life for women – that drew inspiration, strength and light from him.

The World Leader of the CDB expresses himself thus on the meaning of lay consecration today, also lived by Nino: “Nino Baglieri has been for us Volunteers With Don Bosco a special gift from heaven: he is the first of us brothers to show us a path to holiness through a humble, discreet, joyful witness. Nino fully realised the vocation to Salesian consecrated secularity and teaches us that holiness is possible in every condition of life, even those marked by the encounter with the cross and suffering. Nino reminds us that we can all conquer through the One who gives us strength: the Cross that he loved so much, like a faithful bridegroom, was the bridge through which he united his personal history as a man with the history of salvation; it was the altar on which he celebrated his sacrifice of praise to the Lord of life; it was the stairway to paradise. Encouraged by his example, we too, like Nino, can become capable of transforming all daily circumstances as good leaven, certain of finding in him a model and a powerful intercessor with God.”

Nino, who could not move was the Nino who over time learned not to run away, not to evade requests, and became more and more accessible and simple like his Lord. His bed, his small room or his wheelchair were thus transfigured into that “altar” where so many brought their joys and sorrows: he welcomed them, offered himself and his own sufferings for them. Nino who was “just there” was the friend on whom people could “unload” many worries and “lay down” their burdens: he welcomed them with a smile, even if his life – guarded in reserve – would not lack moments of great moral and spiritual trial.

In letters, in meetings, in friendships he shows great realism and was always able to be true, recognising his own smallness but also the greatness of God’s gift in him and through him.

During a meeting with young people in Loreto, in the presence of Card. Angelo Comastri, he would tell them, “If any of you are in mortal sin, you are much worse off than I am!” It was this completely Salesians awareness of “death but not sin”, and that our true friends must be Jesus and Mary, from whom we must never be separated.

The Bishop of the Diocese of Noto, Bishop Salvatore Rumeo, stressed that “the divine adventure of Nino Baglieri reminds us all that holiness is possible and does not belong to past centuries: holiness is the way to reach the Heart of God. In the Christian life there are no other solutions. Embracing the Cross means being with Jesus in the season of suffering to participate in His Light. And Nino is in God’s Light.”

Nino was born to Heaven on 2 March 2007, after having uninterruptedly

celebrated 6 May (the day of the fall) as the “anniversary of the Cross” for him since 1982.

After his death, he was dressed in running gear and trainers, so that, as he had said, “on my last journey to God, I will be able to run towards him.”

Fr Giovanni d’Andrea, Provincial of the Salesians in Sicily, invites us to “…get to know Nino and his message of hope better and better. We too, like Nino, would like to put on ‘running gear and trainers’ and ‘run’ on the road to holiness, which means realising God’s Dream for each one of us, a Dream that each one of us is: to be ‘happy in time and in eternity’, as Don Bosco wrote in his Letter from Rome, 10 May 1884.”

In his spiritual testament, Nino exhorts us “not to leave him without doing anything to do”: his Cause for Beatification and Canonisation is now the instrument made available by the Church to learn to know and love him more and more, to meet him as a friend and example in the following of Jesus, to turn to him in prayer, asking him for those graces that have already arrived in great numbers.

“May Nino’s testimony” the Postulator General Fr Pierluigi Cameroni sdb hopes “be a sign of hope for those who are in trial and pain, and for the new generations, so that they may learn to face life with faith and courage, without becoming discouraged and despondent. Nino smiles on us and supports us so that, like him, we can make our ‘run’ towards the joy of heaven.”

Finally, Bishop Rumeo, at the end of the closing session of the Diocesan Inquiry, said. “It is a great joy to have reached this milestone for Nino and especially for the Church in Noto. We must pray to Nino, we must intensify our prayer, we must ask for some grace from Nino so that he can intercede from heaven. It is an invitation to us to walk the path of holiness. Holiness is a difficult art because the heart of holiness is the Gospel. Being holy means accepting the word of the Lord: if someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other. If someone asks for your cloak offer your tunic as well. This is holiness! […] In a world where individualism prevails, we must choose how we understand life: either we choose a human reward, or we receive the reward of God. Jesus said that he came and remains a sign of contradiction because he is the watershed, the year zero. The coming of Christ is the needle, the pointer in the balance: we are either with him, or against him. Love, love one another is the claim that must guide our life.”

Roberto Chiaramonte