 Reading time: 5 min.

This is the story of Nino Baglieri, a bricklayer from Modica whose life changed drastically after a fall from scaffolding at the age of seventeen left him quadriplegic. Years of despair were transformed, thanks to a prayer meeting on Good Friday 1978, into a spiritual blossoming that led him to say a decisive “yes” to the Cross. From that bed of pain, Nino, writing with his mouth, became a friend, counsellor, and voice of hope for thousands of people, especially young people. A Salesian Cooperator and now a Servant of God, he continues to speak of joy and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit.

“One summer day in 1973, a twelve-year-old boy is running after a ball that suddenly ends up under a wheelchair. Sitting above is a man: he looks young and strong, quite kind in his speech, but he is motionless. When asked if he can take the ball, he replies: Of course! It’s yours. Run after it as long as you have the strength. Everything seems to end there, but the story is just beginning. That ball didn’t end up there by chance… that was the first of many encounters between us boys and Nino. We boys, eager to grow and play, in front of a man who, although still young, had already been tested by life: condemned to remain forever motionless in a wheelchair. But that wheelchair, as the days of that summer passed, transformed into a powerful “magnet” that attracted all of us boys. In the following autumn and winter, when the weather conditions forced our “friend” to stay in bed, we were the ones who went to visit him. Thus, his little room became for us the place to do homework, watch television, and play: a small oratory! And meanwhile, the action of the Holy Spirit manifested itself in its ordinary extraordinariness. One day, one of the many kids who had to make a particularly difficult drawing asked Nino for help. But how, precisely to him who could not move his hands? Nino, as if propelled by a higher force, asked to have a pencil placed in his mouth and, moving those few muscles in his shoulder and neck (the only ones he could move), created that drawing. What great joy we felt when we saw that pencil brush the page of the notebook, small pencil marks placed one next to the other, and the drawing came out: God’s plan continued to unfold! After that first drawing, Nino tried to sign his little masterpieces, to write poems, even reciting them every morning on a local radio. Then the correspondence! Letters began to arrive from all over, and Nino promptly responded, also giving his advice.

The account of Antonio Aprile, one of those boys who grew up in the shadow of the great tree that was Nino Baglieri, offers us a surprised look at this life that could have consumed itself in total failure and instead blossomed into a strong and convincing testimony to the love of God.

Antonino Baglieri was born in Modica (Syracuse) on May 1, 1951. After attending elementary school and starting the trade of bricklayer, at seventeen, on May 6, 1968, he fell from a scaffold 17 meters high. Hospitalized urgently, Nino bitterly realizes that he has been completely paralyzed. Faced with a very dramatic situation, his mother Giuseppina, a woman strong in faith, makes herself available to care for him personally for life. Thus begins Nino's journey of suffering as he moves from one hospital centre to another, but without any improvement. Returned in 1970 to his hometown, after the first days of visits from friends, Nino begins ten long dark years, without leaving the house, in solitude, suffering, and much despair. For ten years, Nino Baglieri swims in despair, cursing and seeing no glimmer of light. Beside him, his mother prays, just as Saint Augustine's mother prayed for her son's conversion.

On March 24, 1978, Good Friday, a group of people from the Renewal in the Spirit pray for him; Nino feels a transformation within himself, as he himself will recount: "It was Good Friday in 1978; I will never forget this date. It was four in the afternoon; the priest came with a small group of people, began to pray over me, placed his hands on my head, and invoked the Holy Spirit, and at that precise moment, while invoking the Spirit, I felt a great warmth invade my body, a tingling, as if a new force was entering me and something old was leaving. At that moment, I accepted the Cross, I said my 'yes' to the Lord, I accepted Christ into my life and was reborn to new life. At that moment, I desired physical healing; instead, the Lord worked something greater: the healing of the spirit. I was reborn to new life, a new man with a new heart; while remaining in the same suffering, my heart was filled with new joy, a joy I had never known" (*On the Wings of the Cross. Nino Baglieri and … so much desire to run*, edited by Giuseppe Ruta, Elle Di Ci 2008, 182-183).

From that moment on, Nino accepted the Cross and said his 'yes' to the Lord. He began to read the Gospel and the Bible; he rediscovered the wonders of faith. It was precisely during that time that, helping some neighbourhood kids with their

homework, he learned to write with his mouth. And here's how he spends his days: he writes his memoirs, writes letters to people of all kinds in various parts of the world, personalizes memory images that he gives to those who come to visit him. Thanks to a stick, he composes phone numbers and gets in direct contact with many sick people; his calm and convincing words comfort them. A continuous flow of relationships begins, which not only brings him out of isolation but leads him to testify to the Gospel of joy and hope, with courage and without any fear. In Loreto, speaking to a large group of young people, who looked at him with a certain pity, he had the courage to say; "If any of you are in mortal sin, you are much worse off than I am!" From May 6, 1982, onwards, Nino celebrates the Anniversary of the Cross, and that same year, he became part of the Salesian Family as a Salesian cooperator. On August 31, 2004, he made his perpetual profession among the Volunteers with Don Bosco (CDB). On March 2, 2007, at 8 a.m., Nino Baglieri, after a long period of suffering and trial, returned his soul to God. After his death, he was dressed in a tracksuit and sneakers, so that, as he had said: "In my last journey towards God, I can run to meet him."

In this race towards God, Nino involved many who, having known him personally and having listened to his words, found hope and strength thanks to him. Nino's testimony, for which the beatification process began on March 3, 2012, reminds us that the renewal of the Church also passes through the testimony offered by the lives of believers. With their very existence in the world, Christians are indeed called to make the Word of truth that the Lord Jesus left us shine. With his message, Nino reminds us that the trials of life, while allowing us to understand the mystery of the Cross and to participate in the sufferings of Christ, are a prelude to eternal joy, to which faith leads. Cardinal Angelo Comastri, General Vicar of His Holiness for the Vatican City, who had the opportunity to meet and know Nino Baglieri, declared: "When one met him, it gave the impression that he was inhabited by the Holy Spirit… He celebrated the anniversary of his call to the cross as others celebrate the anniversary of Marriage or religious ordination… Nino Baglieri became an untiring apostle, a magnet of goodness, who attracted many young people to the love of God. Where did he find the strength? In the Holy Eucharist! In his diary, written holding the pen in his mouth, he confided a touching prayer that goes like this: 'Lord, in the Holy Eucharist, You let yourself be absorbed to transform us into You, to be like You, to love and serve like You. Transform my life, O Lord, change it in Your way, let me also be a host for my brothers, let me give myself to others with the same love You have for me. as you give yourself to me, let me also give myself to all'."