 Reading time: 11 min.

The chronicle of the Salesian college in Viedma recalls that, according to custom, on 15 March 1951 in the morning the bell announced the flight to heaven of Brother Artemides Zatti, and reported these prophetic words: **“One less brother in the house and one more saint in heaven.”**

The canonisation of Artemides Zatti on 9 October 2022 is a gift of grace; the witness of holiness that the Lord gives us through this brother who lived his life in docility to the Holy Spirit, in the spirit of family typical of the Salesian charism, embodying fraternity towards his confreres and the Salesian community, and closeness towards the poor and the sick and anyone he met on his path, is a blessing to be welcomed and made to bear fruit.

St Artemides Zatti turns out to be a model, intercessor and companion of Christian life, close to everyone. Indeed, his adventure presents him to us as a person **who experienced the daily toil** of existence with its successes and failures. It is enough to recall the separation from his native country to emigrate to Argentina; the tuberculosis that broke through like a hurricane in his young life, shattering every dream and every prospect for the future; seeing the hospital that he had built with so many sacrifices and which had become a sanctuary of God’s merciful love demolished. **But Zatti always found in the Lord the strength** to get back up and continue on his way.

Witness of hope

For the dramatic times we are living in, marked by the pandemic, so many wars, by the climate emergency and above all by the crisis and the abandonment of faith of so many people, Artemides Zatti encourages us to **live hope as a virtue and as an attitude of life in God**. His story reminds us how the path to holiness very often requires **a change of course and vision**. Artemides, at different stages of his life, discovered the great opportunity in the Cross to be reborn and to start again, when:

– as a boy, in the hard and tiring work of the countryside, he immediately learnt to face the hardships and responsibilities that would always accompany him in his mature years;

– at the age of 17 he emigrated with his family to Argentina in search of greater fortune;

– as a young aspirant to Salesian life he was struck down by tuberculosis, infected by a young priest he was helping because he was very ill.

The young Zatti experienced in his own flesh the drama of the disease, not only as

fragility and suffering of the body, but also as something that touched the heart, gave rise to fears and many questions, making the question of meaning emerge with everything that happened affecting the future that lay ahead of him, seeing that what he dreamed of, and yearned for, suddenly failed. In faith he turned to God, sought new meaning and a new direction for life to which he found neither immediate nor easy answers. Thanks to the wise and encouraging presence of Father Cavalli and Father Garrone, and reading life's circumstances in a spirit of discernment and obedience, his Salesian vocation came to maturity as a brother, dedicating his whole life to the material and spiritual care of the sick and assistance to the poor and needy. He decided to stay with Don Bosco, living the original vocation of the brother to the full;

– when he had to face trials, sacrifices and debts to carry out his mission on behalf of the poor and the sick by running the hospital and pharmacy, always trusting in the help of Providence;

– when he saw the hospital, to which he had devoted so much energy and resources, being demolished to build a new one;

– when in 1950 he fell from a ladder and the symptoms of a tumour appeared, which he himself had clearly diagnosed, and which would lead to his death, which then occurred on 15 March 1951. He nevertheless continued to attend to the mission to which he had consecrated himself, accepting the sufferings of this last stretch of his life.

The Easter exodus: from Bahía Blanca to Viedma

In all probability, Artemides arrived in Bahía Blanca from Bernal in the second half of February 1902. The family received him with the sorrow and affection one can imagine. Above all, his mother devoted herself to him with much love so that he would recover his strength and health, given the extreme weakness he was in, and she wanted to cure him herself. The one who opposed this solution was Artemides himself. Now feeling closely attached to the Salesians, he wanted to obey what Bernal's superiors had decided and go to Junín de los Andes to take care of his health. The overriding thought for him, and one he could no longer put off, was the desire to follow the vocation for which he had set out, to become a Salesian priest, and despite the darkness about his future, he would face every difficulty and sacrifice for it: he intended to renounce even his mother's and family's care, fearing that they might stop him in his resolve. He had encountered Jesus, heard his call, and wanted to follow him, even though it might not be in the ways he thought and desired.

His parents, in order to solve their son's problem, turned to the family

counsellor Father Carlo Cavalli, who absolutely and providentially advised against sending Artemides to Junín, a place too far away for his weak strength. Instead, since it was precisely at that time that Father Evasio Garrone's reputation as a doctor had established itself in Viedma, Father Cavalli very wisely thought it best to entrust him to him. The distance of only 500 km, with the means of transport of the time, made this solution worthwhile. The family agreed, the good parish priest paid for the journey on Mr Mora's Galera and Artemides, convinced by his spiritual director, set off for Viedma.

The Galera, a kind of horse-drawn coach, was the only public transport at the time able to travel from Bahía Blanca to Viedma, crossing the Colorado River. There was also the mishap when the Galera lost its way, so the travellers had to sleep outside and arrived on Tuesday and not Monday as planned. The journey must have been very painful, although Artemides "covers everything with the optimism of a saint with hunger and thirst for immolation. But what the poor man suffered only God knows."

Here is the text of the letter written by Artemides to his family immediately after his arrival in Viedma.

Dear parents and brothers and sisters
Viedma, 5.3.902

I arrived in Viedma yesterday morning, after a happy journey on the "Galera", and today I am taking the opportunity to write to you to tell you that I went well, as I said, because the "Galera" was not so full of people and merchandise. I will only tell you that we were supposed to arrive on Monday at Patagones, ***but because we had lost our way, we slept in the field under open sky*** *and arrived on Tuesday morning, where,* ***with great joy, I found my Salesian confreres.*** *As for my health, I was examined by doctor* ***R. D. Garrone*** *examined me and promised me that in a month I would be perfectly healthy.* ***With the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our good Mother, and D. Bosco,*** *I always hope for the best. Pray for me and I will pray for you and I sign myself yours*

ARTEMIDE ZATTI
Goodbye to all

This letter is a masterpiece of hope, a condensation of evangelical optimism: it is a parable of life where, despite the spectre of death hovering and the road

being lost, there is a horizon that opens up to infinity. In that night, spent in the fields of Patagonia contemplating the stars, the young Artemides emerges from his turmoil, from his discouragement. Freed from looking only downwards, he can lift his eyes and look up to the sky to count the stars; freed from the sadness and fear of having no future, freed from the fear of being alone, from the fear of death, he has the experience that God's goodness is as immense as a starry sky and that graces can be infinite, like the stars. So in the morning he arrives at Viedma as if in the promised land, where "with great joy" he is welcomed by those he already thinks of as his confreres, where he hears words and promises that speak of healing, where with full trust in "the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary our Good Mother and Don Bosco", he arrives at the city where he would lavish his charity for the rest of his life. Having passed through the fords in the flooded Rio Colorado, he was also reborn with hope for his health and his future.

Kinsman of all the poor

Artemides Zatti dedicated his life to God in the service of the sick and the poor, who became his treasures. In charge of the San José Hospital in Viedma, he widened the circle of those he cared for by reaching all the sick of the city, especially the poorest he and his bike! He managed a lot of money, but his life was very poor: for the trip to Italy on the occasion of Don Bosco's canonisation, he had to borrow his suit, hat and suitcase. He was loved and greatly respected by the sick; loved and greatly respected by the doctors who gave him the utmost trust, and surrendered to the ascendancy that flowed from his holiness. The secret of so much ascendancy? For him, **every sick person was Jesus himself. Literally!** For his part, there was no doubt about it: he treated everyone with the same tenderness with which he would have treated Jesus himself, offering his own room in cases of emergency, or even placing a corpse there in times of need. He tirelessly continued his mission among the sick serenly until the end of his life, never taking a rest.

With his upright attitude he restores to us a Salesian **vision of "knowing how to remain" in our mission land** to enlighten those in danger of losing hope, to strengthen the faith of those who feel they are failing, to be a sign of God's love when it "seems" that He is absent from everyday life.

All this led him to recognise the uniqueness of every sick person, with their dignity and frailty, knowing that the sick person is always more important than the disease, and this is why he took care to listen to the patients, to their story, their anxieties, their fears. He knew that even when it is not possible to heal, it is always possible to cure, it is always possible to console, it is always possible to make one feel a closeness that shows interest in the person before their illness. He stopped

by, listened, established a direct and personal relationship with the sick person, felt empathy and emotion for them, allowed himself o be involved in their suffering. **Artemides experienced closeness to people as an expression of the love of Jesus Christ, the Good Samaritan** whose compassion brought him close to every human being wounded by sin. He felt called to be merciful like the Father and to love, in particular, his sick, weak and suffering brothers and sisters. Zatti established a pact between himself and those in need of care, a pact based on mutual trust and respect, sincerity, availability, so as to overcome all defensive barriers, putting the dignity of the sick person at the centre. Zatti found the inexhaustible source for this relationship with the sick person in the charity of Christ.

And he lived this closeness, as well as personally **in community**: in fact he generated a community capable of caring, which does not abandon anyone, which includes and welcomes especially the most fragile. Artemides' witness to being a Good Samaritan, to being merciful like the Father, was a mission and a style that involved all those who in some way dedicated themselves to the hospital: doctors, nurses, caregivers, religious, volunteers who gave precious time to those who were suffering. At Zatti's school, their service alongside the sick, carried out with love and competence, became a mission. Zatti knew and inculcated the awareness that the hands of all those who were with him touched the suffering flesh of Christ and should be a sign of the merciful hands of the Father.

Salesian brother

The attractive figure of Artemides Zatti is an invitation to propose to young people the fascination of consecrated life, the radical nature of following the obedient, poor and chaste Christ, the primacy of God and the Spirit, fraternal life in community, spending oneself totally for the mission. The vocation of the Salesian brother is part of the character that Don Bosco wanted to give to the Salesian Congregation. It blossoms more easily where apostolic lay vocations are promoted among the young and a joyful and enthusiastic witness of religious consecration is offered to them, like that of Artemides Zatti.

Artemides Zatti – the saint!

Following in the footsteps of St Francis de Sales, who promoted the vocation to holiness for all, the testimony of Artemides Zatti reminds us, as the Second Vatican Council states, that: "all the faithful of every state and condition are called by the Lord, **each in his own way**, to a holiness whose perfection is that of the heavenly Father himself." St Francis de Sales, Don Bosco and Artemides make daily

life an expression of God's love, received and reciprocated. Artemides Zatti's testimony enlightens us, attracts us and also challenges us, because it is the **"Word of God" incarnated in history** and close to us.

Through the parable of Artemides Zatti's life, his experience of God's unconditional and gratuitous love stands out above all. First and foremost, it was not the works he performed, but the amazement of discovering himself loved and the faith in this providential love in every season of life. From this lived certainty flowed the totality of self-giving to his neighbour for the love of God. The love he received from the Lord was the power that transformed his life, expanded his heart and predisposed him to love. With the same Spirit, the Spirit of holiness, love that heals and transforms us, Artemides:

– from an early age made choices and performed acts of love in every situation and with every brother and sister he met, because he felt loved and had the strength to love;

– while still a teenager in Italy, experienced the hardships of poverty and work, but laid the foundations of a solid Christian life, giving the first proofs of his generous charity;

– emigrating with his family to Argentina, knew how to preserve and increase his faith, resisting an often immoral and anti-Christian environment and maturing, thanks to the encounter with the Salesians and the spiritual accompaniment of Father Carlo Cavalli, in his aspiration to Salesian life, accepting the need to go back to the desks in school with twelve year old boys, despite his twenty years of age;

– readily offered to assist a priest sick with tuberculosis and contracted the disease, without uttering a word of complaint or recrimination, but experiencing the illness as a time of trial and purification, bearing its consequences with fortitude and serenity;

– cured in an extraordinary way, through the intercession of Mary Help of Christians, after making the promise to dedicate his life to the sick and the poor, he lived his apostolic consecration as a Salesian brother in a radically gospel way and with Salesian joy;

– lived the ordinary rhythm of his days in an extraordinary way: faithful and edifying practice of religious life in joyful fraternity; sacrificial service at all hours and with all the humblest of services to the sick and the poor; continuous struggle against poverty, in the search for resources and benefactors to meet debts, trusting exclusively in Providence; ready availability for all human misfortunes that asked for his intervention; resistance to every difficulty and acceptance of every adverse case; self-mastery and joyful and optimistic serenity that communicated itself to all

those who approached him.

Seventy-one years of this life before God and before people: a life delivered with joy and fidelity to the end, embodied in daily life, in hospital wards, on his bicycle through the streets of Viedma, in the travails of daily life to meet demands and needs of all kinds, doing everyday things in a spirit of service, with love and without show, without claiming anything, with the joy of self-giving, enthusiastically embracing his vocation as a Salesian brother and becoming a shining reflection of the Lord.

Film seen before the conference

Video of the conference: The great gift of holiness of Artemide Zatti
Lecture given by Fr Pierluigi CAMERONI, Postulator General of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco in Turin-Valdocco, on 14.11.2023.