

□ Reading time: 6 min.

The figure of the Servant of God Carlo Cresspi (1891–1982) stands as one of the most significant missionary experiences in the Salesian tradition of the twentieth century. A priest, educator, and man of vast scientific and artistic culture, he knew how to direct his talents towards serving the young and the poor. Arriving in Ecuador in 1923, he spent almost his entire life in Cuenca, where he promoted educational, social, and pastoral works that profoundly marked the life of the city. Alongside his cultural activities and educational commitment, the focus of his apostolate always remained on the most needy: children, street kids, and poor families. For this reason, the people remembered him above all as “Father Cresspi”, a priest close to the people and driven by a great faith in Providence.

Carlo Cresspi was born in Legnano (Milan) on 29 May 1891 to Daniele and Luisa Croci. He was the third of thirteen children. Like John Bosco from an early age he was filled by the Lord with great gifts: intelligence, generosity and will. After attending a local school, at the age of twelve he met the Salesians at the Saint Ambrose College in Milan, where he completed his high school studies. “When I was studying at the college,” he recounted, “the Virgin showed me a revelatory dream: I saw myself dressed as a priest with a long beard above an old pulpit, preaching in front of many people. The pulpit, however, did not look like a church, but like a hut...”

In 1903, he went to complete his studies at the Salesian high school in Valsalice (Turin) and felt called to Salesian life. He did his novitiate at Foglizzo. On 8 September 1907 he made his first religious profession and in 1910 his perpetual profession. He began to study philosophy and theology in Valsalice; at the same time he taught natural sciences, mathematics and music. In 1917 he was ordained a priest. At the University of Padua he discovered the existence of a hitherto unknown microorganism, which aroused the interest of scientists. In 1921 he received a doctorate in natural sciences, which was followed by a diploma in music. In 1923, following the path shown to him by the Virgin, he set off on a mission to Ecuador.

He disembarked in Guayaquil and went to Quito; soon afterwards he moved to

Cuenca where he would remain for the rest of his life. He began his enormous work for the poor: he had electric light installed in Macas, in the middle of the Amazon rainforest, and opened an agricultural school in Cuenca, bringing in machinery and specialised personnel from Italy. In a short time, as if by magic, he implemented what was known as the *revolución blanca*: the *Normal Orientalista*, the *Cornelio Merchán Institute*, the Technical College, the *Quinta Agronomica*, the Salesian Theatre, the *Gran Casa* of the community. Father Crespi did it all: he was a man who never rested! While directing and financing the works by day, by night he continued the work left unfinished. Day and night people without resources flocked to him in endless queues: and he put his hand in the large pocket of his black cassock and the money came out as if by magic. Generations of people followed in time, benefiting from the generous and tender heart of this priest who sowed the seeds of schools, sports grounds, refectories for poor children.

He spread devotion to Mary Help of Christians with all his might, spending part of his time at the shrine of the same name. His confessional, especially in the last years of his life, was crowded and people spontaneously began to call him "Saint Charles Crespi". He was always among the poor: on Sunday afternoons he taught catechism to street children, giving them, besides entertainment, their daily bread. He organised cutting and sewing workshops for the poor girls of the city. He received numerous honours, including the Gold Medal of Merit from the President of the Republic of Ecuador; an Honorary Canonate of the Cathedral in Cuenca; the Gold Medal of Educational Merit from the Minister of Education; the Commendation of the Italian Republic; he was declared Cuenca's most illustrious inhabitant in the 20th century; he was awarded a *Doctor Honoris Causa* post mortem from the Salesian Polytechnic University. He died in Cuenca on 30 April 1982. All Ecuador mourned the death of a saintly son of Don Bosco.

1. Father Crespi's secret

Underlying his immense work and manifold activities was the desire to imitate Christ in his preferential love for the poor, in his approach to the little ones, in his concern for sinners, forgetting himself and with great humility, reflected in the simplicity of his gestures. As the years went by, his scientific and academic interests waned, and his dedication to poor and abandoned children became more and more predominant. His humility can also be seen in the threadbare cassock he wore, in worn out shoes and frugal meal, in the sober little room furnished with only

a wooden bed. The many recognitions he received for his work in the scientific, artistic and cultural fields were aimed at his poor: "Your Excellency," he replied when he was awarded the title of honorary canon, "Father Crespi does not seek medals, but bread, rice and sugar for his poor children." He was a man of high culture in the scientific field as a historian and archaeologist, in the cultural field as a musician and pianist. He distinguished himself as a confessor for his modest approach, but one full of humanity, goodness and tenderness: the true face of God's merciful love. He even heard confessions for 16 hours a day without eating anything. He left as a testament that he loved Mary Help of Christians and poor children very much.

He is remembered for his daily frantic movements between the confessional and the altar, between the sanctuary and the school, with a child's smile on his lips, his lively eyes dancing merrily, the fingers of his right hand fingering an old rosary. A life of praise to God and loving surrender to his neighbour, a contemplative in action, a monk of God in the midst of a people of sinners. At the age of ninety he was a man and a child; a man of typically evangelical contrasts: he revealed Providence through his smallness, Wisdom in naivety, Goodness in firmness, Mercy in the ability to create from nothing a wonderful world of values. He was able to convert his gifts and skills as a professional musician, raised in the European classical tradition, into the simplicity and culture of the indigenous people. He went on from tuning into the deeply sentimental music of the people and the motifs dear to the simple people, to listening for hours on end to the miseries of the people, the disagreements of life, sin and habitual passion. He switched from music to the confessional, the musical scale to the range of human miseries. Another conversion is worth remembering: from a youthful vocation and early missionary experience for the natural sciences, to a passion of service and dedication to the needy.

2. Cunecano by choice

He loved the people of Cuenca and was loved and revered by them as a saint: he loved the important people for their culture, the children for their innocence and goodness, the poor for being the friends of Christ. For the children he organised the festive oratory, for the boys a school with around 1,500 pupils, he founded the theatre and a museum of great prestige and scientific and cultural value. Over time, the city of Cuenca and Father Crespi became an inseparable pair; he arrived in this Ecuadorian city on 24 April 1923 and remained there until his death: some 60

years!

Because of the many years he lived in Cuenca, he received many awards. Father Crespi's "miracle" was the result of his boundless trust in Providence, even in the hour of trial, when, in 1962, flames quickly devoured the great institute he had built with so many sacrifices. He came to the end of his long and laborious life, loved and venerated like a biblical patriarch. Many believed that he was of noble origins, the son of counts, but with a look of faith and holy cunning he said, "We are all children of God, this is the best title!"

He remained with the little ones until the end of his life, favouring the work and spirit of the Salesian oratory, which he considered Don Bosco's work of genius, the most beautiful, the most satisfying of his works. The oratory animated by games, biblical, comic, adventurous films, formed through catechism classes, remembered and loved for its joyful and fraternal celebrations. And Father Crespi in the midst of his boys with his legendary bell, giving orders, shouting, always with a fatherly and understanding gaze. The city of Cuenca venerates and admires him as a relic of holiness and wisdom. For the people of this Ecuadorian city he was a guide, father, counsellor, confessor, illustrious son, whose Cause of Beatification and Canonisation was launched in 2006.⁴⁰¹