 Reading time: 6 min.

Simon Srugi was born on 15 April 1877 and grew up in a Greek-Melkite family at Nazareth (Palestine). After 4 years of apprenticeship in Bethlehem, he professed as a Brother and spent his whole Salesian life at Betgamāl-Caphargamala (1894–1943) in the Shephèla region. This agricultural school and orphanage for Arab and Armenian boys was wide open to the service of the local people with an elementary school, a grain mill, an olive press and a village clinic.

1) **In the life of the educative community**, Srugi was in charge of the infirmary, catechist of the little ones, president of the sodalities of the Blessed Sacrament and of Saint Joseph, formator of altar servers and liturgical master of ceremonies. He was exemplary for chastity, poverty, obedience, kindness towards his confreres and lay co-workers. Dominating his lively temperament, he did not allow himself to be overwhelmed by haste or agitation, so young and old alike sought his amiable company. They admired his humility and the ability to forgive everyone and always, taking it for granted that "*Truly humble people never believe they have been wronged*" In the shrine at Betgamāl, every day Simon saw depictions of the crucified Jesus praying "*Pater dimitte illis*", and of St Stephen who forgave those who stoned him. Encouraged by their example he reached a heroic state of virtue, forgiving those who accused him of causing the death of a woman suffering from gangrene, treating the group of young thugs who attacked him in the clinic, and even treating one of the assumed murderers of his Rector, Fr Mario Rosin.

2) **Srugi carried out his work especially in the latter environment as a nurse**, assisted by Sister Tersilla Ferrero FMA. Every day they treated dozens of poor people, malnourished, suffering from various diseases (malaria, dysentery, lung, eyes, teeth infections…). The Clinic Registers from 1932-1942 contain tens of thousands of patient data from 70 villages in the district. Simon was animated by great charity, and he took care of these rough, filthy brothers and sisters with delicate compassion, seeing in their wounds those of Jesus. People preferred to turn to him rather than to doctors, because they were convinced that he healed with the power of God.

3) **The source of this heroic lifewas his habitual union with God**, which was not confined to the celebration of the Mass or to the long hours of adoration in front of the Blessed Sacrament, but overflowed into his entire daily life, in a constant liturgical attitude: "*God dwells in my soul no less blazing with light and glory than in*

the glory of heaven. I am always in God's presence. I am part of his guard of honour. I will seek to be pure in mind and heart … How careful I must be never to stain my soul or my body, the august temple of the Most Holy Trinity!" – Witnesses testify that Simon walked on earth but his heart was in heaven. He worked and laboured but always sustained by the hope of reward and eternal rest. "He lived by faith, based on great love of God, on total abandonment in his Providence. His outward appearance, always calm, smiling and serene, exuded an air of paradise that enchanted. The common opinion was that he lived more for heaven than for earth. Amid so much activity and different kinds of work, Bro. Srugi habitually dwelt in a higher world; in his intimate conversations with God, Our Lady and the saints, he already had a foretaste of something of the heavenly homeland, for which he must have yearned with all the urging of his soul" (Fr De Rossi). – "The virtue of hope is the virtue that I most admired in the Servant of God. I have never known anyone who had such familiarity with Heaven than he did. It was the thought of Paradise that accompanied and guided him in all of life's circumstances, be they prosperous or adverse. And this thought, which was almost something natural for him, he nurtured tactfully in all those who approached him, be they confreres, young people, the sick, workers, and also Muslims. How often did I hear him say and sing out: "*Paradise, paradise!*". At times he seemed beside himself with joy. As we were used to seeing him recollected and humble, it was strange when he took up these topics, so easily and informally, happily, jumping for joy. Srugi saw paradise and tasted its delights beforehand". (Fr Dal Maso)

4) **On his personal notebooks he wrote about the radical nature of his religious consecration**: "*I have given myself, I have consecrated myself, I have sold myself entirely to my God. So I must be neither of myself, nor of the world, nor of young people; my thoughts, my affections, my desires must be for him … By becoming a religious I gave myself entirely to my God, body and soul, and He gladly accepted me as His. … I have consecrated myself to the service of God with love, and I want to keep my holy vows for his sake and to please him … Being religious is nothing other than being bound to God by means of a continuous mortification of ourselves, and living only for God*". One rhyming verse sums it up clearly: *"To pray, to suffer, to live by love divine: this destiny, O religious, is ultimately thine.*"
He insisted that everything must be underpinned by the "right intention", meaning the intention to serve and please God alone, to do everything for his glory, out of love for him. "*God, in his immense goodness, deserves that everything should be done in his honour, even if there were neither heaven nor hell … In every place and in all my actions I will always look at my God as He looks at me and I will do*

everything to please him". In this Simon wanted to imitate Jesus ("*I always do what is pleasing to Him*": Jn 8:29), and to follow Francis de Sales' teaching on God's "good pleasure".
In addition to *The Imitation of Christ*, the book by St Alphonsus Liguori *The Practice of Loving Jesus Christ* was one that Simon read most. Love means imitation which leads to identification: the crucified Jesus is the most perfect model whom the religious is called to copy, in order to become one with him, "until you can say with the Apostle: "*it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me*" (Gal 2:20)."
This is the deepest meaning of Bro. Srugi's habitual greeting "*Live Jesus!*" addressed to both Christian and Muslim, which for him embraced everything: "*May Jesus live in our hearts, our minds, our works, in our life and in our death.*"
This habitual attitude gave rise to the unalterable peace and tranquillity that Srugi radiated: "*Absolute abandonment to the divine will is the secret of the joy of the saints … Where there is perfect uniformity to God's will, neither sadness nor melancholy can ever reign … The happiness of pleasing God by doing all things well is a sample of paradise.*"

5) **Witness of the early Salesian tradition and role-model for us today**.
Simon's theology of religious perfection is what is contained in Don Bosco's writings, brought up to date by his successors (Rua, Albera, Ricaldone – whom he met personally – and Rinaldi); their letters and "strennas" were regularly read and commented on in the community at Betgamāl. Therefore it belonged to the "common manner of feeling and acting" in vogue among the Salesians of that era, expressed in terms of a "family lexicon".
Srugi benefited especially from the ministry of Fr Eugenio Bianchi (1853-1931) who was at Betgamāl from 1913-1931, continuing to transmit the original Salesian charism which he had first received from Don Bosco himself and then, from 1886 to 1911, that he had "grafted" onto the lives of more than one thousand novices, among them many pioneers of the Salesian missions in Asia, and future saints already canonised or on the way: Andrew Beltrami, Louis Versiglia, Louis Variara, Vincent Cimatti, Augustus Hlond… Brother Srugi did not restrict himself to copying a model or generically following in the footsteps of others: instead, he drew up a personalised program for his progress, to which he remained faithful not just intermittently but constantly, not just in some areas but in all, not thinking just of himself but also of the confreres and boys with whom he lived, not within the closet of an exclusively Christian setting but in a context marked by a Muslim presence, not in times of peace but during a period marked by wars and tragic events. For these reasons he embodied a kind of Salesian holiness that was unprecedented at

the time.

6) **On November 27, 1943**, worn out by fatigue and illness, his earthly life, which he had given in the joyful and self-sacrificing service of God and others, ended. Srugi's reputation for holiness increased with the passing of the years; news of graces obtained through his intercession were arriving. In the climate of the Second Vatican Council the ecumenical and lay dimensions of his witness were heightened. The Diocesan and Apostolic Processes were celebrated (1964-66, 1981-83), and after the Congregation for the Causes of Saints had expressed its positive opinion, on 2 April 1993 Pope John-Paul II authorised the decree on the heroicity of Simon's virtues, thus conferring on him the title of Venerable, and proposing him to the universal Church as an imitable model and an effective intercessor.

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