

# Monsignor Giuseppe Malandrino and the Servant of God Nino Baglieri

*Monsignor Giuseppe Malandrino, the ninth Bishop of the Noto diocese, returned to the House of the Father on 3 August 2025, the day on which the feast of the Patron Saint of the Diocese of Noto, Mary Ladder of Paradise, is celebrated. 94 years of age, 70 years of priesthood and 45 years of episcopal consecration are respectable numbers for a man who served the Church as a Shepherd with “the smell of the sheep” as Pope Francis often emphasised.*

## **Lightning rod of humanity**

During his experience as pastor of the Diocese of Noto (1906.1998 – 1507.2007), he had the opportunity to cultivate his friendship with the Servant of God Nino Baglieri. He almost never missed a “stop” at Nino’s house when pastoral reasons took him to Modica. In one of his testimonies, Monsignor Malandrino says: “...finding myself at Nino’s bedside, I had the vivid perception that this beloved sick brother of ours was truly a “lightning rod of humanity”, according to a concept of sufferers so dear to me and which I also wanted to propose in the Pastoral Letter on the permanent mission *You will be my witnesses*” (2003). Monsignor Malandrino writes: “It is necessary to recognise in the sick and suffering, the face of the suffering Christ and to assist them with the same care and with the same love of Jesus in His passion, lived in a spirit of obedience to the Father and in solidarity with his brothers”. This was fully embodied by Nino’s dearest mother, Mrs. Peppina. She, a typical Sicilian woman, with a strong character and great determination. She replies to the doctor who proposes euthanasia for her son (given his serious health conditions and the prospect of a life as a paralytic), “if the Lord wants him, he will take him, but if he leaves him to me

like this, I am happy to look after him for life.” Was Nino’s mother aware of what she was going to face at that moment? Was Mary, the mother of Jesus, aware of how much pain she would have to suffer for the Son of God? The answer, when read with human eyes, does not seem easy, especially in our 21<sup>st</sup> century society where everything is unstable, fluctuating, consumed in an “instant”. Mamma Peppina’s Fiat became, like Mary’s, a Yes of Faith and adherence to that will of God which finds fulfilment in knowing how to carry the Cross, in knowing how to give “soul and body” to the realisation of God’s Plan.

### **From suffering to joy**

The friendship between Nino and Monsignor Malandrino was already underway when the latter was still bishop of Acireale. In fact, as early as 1993, through Father Attilio Balbinot, a Camillian very close to Nino, he presented him with his first book, “From suffering to joy”. In Nino’s experience, the relationship with the Bishop of his diocese was one of total filiation. From the moment he accepted God’s Plan for him, he made his “active” presence felt by offering his sufferings for the Church, the Pope, and the Bishops (as well as priests and missionaries). This relationship of filiation was renewed annually on 6 May, the day of his fall, later seen as the mysterious beginning of a rebirth. On 8 May 2004, a few days after Nino celebrated the 36<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cross, Monsignor Malandrino went to his house. In memory of that meeting, he writes in his memoirs, “it is always a great joy every time I see him and I receive so much energy and strength to carry my Cross and offer it with so much Love for the needs of the Holy Church and in particular for my Bishop and for our Diocese. May the Lord always give him more holiness to guide us for many years always with more ardour and love...”. Again: “... the Cross is heavy but the Lord gives me so many Graces that make suffering less bitter and it becomes light and sweet; the Cross becomes a Gift, offered to the Lord with so much Love for the salvation of souls and the Conversion of

Sinners...". Finally, it should be emphasised how, on these occasions of grace, the pressing and constant request for "help to become a Saint with the daily Cross" was never lacking. Nino, in fact, absolutely wanted to become a saint.

### **An anticipated beatification**

Moments of great significance in this sense were the funeral of the Servant of God on 3 March 2007, when Monsignor Malandrino himself, at the beginning of the Eucharistic Celebration, devoutly bent down, albeit with difficulty, to kiss the coffin containing Nino's mortal remains. It was an homage to a man who had lived 39 years of his existence in a body that "did not feel" but which radiated joy of life in every way. Monsignor Malandrino emphasised that the celebration of the Mass, in the Salesian courtyard which had become an open-air "cathedral" for the occasion, had been an authentic apotheosis (thousands of people participated in tears) and it was clearly and communally perceived that they were not in front of a funeral, but a true "beatification". Nino, with his testimony of life, had in fact become a point of reference for many, young and old, lay people and consecrated persons, mothers and fathers of families, who, thanks to his precious testimony, were able to read their own existence and find answers that they could not find elsewhere. Monsignor Malandrino also repeatedly emphasised this aspect: "in fact, every encounter with the dearest Nino was for me, as for everyone, a strong and vivid experience of edification and a powerful – in its sweetness – spur to patient and generous giving. The presence of the Bishop gave him immense joy every time because, in addition to the affection of the friend who came to visit him, he perceived the ecclesial communion. It is obvious that what I received from him was always much more than the little I could give him." Nino's fixed "obsession" was to "become a saint"; having fully lived and embodied the Gospel of Joy in Suffering, with his physical ailments and his total gift for the beloved Church, ensured that everything did not end with his departure to the Heavenly Jerusalem, but

continued, as Monsignor Malandrino emphasised at the funeral. “... Nino’s mission now also continues through his writings as he himself had announced it in his spiritual Testament.” “... my writings will continue my testimony. I will continue to give Joy to everyone and to speak of the Great Love of God and the Wonders he has done in my life.” This is still coming true because “a city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Matthew 5:14-16). Metaphorically, it is intended to emphasise that “light” (understood in a broad sense) must be visible, sooner or later; what is important will come to light and will be recognised.

To revisit these days – marked by the death of Monsignor Malandrino, by his funerals in Acireale (5 August, Our Lady of the Snow) and in Noto (7 August) with subsequent burial in the cathedral which he himself strongly wanted to be renovated after the collapse of 13 March 1996 and which was reopened in March 2007 (the month in which Nino Baglieri died) – means retracing this bond between two great figures of the Netine Church, strongly intertwined and both capable of leaving an indelible mark on it.

*Roberto Chiaramonte*

---

## **With Nino Baglieri, Pilgrim of Hope, on the Journey of the Jubilee**

*The path of the 2025 Jubilee, dedicated to Hope, finds a shining witness in the story of the Servant of God Nino*

*Baglieri. From the dramatic fall that left him tetraplegic at seventeen to his inner rebirth in 1978, Baglieri moved from the shadow of despair to the light of active faith, transforming his bed of suffering into a throne of joy. His story intertwines the five Jubilee signs – pilgrimage, door, profession of faith, charity, and reconciliation – showing that Christian hope is not escapism but a strength that opens the future and supports every journey.*

## **1. Hoping as Waiting**

Hope, according to the online Treccani dictionary, is a feeling of “trustful expectation in the present or future fulfillment of what is desired.” The etymology of the noun “hope” comes from the Latin *spes*, which in turn derives from the Sanskrit root *spa-* meaning to stretch toward a goal. In Spanish, “to hope” and “to wait” are both translated with the verb *esperar*, which combines both meanings in one word: as if one could only wait for what one hopes for. This state of mind allows us to face life and its challenges with courage and a heart always burning with light. Hope is expressed – positively or negatively – in some popular proverbs: “Hope is the last to die,” “While there is life, there is hope,” “He who lives by hope dies in despair.”

Almost gathering this “shared feeling” about hope, but aware of the need to help rediscover hope in its fullest and truest dimension, Pope Francis dedicated the Ordinary Jubilee of 2025 to Hope (*Spes non confundit* [Hope does not disappoint] is the bull of convocation) and already in 2014 said: “The resurrection of Jesus is not the happy ending of a beautiful fairy tale; it is not the happy end of a movie; it is the intervention of God the Father where human hope breaks down. At the moment when everything seems lost, in the moment of pain, when many people feel the need to get down from the cross, that is the moment closest to the resurrection. The night becomes darkest just before the morning begins, before the light begins. In the darkest moment God intervenes and raises up” (cf. Audience of 16 April 2014).

In this context, the story of the **Servant of God Nino Baglieri** (Modica, May 1, 1951 – March 2, 2007) fits perfectly. As a seventeen-year-old bricklayer, he fell from a seventeen-meter-high scaffold due to the sudden collapse of a plank, crashing to the ground and becoming tetraplegic: from that fall on May 6, 1968, he could only move his head and neck, depending on others for life in everything, even the simplest and humblest things. Nino could not even shake a friend's hand or caress his mother... and saw his dreams vanish. What hope for life did this young man have now? What feelings could he face? What future awaited him? Nino's first response was despair, total darkness before a search for meaning that found no answer. First a long wandering through hospitals in different Italian regions, then the pity of friends and acquaintances led Nino to rebel and lock himself away in ten long years of loneliness and anger, while the tunnel of life grew ever deeper.

In Greek mythology, Zeus entrusts Pandora with a jar containing all the evils of the world; when opened, men lose immortality and begin a life of suffering. To save them, Pandora reopens the jar and releases *elpis*, hope, which remained at the bottom. It was the only antidote to life's troubles. Looking instead to the Giver of all good, we know that "hope does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5). Pope Francis writes in *Spes non confundit*: "In the sign of this hope, the apostle Paul encourages the Christian community in Rome [...] Everyone hopes. In the heart of every person is enclosed hope as desire and expectation of good, even without knowing what tomorrow will bring. The unpredictability of the future, however, gives rise to sometimes opposing feelings: from trust to fear, from serenity to discouragement, from certainty to doubt. We often meet discouraged people who look to the future with skepticism and pessimism, as if nothing could offer them happiness. May the Jubilee be an opportunity for all to revive hope" (ibid., 1).

## **2. From Witness of "Despair" to "Ambassador" of Hope**

Let us return to the story of our Servant of God, Nino Baglieri.

Ten long years had to pass before Nino emerged from the tunnel of despair, the thick darkness cleared, and Light entered. It was the afternoon of March 24, Good Friday 1978, when Father Aldo Modica, with a group of young people, went to Nino's home, urged by his mother Peppina and some people involved in the Renewal in the Spirit movement, then in its early days in the nearby Salesian parish. Nino writes, "While they invoked the Holy Spirit, I felt a very strange sensation, a great warmth invaded my body, a strong tingling in all my limbs, as if a new strength entered me and something old left. At that moment I said my 'yes' to the Lord, accepted my cross, and was reborn to a new life, becoming a new man. Ten years of despair erased in a few moments, because an unknown joy entered my heart. I desired the healing of my body, but the Lord granted me an even greater grace: spiritual healing."

A new path began for Nino: from "witness of despair" he became a "pilgrim of hope." No longer isolated in his little room but an "ambassador" of this hope, he shared his experience through a broadcast on a local radio station and – an even greater grace – God gave him the joy of being able to write with his mouth. Nino confides: "In March 1979 the Lord performed a great miracle for me: I learned to write with my mouth. I started like this; I was with my friends doing homework, I asked for a pencil and a notebook, I began making marks and drawing something, but then I discovered I could write, and so I began to write." He then began to write his memoirs and correspond with people of all kinds around the world, thousands of letters still preserved today. The regained hope made him creative; now Nino rediscovered the joy of relationships and wanted to become – as much as he could – independent. With a stick he used with his mouth and an elastic band attached to the phone, he dialed numbers to communicate with many sick people, offering them words of comfort. He discovered a new way to face his suffering, which

brought him out of isolation and set him on the path to becoming a witness to the Gospel of joy and hope. "Now there is so much joy in my heart, there is no more pain in me, in my heart there is Your love. Thank you, my Lord Jesus, from my bed of pain I want to praise you and with all my heart thank you because you called me to know life, to know true life."

Nino changed perspective, made a 360° turn – the Lord gave him **conversion** – and placed his trust in that merciful God who, through "misfortune," called him to work in His vineyard, to be a sign and instrument of salvation and hope. Thus, many who came to console him left comforted, with tears in their eyes. They did not find on that little bed a sad and gloomy man, but a smiling face that radiated – despite many sufferings, including bedsores and respiratory problems – the joy of living; the smile was constant on his face, and Nino felt "useful from the bed of the cross." Nino Baglieri is the opposite of many people today, constantly searching for the meaning of life, aiming for easy success and the happiness of fleeting and worthless things, living online, consuming life with a click, wanting everything immediately but with sad, dull eyes. Nino apparently had nothing, yet he had peace and joy in his heart. He did not live isolated but supported by God's love expressed through the embrace and presence of his entire family and more and more people who knew him and connected with him.

### **3. Rekindling Hope**

Building hope means that every time I am not satisfied with my life and I commit to changing it. Every time I do not let negative experiences harden me or make me distrustful. Every time I fall and try to get up, not allowing fears to have the last word. Every time, in a world marked by conflicts, I choose trust and always try again, with everyone. Every time I do not flee from God's dream that tells me, "I want you to be happy," "I want you to have a full life... full even of holiness." The pinnacle of the virtue of hope is



indeed a gaze toward Heaven to live well on earth or, as Don Bosco would say, **walking with feet on the ground and heart in Heaven.**

In this furrow of hope, the Jubilee finds fulfillment, which, with its signs, asks us to set out, to cross some frontiers.

*First sign, the pilgrimage:* when moving from one place to another, one is open to the new, to change. Jesus' whole life was "a setting out," a journey of evangelization fulfilled in the gift of life and beyond, with the Resurrection and Ascension.

*Second sign, the door:* in John 10:9 Jesus says, "I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved; he will come in and go out and find pasture." Passing through the door means being welcomed, being community. The Gospel also speaks of the "narrow door": the Jubilee becomes a path of conversion.

*Third sign, the profession of faith:* expressing belonging to Christ and the Church and declaring it publicly.

*Fourth sign, charity:* charity is the password to heaven; in 1 Peter 4:8 the apostle Peter admonishes, "Keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."

*Fifth sign, therefore, reconciliation and Jubilee indulgence:* it is a "favorable time" (cf. 2 Cor 6:2) to experience God's great mercy and walk paths of rapprochement and forgiveness toward others; to live the prayer of the Our Father where we ask, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It is becoming new creatures.

Even in Nino's life, there are episodes that connect him – along the "thread" of hope – to these Jubilee dimensions. For example, his repentance for some childhood mischiefs, like when three of them (he recounts), "stole the offerings from the sacristy during Masses, we used them to play foosball. When you meet bad companions, they lead you astray. Then one took the Oratory keys and hid them in my

schoolbag in the study; they found the keys, called the parents, gave us two slaps, and kicked us out of school. Shame!" But above all, in Nino's life there is charity, helping the poor person in physical and moral trial, reaching out to those with psychological struggles, and writing to brothers in prison to testify to them God's goodness and love. Nino, who before the fall had been a bricklayer, writes, "[I] liked to build with my hands something that would last over time: even now I feel like a bricklayer working in God's Kingdom, to leave something that lasts, to see the Wonderful Works of God that He accomplishes in our Life." He confides, "My body seems dead, but my heart keeps beating in my chest. My legs do not move, yet I walk the paths of the world."

#### **4. Pilgrim Toward Heaven**

Nino, a consecrated Salesian cooperator of the great Salesian Family, ended his earthly "pilgrimage" on Friday, March 2, 2007, at 8:00 a.m., at only 55 years old, having spent 39 years tetraplegic between bed and wheelchair, after asking forgiveness from his family for the hardships his condition caused. He left this world dressed in tracksuit and sneakers, as he expressly requested, to run in the green flowering meadows and leap like a deer along the streams. We read in his spiritual Testament, "I will never stop thanking you, O Lord, for having called me to You through the Cross on May 6, 1968. A heavy cross for my young strength..." On March 2, life – a continuous gift that begins with parents and is slowly nurtured with wonder and beauty – placed the most important piece for Nino Baglieri: the embrace with his Lord and God, accompanied by the Madonna.

At the news of his passing, a unanimous chorus rose from many quarters: "a saint has died," a man who made his bed of the cross the banner of a full life, a gift for all. Thus, a great witness of hope.

Five years after his death, as provided by the *Normae Servandae in Inquisitionibus ab Episcopis faciendis in Causis Sanctorum* of 1983, the bishop of the Diocese of Noto,

at the request of the Postulator General of the Salesian Congregation, after consulting the Sicilian Episcopal Conference and obtaining the Nihil obstat from the Holy See, opened the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Nino Baglieri.

The diocesan process, lasting 12 years, followed two main lines: the work of the Historical Commission, which researched, collected, studied, and presented many sources, especially writings “by” and “about” the Servant of God; and the Ecclesiastical Tribunal, responsible for the Inquiry, which also heard witnesses under oath.

This process concluded on May 5, 2024, in the presence of Monsignor Salvatore Rumeo, current bishop of the Diocese of Noto. A few days later, the procedural acts were delivered to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, which opened them on June 21, 2024. At the beginning of 2025, the same Dicastery declared their “Legal Validity,” allowing the Roman phase of the Cause to enter full swing.

Now the contribution to the Cause continues also by spreading knowledge of Nino’s figure, who at the end of his earthly journey recommended: “Do not leave me doing nothing. I will continue my mission from heaven. I will write to you from Paradise.”

The journey of hope in his company thus becomes a longing for Heaven, when “we will meet face to face with the infinite beauty of God (cf. 1 Cor 13:12) and will be able to read with joyful admiration the mystery of the universe, which will share with us endless fullness [...]. Meanwhile, we unite to take care of this home entrusted to us, knowing that whatever good is in it will be taken up in the feast of heaven. Together with all creatures, we walk on this earth seeking God [...] We walk singing!” (cf. *Laudato Si’*, 243-244).

*Roberto Chiaramonte*

---

# The Cemetery Boys

*The ordeal of abandoned young people continues to resonate in the contemporary world. Statistics speak of approximately 150 million children forced to live in the streets, a reality that is also dramatically evident in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. To mark the feast day of St. John Bosco, a campaign was held in Vienna, promoted by Jugend Eine Welt, an initiative that highlighted not only the local situation but also the difficulties encountered in distant countries, such as Liberia, where the Salesian, Lothar Wagner, dedicates his life to giving these young people hope.*

## **Lothar Wagner: A Salesian who dedicates his life to street children in Liberia**

Lothar Wagner, a German Salesian Cooperator, has dedicated over twenty years of his life to supporting children in West Africa. After gaining extensive experience in Ghana and Sierra Leone, over the last four years he has focused his passion on Liberia, a country marked by prolonged conflicts, health crises, and devastation such as the Ebola epidemic. Lothar has become a spokesman for a reality that is often ignored, where social and economic scars compromise opportunities for young people to grow.

Liberia, with a population of 5.4 million, is a country where extreme poverty is accompanied by fragile institutions and widespread corruption. The consequences of decades of armed conflict and health crises have left the education system among the worst in the world, while the social fabric has frayed under the weight of economic hardship and lack of essential services. Many families are unable to guarantee their children's basic needs, thus pushing a large number of young people to seek refuge on the streets.

In particular, in Monrovia, some young people find refuge in the most unexpected places: the city's cemeteries. Known as the "cemetery boys," these young people, lacking a safe home, take refuge among the graves, a place that becomes a symbol of total abandonment. Sleeping outdoors, in parks, in landfills, even in sewers or inside tombs, has become the tragic daily refuge for those who have no other choice.

*"It is truly very heart-breaking when you walk through the cemetery and see boys coming out of the tombs. They lie down with the dead because they no longer have a place in society. Such a situation is scandalous."*

### **A multiple approach: from the cemetery to detention cells**

The cemetery boys are not the only focus of Lothar's attention. The Salesian also dedicates himself to another dramatic reality: that of underage prisoners in Liberian prisons. The Monrovia prison, built for 325 inmates, now houses over 1,500 prisoners, including many young people incarcerated without a formal charge. The cells, extremely overcrowded, are a clear example of how human dignity is often sacrificed.

*"There is a lack of food, clean water, hygienic standards, medical and psychological assistance. Constant hunger and the dramatic spatial situation due to overcrowding greatly weaken the boys' health. In a small cell, intended for two inmates, eight to ten young people are locked up. They sleep in shifts, because this cell size only offers standing space to its many inhabitants."*

To cope with this situation, he organises everyday visits to the prison, bringing drinking water, hot meals, and a psycho-social support that becomes a lifeline. His constant presence is essential to try to re-establish a dialogue with the authorities and families, also raising awareness of the importance of protecting the rights of minors, who are often forgotten and abandoned to a dire fate. "We do not leave them

alone in their solitude, but we try to give them hope,” Lothar emphasises with the firmness of someone who knows the everyday pain of these young lives.

### **A day for awareness in Vienna**

Support for these initiatives also comes from international attention. On January 31, in Vienna, Jugend Eine Welt organised a day dedicated to highlighting the precarious situation of street children, not only in Liberia, but throughout the world. During the event, Lothar Wagner shared his experiences with students and participants, involving them in practical activities – such as using barrier tape to simulate the conditions of an overcrowded cell – to give them a first-hand understanding of the difficulties and anguish of young people who live in minimal spaces and in degrading conditions every day.

In addition to daily emergencies, the work of Lothar and his collaborators also focuses on long-term interventions. The Salesian missionaries are in fact involved in rehabilitation programmes ranging from educational support to vocational training for young prisoners, to legal and spiritual assistance. These interventions aim to reintegrate young people into society once they are released, helping them build a dignified and fulfilling future. The goal is clear: to offer not only immediate help, but to create a path that allows young people to develop their potential and actively contribute to the rebirth of the country.

The initiatives also encompass the construction of vocational training centres, schools, and reception facilities, with the hope of expanding the number of young beneficiaries and ensuring constant support, day and night. The success story of many former “cemetery boys” – some of whom have become teachers, doctors, lawyers, and entrepreneurs – is tangible confirmation that, with the right support, transformation is possible.

Despite the commitment and dedication, this path is fraught with obstacles: bureaucracy, corruption, the children's distrust, and the lack of resources represent daily challenges. Many young people, marked by abuse and exploitation, struggle to trust adults, making the task of establishing a relationship of trust and offering real and lasting support even more difficult. However, every small success – every young person who regains hope and begins to build a future – confirms the importance of this humanitarian work.

The path undertaken by Lothar and his collaborators testifies that, despite the difficulties, it is possible to make a difference in the lives of abandoned children. The vision of a Liberia in which every young person can realise their potential translates into concrete actions, from international awareness to the rehabilitation of prisoners, through educational programmes and reception projects. The work, based on love, solidarity, and a constant presence, represents a beacon of hope in a context in which despair seems to prevail.

In a world marked by abandonment and poverty, the stories of rebirth of street children and young prisoners are an invitation to believe that, with the right support, every life can rise again. Lothar Wagner continues to fight to guarantee these young people not only shelter, but also the possibility of rewriting their destiny, demonstrating that solidarity can truly change the world.

---

## **Profiles of families wounded**

# in the history of Salesian holiness

## 1. Stories of wounded families

We are used to imagining the family as a harmonious reality, characterized by the coexistence of multiple generations and the guiding role of parents who set the norm, and of children who – in learning it – are guided by them in the experience of reality. However, families are often affected by dramas and misunderstandings or marked by wounds that undermine their ideal structure, leaving a distorted, misleading, and deceptive image of them.

The history of Salesian holiness is also marked by stories of wounded families: families where at least one parental figure is absent, or where the presence of the mother and father becomes, for various reasons (physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual), detrimental to their children, who are now on the path towards sainthood. Don Bosco himself, who experienced the premature death of his father and the separation from his family due to the prudent plan of Mama Margaret, desired – it is no coincidence – that the Salesian work be particularly dedicated to the “poor and abandoned youth” and did not hesitate to reach out to the young people who were formed in his Oratory with an intense vocational pastoral care (demonstrating that no wound from the past is an obstacle to a full human and Christian life). It is therefore natural that Salesian holiness, which draws from the lives of many of Don Bosco’s young people who were later consecrated through him to the cause of the Gospel, bears within itself traces of wounded families. This is a logical consequence of its origins.

Of these boys and girls who grew up in contact with Salesian works, three will be presented, whose story is to be “grafted” into the biographical legacy of Don Bosco. The main characters are:



– Blessed Laura Vicuña, born in Chile in 1891, orphaned of her father and whose mother began a cohabitation in Argentina with the wealthy landowner Manuel Mora; Laura, therefore, wounded by her mother's morally irregular situation, was ready to offer her life for her;

– The Servant of God Carlo Braga, from Valtellina, born in 1889, abandoned as a very young child by his father, while his mother was sent away due to a mix of ignorance and malicious gossip, being deemed mentally unstable. Carlo, therefore, had to face great humiliations and saw his Salesian vocation called into question multiple times by those who feared in him a compromising resurgence of the mental distress falsely attributed to his mother;

– Finally, the Servant of God Ana María Lozano, born in 1883 in Colombia, who followed her father to the leper colony, where he was forced to move due to the appearance of dreaded leprosy. She was hindered in her religious vocation, but was finally able to realise it thanks to her providential encounter with Blessed Luigi Variara, sdb.

## **2. Don Bosco and the search for the father**

Like Laura, Carlo, and Ana María – marked by the absence of or the “wounds” by one or more parental figures – before them, and in a certain sense “on their behalf”, Don Bosco also experienced the absence of a strong family unit.

The *Memoirs of the Oratory* soon dwelt on the early loss of the father: Francesco died at 34, and Don Bosco – not without resorting to an expression that is, in some respects, disconcerting – acknowledged that, “God, *merciful* as He is, struck them all with a great misfortune”. Thus, among the very first memories of the future saint of the young, a lacerating experience emerged: that of his father's lifeless body, from which his mother tried to take him away, but encountered Johnny's resistance, “I absolutely wanted to stay”, explains Don Bosco, and then added, “If Dad doesn't come, I don't want to go [away]”. Margaret then responded, “Poor son, come with me, you no longer have a father”. She cried, and Johnny, who

lacked a rational understanding of the situation, intuitively grasped the full extent of the drama. With an emotional intuition, he empathised and shared in his mother's sadness, "I cried because she cried, since at that age I certainly could not understand how great a misfortune the loss of a father was".

In front of his dead father, Johnny shows that he still considered him the centre of his life. He indeed said, "I don't want to *go* [with you, Mom]" and not, as we would expect, "I don't want to *come*". His point of reference is his father – the starting point and the hoped-for point of return – in relation to whom every distancing appears destabilising. In the tragedy of those moments, moreover, Johnny had not yet understood what the death of a parent means. He indeed hoped ("if Dad doesn't come...") that his father could still remain close to him: yet he already sensed the immobility, the silence, the inability to protect and defend him, and the impossibility of being taken by the hand to become a man in his turn. The immediately subsequent events then confirm John in the certainty that the father lovingly protects, directs, and guides, and that, when he is missing, even the best of mothers, like Margaret, can only provide partial support. On his path as an exuberant boy, the future Don Bosco, however, encounters other "fathers": his near peers Luigi Comollo, who awakened in him the emulation of virtues, and Saint Joseph Cafasso, who called him "my dear friend", gave him a "gracious gesture to come closer", and, in doing so, confirmed him in the persuasion that fatherhood is closeness, confidence, and concrete interest. But there is above all Fr Calosso, the priest who "bumped into" the curly-haired Johnny during a "popular mission" and became decisive for his human and spiritual growth. The gestures of Fr Calosso operated a true revolution in the pre-adolescent John. Fr Calosso first of all *spoke to him*. Then he *allowed him to speak*. Then he *encouraged* him. Still: he took an *interest* in the story of the Bosco family, showing that he knew how to contextualize the "moment" of that boy within the "whole" of his story. Moreover, he

revealed the world to him, or rather, in some way, he brought him back to life, introducing him to new things, gifting him new words, and showing him that he had the abilities to do much and well. Finally, he *watched over* him with his gestures and gaze, and provided for his most urgent and real needs, "While I spoke, he never took his gaze off me. 'Be of good cheer, my friend, I will take care of you and of your studies'".

In Fr Calosso, John Bosco thus experienced that true fatherhood deserves a total and all-encompassing entrustment; it leads to self-awareness; it opens up an "ordered world" where rules provide security and educate to freedom:

"I immediately placed myself in the hands of Fr Calosso. It was then that I learned what it means to have a stable guide [...], a faithful friend of the soul. He encouraged me; all the time I could, I spent with him. From that time on, I began to taste what spiritual life truly is, since before I acted more materially, like a machine doing something without knowing the reason behind it."

The earthly father, however, is also the one who would always like to be with his son, but at a certain point can no longer do so. Fr Calosso also died; even the best father, at a certain point, steps aside, to give his son the strength of that detachment and autonomy which are typical of adulthood.

What then is, for Don Bosco, the difference between successful and failed families? One would be tempted to say that it all lies here: a "successful" family is characterised by parents who educate their children to be free, and if they let them go, it is only due to an unforeseen impossibility or for their own good. A "wounded" family, on the other hand, is one where the parent/s no longer give life, but carry within themselves problems of various kinds that hinder the child's growth: a parent who is indifferent to them and, in the face of difficulties, even abandons them, with an

attitude so different from that of the Good Shepherd.

The biographical events of Laura, Carlo, and Ana María confirm this.

### **3. Laura: a daughter who “gives life” to her own mother**

Born in Santiago, Chile, on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1891, and baptized on May 24<sup>th</sup> of the same year, Laura was the eldest daughter of José D. Vicuña, a disgraced nobleman who married Mercedes Pino, daughter of modest farmers. Three years later, a little sister, Julia Amanda, arrived, but soon after, their father died, having suffered a political defeat that undermined his health and compromised also their honour, along with the family's economic support. Devoid of any “protection and future perspective”, Laura's mother landed in Argentina, where she sought the protection of the landowner Manuel Mora: a man “of proud and haughty character”, who “did not hide hatred and contempt for anyone who opposed his plans”. A man, in short, who only seemingly offered protection, but was actually accustomed to taking, if necessary, by force, whatever he wanted, manipulating people. Meanwhile, he paid for Laura and her sister's studies at the boarding school of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Their mother – who was under the psychological influence of Mora – lived with him without finding the strength to break the bond. However, when Mora began to show signs of improper interest towards Laura herself, and especially when she embarked on the path of preparation for her First Holy Communion, she suddenly understood the gravity of the situation. Unlike her mother – who justified an evil (cohabitation) in view of a good (her daughters' education at the boarding school) – Laura understood that this was a morally illegitimate argument, which put her mother's soul in grave danger. Around this time, Laura also expressed the desire to become a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians herself; but her request was rejected, because she was the daughter of a ‘public concubine’. And it is at this point that a change took place in Laura – received

into the boarding school when 'impulsiveness, ease of resentment, irritability, impatience and propensity to appear' still dominated in her – that only Grace, combined with the person's commitment, can bring about: she asked God for her mother's conversion, offering herself for her. At that moment, Laura could move neither 'forwards' (entering the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) nor 'backwards' (returning to her mother and Mora). With a gesture imbued with the creativity typical of saints, Laura embarks on the only path still available to her: one that reached towards the heights of transcendence and the depths of inner transformation. In her First Holy Communion resolutions she had written down:

I propose to do all that I know and can to [...] repair the offenses that you, Lord, receive every day from people, especially from those of my family; my God, grant me a life of love, mortification, and sacrifice.

Then she finalised her intention in an "Act of Offering", which included the sacrifice of her very life. Her confessor, recognising that the inspiration came from God but ignoring its consequences, consented, and confirmed that Laura was "aware of the offering she had just made". She lived her last two years in silence, joy, and with a smile, and a disposition that was rich in human warmth. Yet the gaze she directed at the world – as confirmed by a photographic portrait quite different from the well-known hagiographic stylisation – revealed all the deep awareness and pain that dwelt within her. In a situation where she lacked both the "freedom from" (conditioning, obstacles, struggles) and the "freedom to" do many things, this pre-adolescent testified to "freedom for": that of the total gift of self.

Laura did not despise but loved life: her own and that of her mother. For this reason, she offered herself. On April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1902, Good Shepherd Sunday, she asked: "If He gives his life... what prevents me from doing so for my mother?" Dying, she added: "Mom, I am dying, I myself asked Jesus for this... I have been offering my life for you for almost two

years, to obtain the grace of your return!"

These are words free of regret and reproach, but full of great strength, great hope, and great faith. Laura had learned to accept her mother for who she was. She even offered herself to give her what she could not achieve by herself. When Laura died, her mother converted. *Laurita de los Andes*, the daughter, thus contributed to giving life to her mother in faith and grace.

#### **4. Carlo Braga and his mother's shadow**

Carlo Braga, who was born two years before Laura, in 1889, was also marked by his mother's fragility: when her husband abandoned her and the children, Matilde "almost stopped eating and was visibly declining". She was then taken to Como, where she died four years later of tuberculosis, although everyone was convinced that her depression had turned into a real madness. Carlo then began to be "pitied as the son of an irresponsible [father] and an unhappy mother". However, three providential events helped him.

He later rediscovered the meaning of the first event, which occurred when he was very small: he had fallen into the hearth and his mother Matilde, in rescuing him, had consecrated him to the Virgin Mary at that very instant. Thus, the thought of his absent mother became for Carlo as a child 'a painful and consoling memory at the same time': sorrow for her absence; but also, the certainty that she had entrusted him to the Mother of all mothers, Mary Most Holy. Years later, Fr Braga wrote to a Salesian confrere struck by the loss of his own mother:

"Now your mother belongs to you much more than when she was alive. Let me tell you about my personal experience. My mother left me when I was six years old [...]. But I must confess that she followed me step by step, and when I cried desolately at the murmur of the Adda [river], while, as a little shepherd, I felt called to a higher vocation, it seemed to me that Mom was smiling at me and drying my tears".

Carlo then met Sister Giuditta Torelli, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians who “saved little Carlo from the disintegration of his personality when at nine he realised he was just tolerated and sometimes heard people say about him, ‘Poor child, why is he even in the world?’” There were indeed those who claimed that his father deserved to be shot for the betrayal of abandonment, and regarding his mother, many schoolmates replied to him, “Shut up, your mother was crazy, anyway”. But Sr Giuditta loved him and helped him in a special way; she looked at him with a “new” gaze; moreover, she believed in his vocation and encouraged it.

After entering the Salesian boarding school in Sondrio, Carlo experienced the third and decisive event: he met Fr Rua, of whom he had the honour of being the little secretary for a day. Fr Rua smiled at Carlo and, repeating the gesture that Don Bosco had once performed with him (“Little Michael, you and I will always go halves”), he “put his hand inside his own and said to him, ‘we will always be friends’”. If Sr Giuditta had believed in Carlo’s vocation, Fr Rua allowed him to realise it, “helping him overcome all obstacles”. Certainly, Carlo Braga would not lack difficulties at every stage of life – as a novice, young Salesian, and even as Provincial – manifested as *prudent* delays and sometimes taking the form of slander; but he had learned to face them. Meanwhile, he became a man capable of radiating extraordinary joy, humble, active, and marked by a gentle sense of irony—all traits that reflect his personal balance and sense of reality. Under the action of the Holy Spirit, Fr Braga himself developed a radiant fatherhood, joined by a great tenderness for the young entrusted to him. Fr Braga rediscovered love for his father, forgave him, and embarked on a journey to reconcile with him. He underwent countless hardships just to be always among his Salesians and boys. He defined himself as one who had been “put in the vineyard to act as a pole”, that is, without seeking recognition but for the good of others. A father, in entrusting his son to him as a Salesian aspirant, said, “With a man like you, I would let him go even to the

North Pole!” Fr Carlo was not scandalised by the needs of the children; rather, he educated them to express them, to increase their desire, “Do you need some books? Don’t be afraid, write a longer list”. Above all, Fr Carlo learned to look at others with that gaze of love from which he himself had once felt reached thanks to Sr Giuditta and Fr Rua. Fr Joseph Zen, now a cardinal, testified in a long passage that deserves to be read in full and begins with his mother’s words to Fr Braga:

“Look, Father, this boy is not so good anymore. Perhaps he is not suitable to be accepted in this institution. I wouldn’t want you to be deceived. Ah, if you only knew how he troubled me this last year! I really didn’t know what to do anymore. And if he gives you trouble here too, just let me know, and I’ll come to pick him up right away”. Fr Braga, instead of responding, looked me in the eyes; I too looked at him, but with my head down. I felt like a defendant accused by the prosecutor, rather than defended by my own lawyer. But the judge was on my side. With his gaze, he understood me deeply, immediately and better than all my mother’s explanations. He himself, writing to me many years later, applied to himself the words of the Gospel: “*Intuitus dilexit eum* (‘looking at him, he loved him’)”. And, from that day on, I had no more doubts about my vocation.

## **5. Ana María Lozano Díaz and the fruitful illness of her father**

The parents of Laura and Carlo had – in various ways – revealed themselves to be “distant” and “absent”. One final figure, that of Ana María, instead attests to the opposite dynamism: that of a father *too* present, who, with his presence, opened up a new path to sanctification for his daughter. Ana was born on September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1883, in Oicatà, Colombia, into a large family, characterised by the exemplary Christian life of her parents. When Ana was very young, her father – one day, while washing – discovered a concerning mark on his leg. It was leprosy, which he managed to hide for some



time, but was ultimately forced to acknowledge, first accepting to separate from his family, then reuniting with them at the leper colony of Agua de Dios. His wife heroically told him, "Your fate is our fate". Thus, the healthy accepted the conditions imposed on them by adopting the rhythm of life of the sick. In this context, her father's illness conditioned Ana María's freedom of choice, forcing her to plan her life within the leper colony. Like Laura before her, she was unable to pursue her religious vocation due to her father's illness. She then experienced, inwardly, the profound rift that leprosy causes in the lives of the sick. However, Ana María was not alone. Just as Don Bosco found help through Fr Calosso, Laura in her confessor, and Carlo in Fr Rua, so she found a friend of the soul in Blessed Luigi Variara, sdb, who assured her, "If you have a religious vocation, it will be realized", and involved her in the founding of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in 1905. It was the first Institute to welcome leprous women or daughters of lepers. When Lozano died on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1982, at almost 99 years old, after more than fifty years as Mother General, Fr Variara's insight had fully manifested in an experience that confirmed and reinforced the Salesian charism's *victim and reparative* dimension.

## **6. The saints teach**

In their inescapable difference, the stories of Laura Vicuña (blessed), Carlo Braga, and Ana María Lozano (servants of God) are united by several noteworthy aspects:

a) Laura, Ana, and Carlo, like Don Bosco, suffered situations of discomfort and difficulty, variously related to their parents. One cannot forget Mama Margaret, who was forced to send Johnny away from home when the absence of paternal authority facilitated the clash with his brother Anthony; nor forget that Laura was threatened by Mora and rejected by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians as their aspirant; and that Carlo Braga suffered misunderstandings and slanders; or that her father's leprosy seemed at one point to rob Ana María

of all hope for the future.

A family, wounded in various ways, therefore caused an *objective harm* to those who were part of it: to fail to acknowledge or attempt to downplay the extent of this damage would be as illusory as it is unjust. Indeed, every suffering is associated with an element of loss that the “saints”, with their realism, capture and learn to name.

b) Johnny, Laura, Ana María, and Carlo then took a second, more arduous step: instead of passively enduring the situation or lamenting it, they moved with increased awareness to address the problem. In addition to a lively realism, they demonstrated the ability, which is typical of saints, to react promptly, avoiding any self-centred withdrawal. They expanded through the gift and integrated it into the concrete conditions of life. In doing so, they bound the ‘da mihi animas’ to the ‘cetera tolle’.

c) The limits and wounds are never erased: they are always recognised and named; in fact, they are ‘lived with’. Even Blessed Alexandrina Maria da Costa and Servant of God Nino Baglieri, Venerable Andrea Beltrami and Blessed Augusto Czartoryski, were “reached” by the Lord in the debilitating conditions of their illness. Blessed Titus Zeman, Venerable José Vándor, and Servant of God Ignatius Stuchlý – part of larger historical events that seemed to overwhelm them – taught the difficult art of persevering through hardships and allowing the Lord to make the person flourish within them. Here, the freedom of choice takes on the highest form of a freedom of adherence, in the ‘fiat’!

### *Bibliographic Note:*

To preserve the character of “witness” rather than “report” of this writing, a critical apparatus of notes has been avoided. However, it should be noted that the quotes present in the text are taken from the *Memoirs of the Oratory* of St John Bosco; from Maria Dosio, *Laura Vicuña. A Path of Salesian Youth Holiness*, LAS, Rome 2004; from *Fr Carlo Braga Recounts His Missionary and Educative Experience*

(autobiographical testimony of the Servant of God) and from the *Life of Fr Carlo Braga, "The Don Bosco of China"*, written by Fr Mario Rassiga, sdb and now available in stencilled form. To these sources are added the materials from the beatification and canonisation causes, which are accessible for Don Bosco and Laura, while still reserved for the Servants of God.

---

## **Blessed Alberto Marvelli: a beacon of faith and social commitment in the 20th century**

*In the panorama of the great witnesses of faith of the 20th century, the name of Alberto Marvelli shines resplendent as an example of Christian dedication and social commitment. Born in Ferrara in 1918 and living in post-war Rimini, Alberto embodied the values of the Gospel through a life spent in the service of the weakest and neediest. Beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2004, his figure continues to inspire young people and adults on the path of faith and social action.*

### **A childhood of values and spirituality**

Alberto Marvelli was born on 21 March 1918, the second of seven children of Alfredo Marvelli and Maria Mayr. His family, deeply Christian, instilled values of faith, charity and service in him from an early age. His mother, in particular, had a great influence on his spiritual formation, passing on to him a love of prayer and concern for the needy. The Marvelli family was known for its generosity and hospitality,

often opening its home to anyone in need.

During his high school years in Rimini, Alberto distinguished himself not only for his excellence in studies, but also for his commitment to sports and social activities. Passionate about cycling and athletics, he saw sport as a means to strengthen character and promote values such as loyalty and discipline.

### **His university years and social vocation**

Enrolled in the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Bologna, Alberto tackled his studies seriously and enthusiastically. But in addition to his academic commitment, he devoted time and energy to Catholic Action, a movement that played a fundamental role in his spiritual growth and social commitment. He organised study groups, spiritual meetings and volunteer projects, involving his university colleagues in initiatives in favour of the less fortunate.

His room became a meeting place for discussions on social and religious issues. Here, Alberto encouraged his companions to reflect on the role of the laity in the Church and society, promoting the idea that every Christian is called to be an active witness of the Gospel in the world.

### **War: a test of faith and courage**

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Albert was called to arms. Even in the military environment he did not stop witnessing to his faith, sharing moments of prayer with his fellow soldiers and offering moral support in a time of great uncertainty and fear.

After 8 September 1943, with the Italian armistice, he returned to Rimini, finding a city devastated by bombing and Nazi occupation. In this dramatic context, Alberto became actively involved in the Resistance, helping Allied prisoners and Jews to escape from the hands of the Nazis. He risked his own life on numerous occasions, showing extraordinary courage and unwavering faith.

## **Charity without borders**

One of Alberto's most emblematic images is of him riding his bicycle through the destroyed streets of Rimini, laden with food, clothes and medicine to be distributed to those in need. His bicycle became a symbol of hope for many citizens. He made no distinction between people: he helped Italians, foreigners, friends and enemies, seeing in everyone the face of the suffering Christ.

He opened the doors of his home to evacuees, organised soup kitchens for the poor and worked to find housing for the homeless. His dedication was total and unconditional. As he wrote in his diary: 'Every poor person is Jesus. Every act of charity is an act of love towards Him'.

## **Interior life and deep spirituality**

Despite his social and political commitments, Albert never neglected his spiritual life. He participated in the Eucharist daily, devoted time to prayer and meditation, and constantly relied on divine Providence. His personal diary reveals a deep union with God and an ardent desire to conform to God's will in every aspect of his life.

He wrote: 'God is my infinite happiness. I must be holy otherwise nothing.' This striving for holiness permeated his every gesture, large or small. Regular confession, Eucharistic adoration and reading the Holy Scriptures were essential moments of spiritual growth for him.

## **Political commitment as a form of charity**

In the post-war period, Alberto was actively involved in the moral and material reconstruction of society. He joined the Christian Democrats, seeing politics as a means to promote the common good and social justice. For him, politics was a high form of charity, a selfless service to the community.

As councillor for Public Works in Rimini, he worked tirelessly to improve housing conditions for the poor, promoted the reconstruction of schools and hospitals, and supported initiatives for the economic revival of the city. He refused

any form of corruption or moral compromise, always putting the needs of the most vulnerable at the centre.

### **Testimonies of an extraordinary life**

There are many testimonies from those who knew Alberto personally. Friends and colleagues remember his smile, his availability and his ability to listen. He used to say: 'We cannot love God if we do not love our brothers'. This conviction translated into concrete gestures, such as hosting displaced families in his home or giving up his own meal to give it to the hungry.

His simple and austere lifestyle, combined with a deep inner joy, attracted the admiration of many. He never sought recognition or personal glory, but always acted with humility and discretion.

### **Tragedy and beatification**

On 5 October 1946, at only 28 years of age, Albert died tragically in a car accident while cycling to an election rally. His sudden death was a blow to the community. However, his funeral became a manifestation of affection and gratitude: thousands of people came together to pay homage to a young man who had given all of himself for others.

The reputation for holiness that surrounded his figure led to the start of the beatification process in the 1990s. On 5 September 2004, during a ceremony in Loreto, Pope John Paul II proclaimed him Blessed. The beatification was not only a personal recognition, but also a message to young people all over the world: holiness is possible in every state of life, even in the laity and in social and political commitment.

### **Legacy and topicality**

The figure of Alberto Marvelli continues to be a point of reference for anyone wishing to combine faith and social action. His life testifies that it is possible to live the Gospel in everyday life, committing oneself to justice, solidarity and the common good. In an era characterised by individualism and indifference, Alberto's example invites us

to rediscover the value of love of neighbour and social responsibility.

Today, several associations and initiatives bear his name, promoting projects of solidarity, spiritual formation and civic engagement. His life is often cited as an example in educational and catechetical courses, inspiring new generations to follow his path.

### **Final reflections**

Alberto Marvelli's message is extraordinarily relevant today. His ability to combine deep faith and concrete action is a response to the challenges of our time. He shows that holiness is not reserved for the chosen few, but is a path accessible to anyone who is open to the love of God and the service of their brothers and sisters.

In a passage in his diary, Albert wrote: 'Every day is a precious gift to love more'. This phrase encapsulates the essence of his spirituality and can be a beacon for all those who wish to live a meaningful and good-oriented life.

Blessed Alberto Marvelli represents a model of lay holiness, a young man who was able to transform his faith into concrete actions for the benefit of others. His life, though short, was a hymn to love, justice and hope. Today more than ever, his testimony invites each of us to reflect on our role in society and the possibility of being instruments of peace and good in the world.

*Alberto Marvelli continues to inspire with his simple and extraordinary life. An invitation to all of us to ride, like him, on the roads of solidarity and brotherly love.*

---

# St Francis de Sales university student in Padua (2/2)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

Francis went to Padua, a city belonging to the Venetian Republic, in October 1588, accompanied by his younger brother Gallois, a twelve-year-old boy who would study with the Jesuits, and their faithful tutor, Fr Déage. At the end of the 16th century, the law faculty of the University of Padua enjoyed an extraordinary reputation, surpassing even that of the famous Studium in Bologna. When he delivered his Discourse of Thanksgiving following his promotion to doctor, Francis de Sales weaved its praises in dithyrambic form:

*Up to that time, I had not dedicated any work to the holy and sacred science of law: but when, afterwards, I decided to commit myself to such a study, I had absolutely no need to look for where to turn or where to go; this college of Padua immediately attracted me by its celebrity and, under the most favourable auspices, in fact, at that time, it had doctors and readers such as it never had and never will have greater.*

Whatever he may say, it is certain that the decision to study law did not come from him, but was imposed on him by his father. Other reasons might have played in Padua's favour, namely the need that the Senate of a bilingual state had for magistrates with a dual French and Italian culture.

## **In the homeland of humanism**

Crossing the Alps for the first time, Francis de Sales set foot in the homeland of humanism. In Padua, he could not only admire the palaces and churches, especially the basilica of St Anthony, but also Giotto's frescoes,



Donatello's bronzes, Mantegna's paintings and Titian's frescoes. His stay in the Italian peninsula also allowed him to get to know several cities of art, in particular, Venice, Milan and Turin.

On a literary level, he could not fail to be in contact with some of the most famous productions. Did he have in his hand Dante Alighieris *Divine Comedy*, the poems of Petrarch, forerunner of humanism and first poet of his time, the novellas of Boccaccio, founder of Italian prose, Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, or Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*? His preference was for spiritual literature, in particular the thoughtful reading of Lorenzo Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat*. He acknowledged modestly, "I don't think I speak perfect Italian."

In Padua, Francis had the good fortune to meet a distinguished Jesuit in the person of Father Antonio Possevino. This "wandering humanist with an epic life" who had been charged by the pope with diplomatic missions in Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Poland and France, had taken up permanent residence in Padua shortly before Francis' arrival. He became his spiritual director and guide in his studies and knowledge of the world.

### **The University of Padua**

Founded in 1222, the University of Padua was the oldest university in Italy after Bologna, of which it was an offshoot. It successfully taught not only law, regarded as the *scientia scientiarum*, but also theology, philosophy and medicine. The 1,500 or so students came from all over Europe and were not all Catholics, which sometimes led to worries and unrest.

Fights were frequent, sometimes bloody. One of the favourite dangerous games was the "Paduan hunt" Francis de Sales would one day tell a friend, Jean-Pierre Camus, "that a student, after striking a stranger, with his sword, took refuge with a woman he discovered was the mother of the young man he had just murdered." He himself, who did not go round

without a sword, was one day involved in a fight by fellow students, who considered his gentleness to be a form of cowardice.

Professors and students alike appreciated the proverbial *patavinam libertatem*, which in addition to being cultivated in intellectual pursuit, also incited a good number of students to “flutter about” by giving themselves up to the good life. Even the disciples closest to Francis were not models of virtue. The widow of one of them would later recount, in her picturesque language, how her future husband had staged a farce in bad taste with some accomplices, aimed at throwing Francis into the arms of a “miserable whore”.

### **The study of law**

In obedience to his father, Francis devoted himself courageously to the study of civil law, to which he wanted to add that of ecclesiastical law, which would make him a future doctor of *utroque jure*. The study of law also involved the study of jurisprudence, which is “the science by means of which law is administered”.

The study focused on the sources of law, that is, ancient Roman law, collected and interpreted in the 6th century by the jurists of the Emperor Justinian. Throughout his life, he would remember the definition of justice, read at the beginning of the *Digesto*: “a perpetual, strong and constant will to render to everyone what belongs to him.”

Examining Francis’ notebooks, we can identify some of his reactions to certain laws. He is in full agreement with the title of the Code that opens the series of laws: *Of the Sovereign Trinity and the Catholic Faith*, and with the defence that immediately follows: *That no one should be allowed to discuss them in public*. “This title” he noted, “is precious, I would say sublime, and worthy of being read often against reformers, know-it-alls and politicians.”

Francis de Sales’ legal education rested on a foundation that seemed unquestionable at the time. For the Catholics of his time, “tolerating” Protestantism could take

on no other meaning than that of being accomplices to error; hence the need to fight it by all means, including those provided by the law in force. Under no circumstances was one to resign oneself to the presence of heresy, which appeared not only as an error on the level of faith, but also as a source of division and disturbance in Christianity. In the eagerness of his twenties, Francis de Sales shared this view.

But this eagerness also had free rein over those who favoured injustice and persecution, since, with regard to Title XXVI of Book III, he wrote: "As precious as gold and worthy of being written in capital letters is the ninth law which states: 'Let the relatives of the prince be punished with fire if they persecute the inhabitants of the provinces.'"

Later, Francis would appeal to the one he designated as "our Justinian" to denounce the slowness of justice on the part of the judge who "excuses himself by invoking a thousand reasons of custom, style, theory, practice and caution." In his lectures on ecclesiastical law, he studied the collection of laws that he would later use, in particular those of the medieval canonist Gratianus, *inter alia*, to demonstrate that the bishop of Rome is the "true successor of Saint Peter and head of the Church militant", and that religious men and women must be placed "under the obedience of the bishops."

Consulting the handwritten notes taken by Francis during his stay in Padua, one is struck by the extremely neat handwriting. He went from the Gothic script, still used in Paris, to the modern script of the humanists.

But in the end, his law studies must have bored him quite a bit. On a hot summer's day, faced with the coldness of the laws and their remoteness in time, he wrote, disillusioned: "Since these matters are old, it did not seem profitable to devote oneself to examining them in this steamy weather, which is too hot to comfortably deal with cold and chilling discussions."

## **Theological studies and intellectual crisis**

While dedicated to the study of law, Francis continued to take a close interest in theology. According to his nephew, when he freshly arrived in Padua, "he set to work with all possible diligence, and placed on the lectern in his room the Summa of the Angelic Doctor, St Thomas, so that he could have it before his eyes every day and easily consult it to understand other books. He greatly enjoyed reading the books of St Bonaventure. He acquired a good knowledge of the Latin Fathers, especially the 'two brilliant luminaries of the Church', 'the great Saint Augustine' and Saint Jerome, who were also 'two great captains of the ancient Church', without forgetting the 'glorious Saint Ambrose' and Saint Gregory the Great. Among the Greek Fathers, he admired St John Chrysostom 'who, because of his sublime eloquence, was praised and called Golden Mouth'. He also frequently cited St Gregory of Nazianzus, St Basil, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Athanasius, Origen and others."

Consulting the fragments of notes that have come down to us, we learn that he also read the most important authors of his time, in particular, the great Spanish exegete and theologian Juan Maldonado, a Jesuit who had successfully established new methods in the study of the texts of Scripture and the Church Fathers. In addition to personal study, Francis was able to take theology courses at the university, where Fr Déage was preparing his doctorate, and benefit from the help and advice of Fr Possevino. It is also known that he often visited the Franciscans at the Basilica of St Anthony.

His reflection focused again on the problem of predestination and grace, to the point that he filled five notebooks. In reality, Francis found himself faced with a dilemma: to remain faithful to convictions that had always been his, or to stick to the classical positions of St Augustine and St Thomas, "the greatest and unrivalled doctor." Now he found it difficult to "sympathise" with such a discouraging doctrine of these two masters, or at least with the current interpretation, according to which men have no

right to salvation, because it depends entirely on a free decision by God.

By his adolescence, Francis had developed a more optimistic view of God's plan. His personal convictions were reinforced after the appearance in 1588 of the book by Spanish Jesuit Luis Molina, whose Latin title *Concordia* summed up the thesis well: *Concord of Free Will with the Gift of Grace*. In this work, predestination in the strict sense was replaced with a predestination that took into account man's merits, i.e. his good or bad deeds. In other words, Molina affirmed both God's sovereign action and the decisive role of the freedom he bestowed on man.

In 1606, the bishop of Geneva would have the honour of being consulted by the pope on the theological dispute between the Jesuit Molina and the Dominican Domingo Báñez on the same issue, for whom Molina's doctrine granted too much autonomy to human freedom, at the risk of jeopardising God's sovereignty.

The *Treatise on the Love of God*, which appeared in 1616, contains in Chapter 5 of Book III the thought of Francis de Sales, summarised in "fourteen lines", which, according to Jean-Pierre Camus, had cost him "the reading of one thousand two hundred pages of a large volume." With a commendable effort to be concise and exact, Francis affirmed both the divine liberality and generosity, and human freedom and responsibility in the act of writing this weighty sentence: "It is up to us to be his: for although it is a gift of God to belong to God, yet it is a gift that God never refuses to anyone, on the contrary, he offers it to all, to grant it to those who will willingly consent to receive it."

Making his own the ideas of the Jesuits, who in the eyes of many appeared to be innovators, and whom the Jansenists with Blaise Pascal would soon brand as bad theologians, too lax, Francis de Sales grafted his theology into the current of Christian humanism and opted for the "God of the human heart" Salesian theology, which rests on the goodness of God who wants all to be saved, would likewise

present itself with a pressing invitation to the human person to respond with the whole “heart” to the appeals of grace.

## Medicine

Alongside the faculties of law and theology, the studies of medicine and botany enjoyed extraordinary prestige in Padua, especially after the Flemish physician Andrea Vesalius, the father of modern anatomy, had dealt a mortal blow to the old theories of Hippocrates and Galienus with the practice of dissecting the human body, which scandalised the established authorities. Vesalius had published his *De humani corporis fabrica* in 1543, which revolutionised knowledge of human anatomy. To procure corpses, the bodies of the executed were demanded or the dead were dug up, which did not happen without provoking sometimes bloody disputes with gravediggers.

Nevertheless, several things can be said. First of all, it is known that during the serious illness that laid him low in Padua at the end of 1590, he had decided to donate his own body to science if he died, and this was to avoid quarrels among medical students intent on searching for corpses. Did he therefore approve of the new method of dissecting the human body? In any case, he seemed to encourage it with this hotly debated gesture. Moreover, one can detect in him an abiding interest in health problems, in doctors and surgeons. There is a big difference, he wrote for example, between the brigand and the surgeon: ‘The brigand and the surgeon cut the limbs and make the blood flow, one to kill, the other to heal.’

Also in Padua at the beginning of the 17th century, an English doctor, William Harvey, discovered the rules of blood circulation. The heart truly became the author of life, the centre of everything, the sun, like the prince in his state. Although the English physician would only publish his findings in 1628, it is possible to assume that by the time Francis was a student, such research was already underway. He himself wrote, for example, that “*cor habet motum in se proprium et alia movere facit*”, i.e. that “the heart has within it a movement which is proper to it and which makes

everything else move.” Quoting Aristotle, he would say that “the heart is the first member that comes to life in us and the last that dies.”

## **Botany**

Probably during his stay in Padua, Francis also became interested in the natural sciences. He could not be unaware that there was the first botanical garden in the city, created to cultivate, observe and experiment with indigenous and exotic plants. Plants were ingredients in most medicines and their use for therapeutic purposes was mainly based on texts by ancient authors, which were not always reliable. We possess eight collections of *Similitudes* by Francis, probably compiled between 1594 and 1614, but whose origin can be traced back to Padua. The title of these small collections of images and comparisons drawn from nature certainly manifests their utilitarian character; their content, on the other hand, testifies to an almost encyclopaedic interest, not only in the plant world, but also in the mineral and animal worlds.

Francis de Sales consulted the ancient authors, who in his time enjoyed an undisputed authority on the subject: Pliny the Elder, author of a vast *Natural History*, a true encyclopaedia of the time, but also Aristotle (that of the *History of Animals* and *The Generation of Animals*), Plutarch, Theophrastus (author of a *History of Plants*), and even St Augustine and St Albert the Great. He was also familiar with contemporary authors, in particular the *Commentari a Dioscorides* by the Italian naturalist Pietro Andrea Mattioli.

What fascinated Francis de Sales was the mysterious relationship between natural history and man's spiritual life. For him, writes A. Ravier, “every discovery is the bearer of a secret of creation.” The particular virtues of certain plants are marvellous: “Pliny and Mattioli describe a herb that is salutary against plague, colic, kidney stones, inviting us to cultivate it in our gardens.” Along the many paths he travelled during his life, we see him attentive to

nature, to the world around him, to the succession of the seasons and their mysterious significance. The book of nature appeared to him as an immense Bible that he had to learn to interpret, which is why he called the Fathers of the Church "spiritual herbalists". When he exercised the spiritual direction of very different people, he would remember that "in the garden, every herb and every flower requires special care."

### **Personal life programme**

During his stay in Padua, a city where there were more than forty monasteries and convents, Francis again turned to the Jesuits for his spiritual direction. Stressing as is appropriate the leading role of the Jesuits in the formation of the young Francis de Sales, it must be said, however, that they were not the only ones. A great admiration and friendship bound him to Father Filippo Gesualdi, a Franciscan preacher from the famous convent of St Anthony of Padua. He frequented the Theatine convent, where Father Lorenzo Scupoli came from time to time to preach. There he discovered the book entitled *Spiritual Combat*, which taught him how to master the inclinations of the lower part of the soul. Francis de Sales "wrote not a few things" Camus said, "of which I immediately discover the seed and the germ in some passages of the *Combat*'" During his stay in Padua, he also seems to have dedicated himself to an educational activity in an orphanage.

It is undoubtedly due to the beneficial influence of these teachers, in particular Father Possevino, that Francis wrote various rules of life, of which significant fragments have survived. The first, entitled *Exercise of Preparation*, was a mental exercise to be performed in the morning: "I will endeavour, through it" he wrote, "to prepare myself to deal with and perform my duty in the most praiseworthy manner." It consisted in imagining everything that could happen to him during the day: "I will therefore think seriously about the unforeseen events that may happen to me, the groups where I may be forced to intervene, the events



that may occur to me, the places where people will try to persuade me to go."And here is the purpose of the exercise:

*I will study diligently and seek the best ways to avoid missteps. I shall thus dispose and determine within myself what it shall be expedient for me to do, the order and behaviour I shall have to remain in this or some other circumstance, what it will be appropriate to say in company, the demeanour I shall have to observe and what I shall have to flee and desire.*

In his *Particular Conduct to spend the day well*, the student identified the main practices of piety he intended to do: morning prayers, daily Mass, time of "spiritual rest", prayers and invocations during the night. In the *Exercise of Sleep or Spiritual Rest*, he would specify the subjects on which he was to focus his meditations. Alongside the classical themes, such as the vanity of this world, the detestation of sin, divine justice, he had carved out space for considerations, with a humanist flavour, on the "excellence of virtue", which "makes man beautiful inwardly and also outwardly", on the beauty of human reason, this "divine torch" that spreads a "marvellous splendour", as well as on the "infinite wisdom, omnipotence and incomprehensible goodness" of God. Another practice of piety was devoted to frequent Communion, its preparation and thanksgiving. There is a development in his frequency of Communion compared to the Parisian period.

As for the *Rules for Conversations and Meetings*, they are of particular interest from the point of view of social education. They contain six points that the student set out to observe. First of all, a clear distinction had to be made between simple encounters, where "companionship is momentary" and "conversation" where affectivity comes into play. As far as encounters are concerned, one reads this general rule:

*I will never despise or give the impression of completely*

*shunning meeting any individual; this could give reason to appear haughty, severe, arrogant, censorious, ambitious and controlling. [...] I will not take the liberty of saying or doing anything that is not balanced, lest I appear insolent, letting myself be carried away by too easy a familiarity. Above all, I will be careful not to bite or sting or mock anyone [...]. I will respect everyone in particular, I will observe modesty, I will speak little and well, so that the companions will return to a new meeting with pleasure and not with boredom.*

With regard to conversations, a term that at the time had a broad meaning of habitual acquaintance or companionship, Francis was more cautious. He wanted to be “a friend to all and familiar to few”, and always faithful to the one rule that allowed no exception: “Nothing against God”.

For the rest, he wrote, “I will be modest without insolence, free without austerity, gentle without affectation, yielding without contradiction unless reason suggests otherwise, cordial without dissimulation.” He would behave differently towards superiors, equals and inferiors. It was his general rule to “adapt himself to the variety of company, but without prejudice to virtue in any way.” He divided people into three categories: the brash, the free and the closed. He would remain imperturbable before insolent people, would be open with free (i.e. simple, welcoming) people and would be very prudent with melancholic types, often full of curiosity and suspicion. With adults, finally, he would be on his guard, to deal with them “as with fire” and not get too close. Of course, one could testify to them about love, because love “begets freedom” but what must dominate is respect that “begets modesty”.

It is easy to see what degree of human and spiritual maturity the law student had reached by then. Prudence, wisdom, modesty, discernment and charity are the qualities that leap to the eye in his life programme, but there is also an “honest freedom”, a benevolent attitude

towards all, and an uncommon spiritual fervour. This did not prevent him from going through difficult times in Padua, of which there are perhaps reminiscences in a passage of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* where he states that “a young man or a young lady who does not go along in speech, in play, in dancing, in drinking or in dressing with the unruliness of a debauched company will be mocked and taunted by others, and their modesty called bigotry or affectation.”

### **Return to Savoy**

On 5 September 1591, Francis de Sales crowned all his studies with a brilliant doctorate *in utroque jure*. Taking leave of the University of Padua, he departed, he said, from “that hill on whose summit dwell, without doubt, the Muses as in another Parnassus.”

Before leaving Italy, it was appropriate to visit this country so rich in history, culture and religion. With Déage, Gallois and a few Savoyard friends, they left at the end of October for Venice, then on to Ancona and the sanctuary at Loreto. Their final destination was to reach Rome. Unfortunately, the presence of brigands, emboldened by the death of Pope Gregory XIV, and also the lack of money did not allow them to do so.

On his return to Padua, he resumed his study of the *Codex* for some time, including the account of the journey. But at the end of 1591, he gave up because of fatigue. It was time to think about returning to his homeland. Indeed, the return to Savoy took place towards the end of February 1592.

---

# **St            Francis            de            Sales**

# university student in Padua (1/2)

Francis went to Padua, a city belonging to the Venetian Republic, in October 1588, accompanied by his younger brother Gallois, a twelve-year-old boy who would study with the Jesuits, and their faithful tutor, Fr Déage. At the end of the 16th century, the law faculty of the University of Padua enjoyed an extraordinary reputation, surpassing even that of the famous Studium in Bologna. When he delivered his Discourse of Thanksgiving following his promotion to doctor, Francis de Sales weaved its praises in dithyrambic form:

*Up to that time, I had not dedicated any work to the holy and sacred science of law: but when, afterwards, I decided to commit myself to such a study, I had absolutely no need to look for where to turn or where to go; this college of Padua immediately attracted me by its celebrity and, under the most favourable auspices, in fact, at that time, it had doctors and readers such as it never had and never will have greater.*

Whatever he may say, it is certain that the decision to study law did not come from him, but was imposed on him by his father. Other reasons might have played in Padua's favour, namely the need that the Senate of a bilingual state had for magistrates with a dual French and Italian culture.

## **In the homeland of humanism**

Crossing the Alps for the first time, Francis de Sales set foot in the homeland of humanism. In Padua, he could not only admire the palaces and churches, especially the basilica of St Anthony, but also Giotto's frescoes, Donatello's bronzes, Mantegna's paintings and Titian's frescoes. His stay in the Italian peninsula also allowed him to get to know several cities of art, in particular, Venice,

Milan and Turin.

On a literary level, he could not fail to be in contact with some of the most famous productions. Did he have in his hand Dante Alighieris *Divine Comedy*, the poems of Petrarch, forerunner of humanism and first poet of his time, the novellas of Boccaccio, founder of Italian prose, Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, or Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*? His preference was for spiritual literature, in particular the thoughtful reading of Lorenzo Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat*. He acknowledged modestly, "I don't think I speak perfect Italian."

In Padua, Francis had the good fortune to meet a distinguished Jesuit in the person of Father Antonio Possevino. This "wandering humanist with an epic life" who had been charged by the pope with diplomatic missions in Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Poland and France, had taken up permanent residence in Padua shortly before Francis' arrival. He became his spiritual director and guide in his studies and knowledge of the world.

### **The University of Padua**

Founded in 1222, the University of Padua was the oldest university in Italy after Bologna, of which it was an offshoot. It successfully taught not only law, regarded as the *scientia scientiarum*, but also theology, philosophy and medicine. The 1,500 or so students came from all over Europe and were not all Catholics, which sometimes led to worries and unrest.

Fights were frequent, sometimes bloody. One of the favourite dangerous games was the "Paduan hunt" Francis de Sales would one day tell a friend, Jean-Pierre Camus, "that a student, after striking a stranger, with his sword, took refuge with a woman he discovered was the mother of the young man he had just murdered." He himself, who did not go round without a sword, was one day involved in a fight by fellow students, who considered his gentleness to be a form of cowardice.

Professors and students alike appreciated the proverbial *patavinam libertatem*, which in addition to being cultivated in intellectual pursuit, also incited a good number of students to “flutter about” by giving themselves up to the good life. Even the disciples closest to Francis were not models of virtue. The widow of one of them would later recount, in her picturesque language, how her future husband had staged a farce in bad taste with some accomplices, aimed at throwing Francis into the arms of a “miserable whore”.

### **The study of law**

In obedience to his father, Francis devoted himself courageously to the study of civil law, to which he wanted to add that of ecclesiastical law, which would make him a future doctor of *utroque jure*. The study of law also involved the study of jurisprudence, which is “the science by means of which law is administered”.

The study focused on the sources of law, that is, ancient Roman law, collected and interpreted in the 6th century by the jurists of the Emperor Justinian. Throughout his life, he would remember the definition of justice, read at the beginning of the *Digesto*: “a perpetual, strong and constant will to render to everyone what belongs to him.”

Examining Francis’ notebooks, we can identify some of his reactions to certain laws. He is in full agreement with the title of the Code that opens the series of laws: *Of the Sovereign Trinity and the Catholic Faith*, and with the defence that immediately follows: *That no one should be allowed to discuss them in public*. “This title” he noted, “is precious, I would say sublime, and worthy of being read often against reformers, know-it-alls and politicians.”

Francis de Sales’ legal education rested on a foundation that seemed unquestionable at the time. For the Catholics of his time, “tolerating” Protestantism could take on no other meaning than that of being accomplices to error; hence the need to fight it by all means, including those provided by the law in force. Under no circumstances was one

to resign oneself to the presence of heresy, which appeared not only as an error on the level of faith, but also as a source of division and disturbance in Christianity. In the eagerness of his twenties, Francis de Sales shared this view.

But this eagerness also had free rein over those who favoured injustice and persecution, since, with regard to Title XXVI of Book III, he wrote: "As precious as gold and worthy of being written in capital letters is the ninth law which states: 'Let the relatives of the prince be punished with fire if they persecute the inhabitants of the provinces.'"

Later, Francis would appeal to the one he designated as "our Justinian" to denounce the slowness of justice on the part of the judge who "excuses himself by invoking a thousand reasons of custom, style, theory, practice and caution." In his lectures on ecclesiastical law, he studied the collection of laws that he would later use, in particular those of the medieval canonist Gratianus, *inter alia*, to demonstrate that the bishop of Rome is the "true successor of Saint Peter and head of the Church militant", and that religious men and women must be placed "under the obedience of the bishops."

Consulting the handwritten notes taken by Francis during his stay in Padua, one is struck by the extremely neat handwriting. He went from the Gothic script, still used in Paris, to the modern script of the humanists.

But in the end, his law studies must have bored him quite a bit. On a hot summer's day, faced with the coldness of the laws and their remoteness in time, he wrote, disillusioned: "Since these matters are old, it did not seem profitable to devote oneself to examining them in this steamy weather, which is too hot to comfortably deal with cold and chilling discussions."

### **Theological studies and intellectual crisis**

While dedicated to the study of law, Francis continued to take a close interest in theology. According to

his nephew, when he freshly arrived in Padua, "he set to work with all possible diligence, and placed on the lectern in his room the Summa of the Angelic Doctor, St Thomas, so that he could have it before his eyes every day and easily consult it to understand other books. He greatly enjoyed reading the books of St Bonaventure. He acquired a good knowledge of the Latin Fathers, especially the 'two brilliant luminaries of the Church', 'the great Saint Augustine' and Saint Jerome, who were also 'two great captains of the ancient Church', without forgetting the 'glorious Saint Ambrose' and Saint Gregory the Great. Among the Greek Fathers, he admired St John Chrysostom 'who, because of his sublime eloquence, was praised and called Golden Mouth'. He also frequently cited St Gregory of Nazianzus, St Basil, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Athanasius, Origen and others."

Consulting the fragments of notes that have come down to us, we learn that he also read the most important authors of his time, in particular, the great Spanish exegete and theologian Juan Maldonado, a Jesuit who had successfully established new methods in the study of the texts of Scripture and the Church Fathers. In addition to personal study, Francis was able to take theology courses at the university, where Fr Déage was preparing his doctorate, and benefit from the help and advice of Fr Possevino. It is also known that he often visited the Franciscans at the Basilica of St Anthony.

His reflection focused again on the problem of predestination and grace, to the point that he filled five notebooks. In reality, Francis found himself faced with a dilemma: to remain faithful to convictions that had always been his, or to stick to the classical positions of St Augustine and St Thomas, "the greatest and unrivalled doctor." Now he found it difficult to "sympathise" with such a discouraging doctrine of these two masters, or at least with the current interpretation, according to which men have no right to salvation, because it depends entirely on a free decision by God.

By his adolescence, Francis had developed a more



optimistic view of God's plan. His personal convictions were reinforced after the appearance in 1588 of the book by Spanish Jesuit Luis Molina, whose Latin title *Concordia* summed up the thesis well: *Concord of Free Will with the Gift of Grace*. In this work, predestination in the strict sense was replaced with a predestination that took into account man's merits, i.e. his good or bad deeds. In other words, Molina affirmed both God's sovereign action and the decisive role of the freedom he bestowed on man.

In 1606, the bishop of Geneva would have the honour of being consulted by the pope on the theological dispute between the Jesuit Molina and the Dominican Domingo Báñez on the same issue, for whom Molina's doctrine granted too much autonomy to human freedom, at the risk of jeopardising God's sovereignty.

The *Treatise on the Love of God*, which appeared in 1616, contains in Chapter 5 of Book III the thought of Francis de Sales, summarised in "fourteen lines", which, according to Jean-Pierre Camus, had cost him "the reading of one thousand two hundred pages of a large volume." With a commendable effort to be concise and exact, Francis affirmed both the divine liberality and generosity, and human freedom and responsibility in the act of writing this weighty sentence: "It is up to us to be his: for although it is a gift of God to belong to God, yet it is a gift that God never refuses to anyone, on the contrary, he offers it to all, to grant it to those who will willingly consent to receive it."

Making his own the ideas of the Jesuits, who in the eyes of many appeared to be innovators, and whom the Jansenists with Blaise Pascal would soon brand as bad theologians, too lax, Francis de Sales grafted his theology into the current of Christian humanism and opted for the "God of the human heart" Salesian theology, which rests on the goodness of God who wants all to be saved, would likewise present itself with a pressing invitation to the human person to respond with the whole "heart" to the appeals of grace.

[\(continued\)](#)

---

# **Nino, a young man like so many... meets the purpose of life in his Lord**

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*

---

## **St Francis de Sales as a young student in Paris**

In 1578 Francis de Sales was 11 years old. His father, wishing to make his eldest son a prominent figure in Savoy, sent him to Paris to continue his studies in the intellectual capital of the time. The boarding school he wanted him to attend was the college of nobles, but Francis

preferred the Jesuit one. With the help of his mother, he won his case and became a student of the Jesuits at their college in Clermont.

Recalling his studies in Paris one day, Francis de Sales was full of praise: Savoy had granted him "his beginnings in the fine arts", he would write, but it was at the University of Paris, "very flourishing and much frequented", where he had "applied himself in earnest first to the fine arts, then to all areas of philosophy, with an ease and profit favoured by the fact that even the roofs, so to speak, and the walls seem to philosophise."

In a page of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales recounts a recollection of Paris at that time, in which he reconstructs the climate in which the capital's student youth was immersed, torn between forbidden pleasures, fashionable heresy and monastic devotion:

*When I was a young man in Paris, two students, one of whom was a heretic, were spending the night in the suburb of Saint-Jacques, having a debauched night out, when they heard the morning bell ringing in the Carthusian church. The heretic asked his Catholic companion why he rang the bell, and the latter told him how devoutly the holy offices were celebrated in that monastery. O God, he said, how different these religious are from ours! They sing like angels and we like brute animals. The next day, wanting to verify for himself what he had learned from his companion's account, he saw monks in their stalls, lined up like marble statues in their niches, motionless, making no gesture except that of psalmody, which they did with a truly angelic attention and devotion, according to the custom of that holy order. Then the young man, overwhelmed with admiration, was seized with an extreme consolation at seeing God worshipped so well by Catholics, and decided, as he then did, to enter the bosom of the Church, the true and only bride of him who had visited him with his inspiration in the dishonourable bed of infamy in which he lay.*



Another anecdote also shows that Francis de Sales was not unaware of the rebellious spirit of the Parisians, which made them “abhor commands”. It was about a man “who, after living eighty years in the city of Paris, without ever leaving it, as soon as he was ordered by the king to remain there the rest of his days, he immediately went out to see the countryside, something he had never wanted to do in all his life.”

## Humanities

The Jesuits at the time were urged on by their origins. Francis de Sales spent ten years in their college, covering the entire curriculum of studies, moving from grammar to classical studies to rhetoric and philosophy. As an external pupil, he lived not far from the college with his tutor, Fr Déage, and his three cousins, Amé, Louis et Gaspard.

The Jesuit method involved a lecture by the teacher (*praelectio*), followed by numerous exercises by the students such as writing verses and speeches, study of the lectures, declamations, conversations and disputations (*disputatio*) in Latin. To motivate their students, teachers appealed to two ‘inclinations’ present in the human soul: pleasure, fuelled by imitation of the ancients, a sense of beauty and the pursuit of literary perfection; and striving or emulation, encouraged by a sense of honour and a prize for the winners. As for religious motivations, they were first and foremost about seeking the greater glory of God (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*).

Going through Francis’ writings, one realises the extent to which his Latin culture was extensive and profound, even if he did not always read the authors in the original text. Cicero has his place there, but rather as a philosopher; he is a great spirit, if not the greatest “among pagan philosophers”. Virgil, prince of the Latin poets, is not forgotten: in the middle of a paragraph a line from the *Aeneid* or the *Eglogues* suddenly appears, embellishing the sentence and stimulating curiosity. Pliny the Elder, author of *Natural*

*History*, would provide Francis de Sales with an almost inexhaustible reserve of comparisons, “similes” and curious, often phantasmagorical data.

At the end of his literary studies, he obtained the “bachelor’s degree” that opened up access to philosophy and the “liberal arts”.

### **Philosophy and the “liberal arts”**

The “liberal arts” encompassed not only philosophy proper, but also mathematics, cosmography, natural history, music, physics, astronomy, chemistry, all “intermingled with metaphysical considerations”. The Jesuits’ interest in the exact sciences, closer in this to Italian humanism than to French humanism, should also be noted.

Francis de Sales’ writings show that his studies in philosophy left traces in his mental universe. Aristotle, “the greatest brain” of antiquity can be found everywhere in Francis. To Aristotle, he wrote, we owe this “ancient axiom among philosophers, which every man desires to know”. What struck him most about Aristotle was that he had written “an admirable treatise on the virtues”. As for Plato, he regards him as a “great spirit”, if not “the greatest”. He greatly esteemed Epictetus, “the best man in all paganism”.

Knowledge concerning cosmography, corresponding to our geography, was made possible by the travels and discoveries of the time. Completely unaware of the cause of the phenomenon of magnetic north, he was well aware that “this polar star” is the one “towards which the needle of the compass constantly tends; it is thanks to it that helmsmen are guided on the sea and can know where their routes take them”. The study of astronomy opened his spirit to the knowledge of the new Copernican theories.

As for music, he confides that without being a connoisseur of it, he nevertheless enjoyed it “very much”. Gifted with an innate sense of harmony in everything, he nevertheless admitted he knew the importance of discordance, which is the basis of polyphony: “For music to be beautiful,

it is required not only that the voices be clear, sharp and distinct, but also that they be linked together in such a way as to constitute a pleasing consonance and harmony, by virtue of the union existing in the distinction and the distinction of the voices, which, not without reason, is called a discordant chord, or rather, a concordant discord". The lute is often mentioned in his writings, which is hardly surprising, knowing that the 16th century was the golden age of this instrument.

### **Extracurricular activities**

School did not entirely absorb the life of our young man, who also needed relaxation. From 1560 onwards, the Jesuits initiated new possibilities such as reducing the daily timetable, inserting recreation between school and study hours, relaxing after meals, creating a spacious "courtyard" for recreation, walking once a week and excursions. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* recalls the games he had to participate in during his youth, when he lists "the game of court tennis, ball, ring races, chess and other board games". Once a week, on Thursdays, or if this was not possible, on Sundays, an entire afternoon was set aside for fun in the countryside.

Did the young Francis attend and even participate in drama/theatre at the Clermont college? More than likely, because the Jesuits were the promoters of plays and moral comedies presented in public on a stage, or on platforms set up on trestles, even in the college church. The repertoire was generally inspired by the Bible, the lives of the saints, especially the acts of the martyrs, or the history of the Church, without excluding allegorical scenes such as the struggle of virtues against vices, dialogues between faith and the Church, between heresy and reason. It was generally considered that such a performance was well worth a good sermon.

### **Riding, fencing and dancing**

His father watched over Francis' complete training as a perfect gentleman and the proof lies in the fact that he required him to engage in learning the "arts of nobility" or the arts of chivalry in which he himself excelled. Francis had to practise riding, fencing and dancing.

As for fencing, it is known that it distinguished the gentleman, just as carrying a sword was part of the privileges of the nobility. Modern fencing, born in Spain at the beginning of the 15th century, had been codified by the Italians, who made it known in France.

Francis de Sales sometimes had the opportunity to show his prowess in wielding the sword during royal or simulated assaults, but throughout his life he would fight against duelling challenges that often ended in the death of a contender. His nephew recounted that during his mission to Thonon, unable to stop two "wretches" who "were fencing with bare swords" and "kept crossing their swords against each other", "the man of God, relying on his skill, which he had learned a long time ago, hurled himself at them and defeated them to such an extent that they regretted their unworthy action."

As for dance that had acquired noble titles in Italian courts, it seems to have been introduced to the French court by Catherine de' Medici, wife of Henry II. Did Francis de Sales participate in any ballet, figurative dance, accompanied by music? It is not impossible, because he had his acquaintances in some of the great families.

In themselves, he would later write in the *Introduction*, dances are not a bad thing; it all depends on the use one makes of them: "Playing, dancing is licit when done for fun and not for affection". Let us add to all these exercises the learning of courtesy and good manners, especially with the Jesuits who paid much attention to "civility", "modesty" and "honesty".

## **Religious and moral formation**

On the religious level, the teaching of Christian

doctrine and catechism was of great importance in Jesuit colleges. The catechism was taught in all classes, learnt by heart in the lower ones following the *disputatio* method and with prizes for the best. Public competitions were sometimes organised with a religiously motivated staging. Sacred singing, which the Lutherans and Calvinists had developed greatly, was cultivated. Particular emphasis was placed on the liturgical year and festivals, using “stories” from Holy Scripture.

Committed to restoring the practice of the sacraments, the Jesuits encouraged their students not only to attend daily Mass, not at all an exceptional custom in the 16th century, but also to frequent Eucharistic communion, frequent confession, and devotion to the Virgin and the saints. Francis responded fervently to the exhortations of his spiritual teachers, committing himself to receive communion “as often as possible”, “at least every month.”

With the Renaissance, the *virtus* of the ancients, duly Christianised, returned to the fore. The Jesuits became its promoters, encouraging their pupils to effort, personal discipline and self-reformation. Francis undoubtedly adhered to the ideal of the most esteemed Christian virtues, such as obedience, humility, piety, the practice of the duty of one’s state, work, good manners and chastity. He later devotes the entire central part of his *Introduction* to “the exercise of the virtues”.

### **Bible study and theology**

On a carnival Sunday in 1584, while all of Paris went out to have a good time, his tutor saw Francis looking worried. Not knowing whether he was ill or sad, he proposed that he attend the carnival. To this proposal the young man responded with this prayer taken from Scripture: “Turn away my eyes from vain things”, and added: “*Domine, fac ut videam*”. See what? “Sacred theology”, was his reply; “it will teach me what God wants my soul to learn.” Fr Déage, who was preparing his doctorate at the Sorbonne, had the wisdom not to oppose

the desire of his heart. Francis became enthusiastic about the sacred sciences to the point of skipping meals. His tutor gave him his own course notes and allowed him to attend public debates on theology.

The source of this devotion was to be found not so much in the theological courses at the Sorbonne, but rather in the exegesis lectures held at the Royal College. After its foundation in 1530, this College witnessed the triumph of new trends in Bible study. In 1584, Gilbert Genebrard, a Benedictine from Cluny, commented on the *Song of Songs*. Later, when he composed his *Treatise*, the bishop of Geneva remembered this master and named him "with reverence and emotion, because" he wrote, "I was his pupil, though an unsuccessful one, when he taught at the royal college in Paris." Despite his philological rigour, Genebrard passed on to him an allegorical and mystical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, which enchanted him. As Father Lajeunie writes, Francis found in this sacred book "the inspiration of his life, the theme of his masterpiece and the best source of his optimism."

The effects of this discovery were not long in coming. The young student experienced a period marked by exceptional fervour. He joined the Congregation of Mary, an association promoted by the Jesuits, which brought together the spiritual elite of the students of their college, of which he soon became the assistant and then the "prefect". His heart was inflamed with the love of God. Quoting the psalmist, he said he was "drunk with the abundance" of God's house, filled with the torrent of divine "voluptuousness". His greatest affection was reserved for the Virgin Mary, "beautiful as the moon, shining like the sun'."

### **Devotion in crisis**

This sensitive fervour lasted for a time. Then came a crisis, a "strange torment", accompanied by "fear of sudden death and God's judgement." According to the testimony of Mother Chantal, "he almost completely ceased eating and sleeping and became very thin and pale as wax." Two

explanations have attracted the attention of commentators: temptations against chastity and the question of predestination. It is not necessary to dwell on the temptations. The way of thinking and acting of the surrounding world, the habits of certain companions who frequented "dishonest women", offered him examples and invitations capable of attracting any young man of his age and condition.

Another reason for crisis was the question of predestination, a topic that was on the agenda among theologians. Luther and Calvin had made it their battle-horse in the dispute over justification by faith alone, regardless of the "merits" that man can acquire through good works. Calvin had decisively affirmed that God "determined what He intended to do for each individual man; for He does not create them all in the same condition, but destines some to eternal life, others to eternal damnation." At the Sorbonne itself, where Francis took courses, it was taught, on the authority of St Augustine and St Thomas, that God had not decreed the salvation of all men.

Francis believed that he was a reprobate in God's eyes and destined for eternal damnation and hell. At the height of his anguish, he made a heroic act of selfless love and abandonment to God's mercy. He even came to the conclusion, absurd from a logical point of view, of willingly accepting to go to hell but on condition that he did not curse the Supreme Good. The solution to his "strange torment" is known, in particular, through the confidences he gave to Mother Chantal: one day in January 1587, he entered a nearby church and, after praying in the chapel of the Virgin, it seemed to him that his illness had fallen at his feet like "scales of leprosy".

Actually, this crisis had some really positive effects on Francis' spiritual development. On the one hand, it helped him move from sensitive, perhaps selfish and even narcissistic devotion to pure love, stripped of all self-interested and childish gratification. And on the other, it opened his spirit to a new understanding of God's love, which

wants the salvation of all human beings. Certainly, he would always defend the Catholic doctrine about the necessity of works to be saved, faithful in this to the definitions of the Council of Trent, but the term “merit” would not enjoy his sympathies. The true reward of love can only be love. We are here at the root of Salesian optimism.

## Balance

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the ten years the young Francis de Sales spent in Paris. He concluded his studies there in 1588 with the licence and degree “in the arts”, which opened the way for him to higher studies in theology, law and medicine. Which did he choose, or rather, which were imposed on him by his father? Knowing the ambitious plans his father had for his eldest son, one understands that the study of law was his preference. Francis went on to study law at the University of Padua, in the Republic of Venice.

From the age of eleven to twenty-one, that is, during the ten years of his adolescence and young adulthood, Francis was a student of the Jesuits in Paris. The intellectual, moral and religious formation he received from the priests of the Society of Jesus would leave an imprint that he would retain throughout his life. But Francis de Sales retained his originality. He was not tempted to become a Jesuit, but rather a Capuchin. ‘Salesianity’ would always have features that were too special to be simply assimilated to other ways of being and reacting to people and events.

---

# Canillitas. Child labour in



# the Dominican Republic (video)

*Child labour is not a reality of the past, unfortunately. There are still around 160 million children working in the world, and almost half of them are employed in various forms of hazardous work; some of them start working at the age of 5! This keeps them away from education and has serious negative consequences on their cognitive, volitional, emotional and social development, affecting their health and quality of life.*

Before discussing child labour, it must be recognised that not all work performed by children can be classified as such. The involvement of children in certain family, school or social activities that do not hinder their schooling not only does not harm their health and development, but is beneficial. Such activities are part of integral education, help children learn skills that are very useful in their lives and prepare them for responsibilities.

The International Labour Organisation's definition of child labour is work activity that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity and is harmful to their physical and psychological development. These are jobs in the streets, in factories, in mines, with long working hours that many times deprive them of even the necessary rest. These are jobs that physically, mentally, socially or morally are risky or harmful to children, and that interfere with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to go to school, forcing them to leave school early or forcing them to try to reconcile school attendance with long hours of hard work.

This definition of child labour is not shared by all countries. However, there are parameters that can define it: age, the difficulty or danger of the work, the number of hours

worked, the conditions in which the work is performed and also the level of development of the country. As for age, it is commonly accepted that someone should under the age of 12 should not be working: international standards speak of a minimum age for admission to work, i.e. not less than the age at which one finishes compulsory schooling.

Recent statistics speak of around 160 million children working, and this figure in reality may be considerably higher, as it is difficult to calculate the actual situation. Concretely, one out of every 10 children in the world is a victim of child labour. And one must bear in mind that this statistic also includes degrading work – if one can call it work – such as forced recruitment in armed conflicts, slavery or sexual exploitation. And it is worrying that the statistics show that there are 8 million more children working today than in 2016, and that this increase is mostly found in children between the ages of 5 and 11. International organisations warn that if the trend continues like this, the number of children employed in child labour could increase by 46 million in the coming years if adequate social protection measures are not taken.

The cause of child labour is mainly poverty, but so are lack of access to education and vulnerability in the case of orphaned or abandoned children.

This work in the vast majority of cases also entails physical consequences (chronic illnesses and diseases, mutilation), psychological consequences (from being abused, boys become abusers; after living in hostile and violent environments they themselves become hostile and violent, they develop low self-esteem and a lack of hope for the future) and social consequences (corruption of customs, alcohol, drugs, prostitution, offences).

This is not a new phenomenon, it also happened in Don Bosco's time when many boys, driven by poverty, sought expedients for survival in the big cities. The saint's response was to take

them in, provide them with food and shelter, literacy, education, a worthy job and make those abandoned boys feel that they were part of a family.

Even today, these boys show great insecurity and distrust, they are malnourished and have serious emotional deficiencies. Today, too, we must seek them out, meet them, gradually offering them what they love in order to finally give them what they need: a home, an education, a family environment and in the future a worthy job.

An attempt is made to get to know the particular situation of each one of them, to seek out family members in order to reintegrate the boys into the family when possible, to give them the opportunity to leave child labour, to socialise, to attend school, accompanying them so that they can realise their dream and life project thanks to education, and to become witnesses for other boys who find themselves in the same situation as them.

In 70 countries around the world, Salesians are active in the field of child labour. We present one of them, that of the Dominican Republic.

*Canillitas* was the name given to boys who were street vendors of newspapers, who due to poverty had trousers that remained short, leaving their *canillas*, or legs, uncovered. Similar to these, today's boys have to move their legs in the street every day to earn a living, so the project for them was called *Canillitas con Don Bosco*.

It started as a Salesian oratory project, which then became a permanent activity: the *Canillitas con Don Bosco Centre* in Santo Domingo.

The project started on 8 December 1985 with three young people from the Salesian environment who dedicated themselves full-time, giving up their other work. They were clear about the four stages to follow: Search, Reception, Socialisation and Accompaniment. They started looking for young people on the streets and in the parks of Santo Domingo, contacting them,

gaining their trust and establishing bonds of friendship. After two months, they invited them to spend a Sunday together and were surprised when more than 300 youngsters showed up at the meeting. It was a festive afternoon with games, music and snacks that prompted the children to spontaneously ask when they could return. The answer could only be: "next Sunday".

Their numbers grew steadily, after they realised that the welcome, the spaces and the activities were just right for them. The camp organised in the summer was attended by about a hundred of the most faithful. Here the boys received a *canillitas* card in the camp, to give them an identity and a sense of belonging, also because many of them did not even know their date of birth.

With the growth in numbers of the boys came the growth in expenses. This led to the need to seek funding and implicitly to make the project known to these boys.

On 2 May 1986, the Salesian community presented the project to the Salesian superiors of the Salesian Province of the Antilles, a project that received unanimous support. Thus, the *Canillitas con Don Bosco* programme was officially launched and continues today after almost 38 years of existence. And it not only continues but has grown and expanded, being a model for other initiatives. This is how the *Canillitas con Laura Vicuña* programme was born, developed by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for working girls, the *Chiriperos con Don Bosco* programmes, to help young people who, to earn a living, did any little job (such as carrying water, throwing away rubbish, running errands...), and the *Apprentices with Don Bosco* programme, which takes care of minors who worked in the many machine shops, exploited by certain entrepreneurs. For the latter, the Salesians built a workshop with the help of some good industrialists and the First Lady of the Republic, so that they would be free to learn a trade and not be at the mercy of injustice.

As a result of this success, all these initiatives and others have merged into the *Network of Boys and Girls with Don Bosco*,

currently composed of 11 centres with programmes adapted to the age groups of the children, which have become an example in the fight against child labour in the Caribbean country. The following are part of this network: *Canillitas con Don Bosco*, *Chiriperos con Don Bosco*, *Aprendices con Don Bosco*, *Hogar Escuela de Niñas Doña Chucha*, *Hogar de Niñas Nuestra Señora de la Altagracia*, *Hogar Escuela Santo Domingo Savio*, *Quédate con Nosotros*, *Don Bosco Amigo*, *Amigos y Amigas de Domingo Savio*, *Mano a Mano con Don Bosco* and *Sur Joven*.

The network has carried out programmes focused on developing skills in children and young people, fostering their integral formation and growth. It has directly accompanied some 93,000 children, adolescents and young people, reached more than 70,000 families, and indirectly had more than 150,000 beneficiaries, working with an average of more than 2,500 beneficiaries each year. All this has been achieved on the basis of Don Bosco's Preventive System, which has led boys and young men to recover their self-esteem, to be protagonists of their own lives in order to become "upright citizens and good Christians".

This work has also had a socio-political impact. It contributed to the growth of social sensitivity towards these poor boys who did what they could to survive. The echo of the Salesian programme in the media of the Dominican Republic gave a group of *Canillitas* the opportunity to participate in a session of the country's National Congress and in the drafting of the Code of the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents of the Dominican Republic (Law 136-03), promulgated on 7 August 2003.

Subsequently, several agreements were signed with the Professional Technical Training Institute, the National Council for Children and Adolescents, and the School of the Magistracy.

Thanks to the support of many businesspeople and civil society, partnerships and interrelationships were established with UNICEF, the International Labour Organisation, the

national government, the Coalition of NGOs for Children of the Dominican Republic, and even made it to the Conference of the Americas at the White House in 2007, with a reception by President George Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Salesian work has contributed to the reduction of child labour and the increase of education rates in the country. The Salesian missionary promoter, Fr Juan Linares, was named the Dominican Republic's Man of the Year in 2011, and for 10 years was a member of the board of directors of the National Council for Children and Adolescents, the governing body of the National System for the Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents.

Recently, a documentary, *Canillitas*, was made to inform, denounce and raise awareness about child labour. The short documentary reflects the daily life of six child workers in the Dominican Republic, as well as the work of Salesian missionaries to change this reality, thanks to education.

We present the film's fact sheet.

Title: Canillitas

Year of production: 2022

Running time: 21 minutes

Genre: Documentary

Suitable audience: Everyone

Country: Spain

Director: Raúl de la Fuente, 2014 Goya Award for "Minerita" and in 2019 for "Un día más con vida"

Production: Kanaki Films

Versions and subtitles: Spanish, English, French, Italian, Portuguese, German and Polish

**Online version:**

*(Article written with material sent by Misiones Salesianas in Madrid, Spain)*