

CONTENTS

From The Editor's Desk:
Still, Still, Still.....3

Conjugal Love
 - *Giampaolo Dianin*.....4

Courage to Be Part of God's Dream
 - *Maria Chiara Bregolin*.....6

Youth on the Move: Every Grace Is
 A Gift of God
 - *Ezio Risatti*.....8

Salesian Saint: Maria Romero
 Menezes.....10

Witnesses In And For Our Times:
 St. John of the Cross.....13

Lectio Divina: Faith and Good Christian
 Living - *Ian Pinto sdb*.....16

Quietspaces: The Strength of the Little
 Ones - *Pope Francis*.....18

Homemade Bread
 - *Fr. Ian Doulton's Collection* 20

Fioretti of Don Bosco - 11
 - *Michele Molineris*.....24

Reflecting on Mary: The Soil for Faith,
 Silence and Prayer
 - *Don Giorgio Chatrian*.....28

NewsBits.....31

Adam's Christmas Prayer
 - *John Scally*.....33

In a Cheerful Mood.....32

Loving Children to their
 Loving Mother.....34

They Are Grateful to
 Our Lady & Don Bosco.....35



A Blessed Christmas to All

We wish all our benefactors and well-wishers the graces of a holy peace-filled Christmas. You and your families will be remembered in our prayers and Masses offered over the Christmas Octave. May the child Jesus born for us in Bethlehem, bring healing, hope and peace to all our lives.

From The Editor's Desk

STILL, STILL, STILL

Maybe just the sight of that word stirs up some anger. For most this is such a busy time and there's no time to be still. Younger children are wired and demanding more time. Older children are back home for the holidays, filling up the house with all that comes with them. The end of the year approaches and there are business matters to close out, ones which may well determine the success or failure of the entire year. There are gifts to buy and deliver and get in the mail. Even when we think it's all done, we realize we've forgotten something. Someone told me the other day, "The only thing about Christmas I really like is the midnight Christmas service. I wish everything else would just go away. For others, the revelry the rest of the world goes through, is a reminder of the relative emptiness of their lives. Anxiety and loneliness increase for many this time of the year. Our physical defenses are lowered and illnesses rise just about now. Even when we're laid low, our minds and hearts are overcrowded.

Still, Still, Still, God beckons us to be still, to know his stillness, to quiet ourselves so that we may know the peace of his presence. As the pressure builds around us, within us, most of us find we are reacting to the circumstances, people, and feelings we encounter rather than observing them and responding appropriately. We react, often overreact, and then have to deal with the havoc we have wreaked on ourselves. Something beyond our control has caused us to lose the little control we did have. Tightness rises in our chests, shoulders, necks, head, stomach, backs.

Still, Still, Still, Though we may have less time available, this is when we need our quiet time with God all the more. If any question requires groundedness, this one does. The source of life and peace whispers to us to devote time each day to listening and appreciating God's presence. For most I recommend giving up talking to God for this time of year. It's better to close our mouths and open our hearts. Sit in God's presence, quietly. Allow all the fear, frustration, anxiety, anger - whatever else you may feel - to pass on through. Stay quiet until it has gone by. It shouldn't take long, maybe twenty minutes or so. Don't try to make the feelings go away; just feel them and stay quiet until the feelings dissolve. There, at the end of that, is the still voice of God touching us and refreshing us. It's a practice that rewards the practitioner. The more we do it, the more we find in it. It's the same quiet presence that Mary and Joseph and the shepherds drew on that holy night long ago. It's the light of Christ being born in us.

The birth of Christ the light of our Lord, the stillness of his peace, is available. Will you make yourself available to it? Or will you merely add your own chaos to that of the world around you? There is a higher way. *Be still and know that I am God* (Psalm 46:10).

Fr. Ian Doulton sdb

CONJUGAL LOVE

By Giampaolo Dianin

In every love story, it is God who leads the woman to the man as he did with Adam and Eve and so allows them both to overcome loneliness. This truth is made more explicit with the seal of the Sacrament.

After commenting on the hymn to love of St. Paul, in chapter IV of *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis gives us a long and more drawn-out systematic reflection on conjugal love which now, in the light of the Word, assumes the traits of “conjugal charity.” The Pope succeeds in putting together some anthropological and theological reflections regarding the concreteness of the conjugal experience that positively nourishes both the spiritual and existential journey of the spouses.

The text opens with a definition of conjugal charity: “This is the love between husband and wife, a love sanctified, enriched and illuminated by the grace of the sacrament of marriage. It is an “affective union”, spiritual and sacrificial, which combines the warmth of friendship and erotic passion, and endures long after emotions and passions subside. [...] Conjugal love reaches that fullness to which it is interiorly ordained: conjugal charity.” (AL 120) In the above excerpt we find a concentration of all the themes



that the Pope will subsequently develop throughout this chapter which is actually the heart of the Apostolic Exhortation.

Consequently conjugal love is a path that leads to the goal which is conjugal charity. We know that charity (*agape*) is an important term in the New Testament. *Agape* is the very love of God made manifest in Jesus who became man but who also gave his life for us. Pope Benedict writes that *agape* is a love which involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier. Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing for sacrifice” (*Deus caritas est* 6). Jesus gave us the logic of Christian *agape*: “Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will save it.” (Lk 17:33).

Let us try to imagine the path that goes from love as an experience to one which all men and women yearn for, a love we call *agape*, by precisely following the steps that Pope Francis indicates in his definition.

Love unites spouses, binds them to one another, seeking closeness and contact, nourished by the gaze and complicity which expresses itself in words that transfigure it by creating the couple's own language, breathing in the smell of the other and sensing the desires of the beloved. Love unites without confusing, holds together without either ceasing to be oneself. Per-

haps it is precisely this inevitable distinction that leads us to always seek contact and unity, while knowing and experiencing that we remain two individuals in any case.

This love, the Pope goes on, is “sanctified, enriched and illuminated by the grace of the sacrament of marriage.” This sacrament is not something more that is added, that is poured into it from the outside or something which could be dispensed with. There is a seed of sacramentality in every encounter of two people who love each other because God created man and woman in this way and the conjugal bond is a sign of his God's own love and that of Jesus' love for his bride, the Church. In every love story, it is God who leads the woman to the man as he did with Adam and Eve and thus allows both to overcome their loneliness. The sacrament of marriage makes this truth explicit and brings as a gift to the spouses the strength to live their lives as Jesus lived his. The Spirit who descends on the two spouses who celebrate their marriage in the Lord, gives them the opportunity to live their love like *agape* with all the richness and radicalness that this word brings with it. The Pope writes: “God is, as it were, “mirrored” in them; he imprints onto them his own features and the indelible character of his love.” (AL 121).

Thus their union, affirms Pope Francis, is the “affective union”, spiritual and sacrificial, which combines the warmth of friendship and erotic passion.” A full love that involves man and woman entirely: feelings, soul

and body; spirituality and sexuality. With a certainty that is not marginal: "Although it can survive even when feelings are weakened." And here we recognize the "Christian difference" that leads the two not to be at the mercy of their feelings and their inevitable changes, but to face every effort and crisis with the strength and grace of the sacrament, with all the help and the

means which the Church places at their disposal, and the guidance of the gospel.

"This love permeates the duties of married life and enjoys pride of place." The Pope quotes the words of an Encyclical of 1930 (*Casti Connubii*) to remind them that this love is the evangelical salt of the earth, and here the earth is everyday married life. □

COURAGE TO BE PART OF GOD'S DREAM

by Maria Chiara Bregolin

"To want to form a family is to resolve to be a part of God's dream, to choose to dream with him, to want to build with him, to join him in this saga of building a world where no one will feel alone" (AL 321).

This is perhaps the most moving phrase of *Amoris Laetitia*. Because reading it with the innocent heart of Pope Francis, it sounds profoundly true.

It all starts with a dream, with a deep desire that perhaps already starts to mature as a child or, for others, when they realize that they have met the right person.

In the beginning it is a little more than a hazy image of the future you would like to pursue and which gradually takes shape and is defined and then, in time, it changes and perhaps fades and then returns again with sharper focus. This dream of God which is the family is God's concrete way of manifesting his love: I believe familial charity is dear to him because it is as strong and as powerful as death, but also as fragile and changeable as life.

It is the space for contradictions, the opportunity to walk together now and always. This

dream of God has all the characteristics of great dreams, stories you love to listen to. Those in which there are heroes who struggle between good and evil, those with their dark sides that are measured by the seriousness of the historical moment in which they find themselves. After all, it takes courage to believe in the love between a husband and a wife, wanting to be fruitful, to accept the children who come, or accept that there won't be children. It takes courage to dream of being with the same person for eternity and maybe having to persevere in moments when you are at your worst. It takes courage to fight against the highest waves of pain and to stay afloat during the storms of disease. But it also takes courage to keep up with commitments during the trickle of misunderstanding and selfishness.

The family has the power to blur that sense of loneliness that we ontologically carry within

ourselves, driving us apart and at the same time it has the ability to revive us lest we forget the yearning for the infinite and our need for God. For some, the family is a response to the desire for meaning.

I like the idea of dreaming with God: and most of all I like to know that my family realizes His

dream. And how? Through its warm, welcoming and accommodating ways, letting everything be seen through love and God himself wanting none of us to be alone. And I like that it runs right through the story of man and woman, and as this dream is born and becomes, love, passion, flesh and soul....! □

THE LEGEND ABOUT A KING

There is an Irish legend about a king, who had no children to succeed him on the throne. So, he had his messengers post signs in every town and village of his kingdom inviting qualified young men to apply for an interview with the king. This way the king hoped to be able to choose a successor before he died. Two qualifications, especially, were stressed. The person must have a deep love for God and for his neighbour. A young man saw one of the signs. He indeed had a deep love for God and neighbour. He felt a kind of inner voice telling him to apply for an interview. But the young man was so poor that he didn't have decent clothes to wear to an interview. He also had no money to buy provisions for the long journey to the king's castle. So the young man prayed over the matter. He finally decided to beg for the clothes and the provisions he needed. When everything was ready, he set out. After a month of travel, one day the young man caught sight of the king's castle. It sat high on a hill in the distance.

At about the same time, he also caught sight of a poor old beggar sitting by the side of the road. The beggar held out his hands and pleaded for help. "I'm hungry and cold," he said in a weak voice. "Could you give me something warm to wear and something nourishing to eat?" The sight of the beggar moved the young man. He stripped off his warm outer clothes and exchanged them for the tattered old coat of the beggar. He also gave the beggar most of the provisions he had been carrying in his backpack for the return journey. Then, somewhat uncertainly, he walked on to the castle in tattered clothes and without enough food for his return trip. When the young man arrived at the castle, guards met him at the gate. They took him to the visitors' area. After a long wait, the young man was led in to see the king. He bowed low before the throne. When he straightened up, the young man could hardly believe his eyes. He said to the king,

"You were the beggar beside the road."

"That's right," said the king.

"Why did you do this to me?" asked the young man.

"I had to find out," said the king, "if you really did love God and neighbour." □

(St. Martin's Messenger, Ireland)



EVERY GRACE IS A GIFT OF GOD

by Ezio Risatti

Jesus assured his disciples that nothing is impossible for the Father, but all too often Christians are unable to pray with faith.

There are Christians who imagine God to be an old king ensconced on a cloud of incense; a sovereign who, surrounded by the Madonna, the angels and a host of saints, lends an ear to the prayers that come up from Earth from time to time: "Yes, she likes me and she goes to Mass on Sundays. Let her be granted what she asks for... He, on the other hand, no! It's true I created him, but all too often he doesn't behave well. I'll put him in his place, maybe I will grant him this grace later..." And Mary and the saints insist: "Lord, think of it! He also has some merits. Remember how three months ago he gave thirty-four cents to a beggar..." Till God is exhausted and in the end he says: "Okay...you've convinced me... I will also grant him what he asks!"

Lucky things don't work that way...thanks be to God!

Jesus is not a faith-salesman

Jesus reassures the disciples that nothing is impossible for God and he assures them: "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be

opened to you. Because everyone who asks always receives, and the one who seeks always finds and whoever knocks will have the door opened to him."

Not infrequently however, Christians are unable to ask because they have not nurtured enough faith, hope and love and this impedes God from giving them many gifts.

Mathew recounts to us that when Jesus returned to Nazareth, the town where everyone knew him - because he had spent his childhood and teenage years there - he could work only a few miracles there because the people did not believe him.

"Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? - They asked one another. Is not he the carpenter's son and is not his mother Mary?"

In the face of their self-sufficiency and the hardness of their hearts, Jesus is disarmed. He could not heal those who did not recognize in his actions the saving deeds of God, because Jesus is not a faith-salesman, a charlatan ready to resort to 'special-effects' to convince his audience about

the efficacy of the products he offers.

He does not challenge the unbelievers saying: "Don't you believe? No problem! Now I'll astound you with a flurry of miracles and, if you don't believe out of love, you will certainly believe out of fear or convenience."

Mary and the saints, fellow travellers on the journey

To revitalize the very little faith, hope and love that sometimes makes the lives of a large number of Catholics dull, the Church never tires of proposing Mary and the saints as examples of those who trust in the love of God even in moments of great despair and difficulty.

Don Bosco was sure that every brick of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians was the result and a testament to a grace granted by God through the intercession of Our Lady. In this regard, it is interesting to note how Don Bosco - fascinated by Mary's trust in God - at the beginning of his mission used to invoke her under the title of "Immaculate" which means the one who always said 'yes' to God. And that, with the passage of time, he realized that the boys of the Oratory looked at the Madonna not so much as a "last resort" to overcome their poverty, unemployment and hunger that prevented them from building lives as of good Christians and honest citizens. Gradually he was convinced that "Mary wants the Salesians to venerate her under the title of Help of Christians." But without detracting he warned: "There are many who want to obtain graces from Mary Help of Christians. We know that if they

do not strive to imitate her they will gain nothing!"

Avoid the "poisoned treats"

Not all the graces that Christians ask for in the hope of improving their lives or that of their brothers are really for their good. How many, for example, if they win a lottery could risk losing their faith and turn away from God?

With an eight or ten figure bank balance and the illusion of being able to live a five-star life, they could succumb to the temptation of replacing the One Triune God with the "god of money" and in the long run, what would it gain them?

As a mother or father wouldn't put a sharp knife into their child's hand to play with, so too Mary and the Saints would never assist Christians to get graces that could be double-edged weapons in one way or another. This is the reason why God, Our Lady and the saints - when it comes to granting or asking for a grace - would wonder how that 'requested' gift would be used, if it would contribute to the authentic realization or the unhappiness of the person. When a person sees only benefits, they would see the loss and damage that could be hidden behind that gain. □



**MARIA
ROMERO MENEZES
1902 - 1977
DAUGHTER OF MARY
HELP OF CHRISTIANS
- BLESSED**

Maria Romero was born on January 13th 1902 to Félix Romero Afana and Ana Meneses Blandón, both of ancient Spanish stock. Her father, because of his rapid rise in a career of administration, achieved a post in the liberal government at the time. Maria grew up happily in a middle-class family among seven other siblings, survivors of the thirteen children of Ana Meneses. She enjoyed the tender love of her parents and heard wonderfully heartwarming stories from her ailing maternal grandmother. She was first educated by seven maternal aunts in a private school that they ran and at the same time she started lessons in drawing, painting besides learning to play the violin and the piano proficiently under excellent teachers who saw her inclination to music.

At the age of eight - after a three day spiritual retreat - she made her First Holy Communion with great fervour and at twelve she was admitted to the school of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in a makeshift dwelling because they had just arrived in Nicaragua that year. Sadly she was forced to repeat her classes because of her repeated bouts of rheumatic fever



that kept her in bed and even became life-threatening. At that stage of life she already demonstrated a moral temperament of a very mature teenager. She was even able consider as "gifts of God," the many sufferings that afflicted her. A schoolmate who often visited her one day found her "glowing from within" as she said: "I know the Holy Virgin will heal me." In fact, within a few days she was able to get up and go back to school despite being ill for the past six months.

In the school, thanks to a special arrangement, she made rapid progress and was able to take regular music and foreign language classes as well as gaining a global understanding of the Preventive System of Don Bosco which would have a lasting impact on her life. The great influence of Father Emilio Bottari, a Salesian missionary and an enlightened spiritual director was

instrumental in guiding her to spiritual maturity.

On December 8, 1915 she was enrolled among the Daughters of Mary where she experienced "one of those nameless joys, entrusting herself confidently to the Mother of God." A little later, totally captivated by the love of God, she decided to give herself entirely to the Lord; so before the Blessed Sacrament her confessor received her vow of chastity. He later recalled that these dispositions "took root ever more strongly in her soul." A significant "first mystical experience" dates back to this time when the teenage Maria embraced her elder sister and emotionally confided to her: "I saw Our Lady, but don't tell anyone."

Finally at the age of eighteen she was able to fulfil her dream of entering the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The priest-director greeted Maria with this "incisive" recommendation: "Difficult moments will come and you may feel that you are torn to pieces, but always remain faithful and firm in your vocation." They were such golden words, and Maria would recall them very often during the several "difficult moments" that life would lavish on her.

In 1931 she was transferred to San José di Costa Rica, which became her second home. For two years, alongside the mistress of novices she resumed teaching music, drawing and typing while also teaching catechism to the children of the city slums. Rather inefficient in "keeping discipline" which meant total silence and flawless order (and she would laugh at her limitation), she was able to captivate her audience

whenever she spoke - from her heart - about the love of Jesus and the beauty of religious instruction and the maternal assistance of Mary most holy.

Sister Maria's charity knew no bounds of space or time: her activities took on new forms. After having started oratories in the slums (1945), from 1953 she began regularly distributing food packages to the poor every week, mobilizing the charity received from wealthy families she was acquainted through the school. Her charitable activities began first in the college itself and then from 1959 in a small house built a short distance away in an old coffee plantation. It was a matter of overcoming not a few "environmental difficulties" regarding the poor who frequented the college and the school ambient.

To protect the health of those without any medical assistance, Sister Maria designed nothing less than a polyclinic with various specializations. This venture seemed impossible but Sister Mary "knew" that the Madonna would take care of everything. The initial realization of this project with the free assistance of medical specialists and the supply of necessary equipment started in the years 1966-1967. An important parenthesis in the life of Sister Maria Romero was a trip she made to Italy from July to October 1969: "An indelible occasion" she wrote which provided for her a proximate experience of Don Bosco's charisma; and then the "great joy" she had of a personal meeting with the Holy Father Paul VI. She asked for his blessing for the many desperate cases that she carried in her heart as

she held in her hands a long list of petitions. Among the sisters she met in the various houses of the institute, was the Superior General who invited her to narrate her experiences, peppered with traces of a genuine missionary spirit, a love for the Church and an "insane love" for the Madonna during an emotional visit to the "holy house of Loreto."

Meanwhile, Sister Maria was moved by a constant concern at the sight of so many poor families who did not have a home and lived beneath the underpasses or in precarious shelters on street-corners in the suburbs; people whose desperate condition prevented them from reaching out for help. Sister Maria, who was now over seventy, presented her plan to the superior and said: "I would not want to die with an omission on my conscience that I would regret in that supreme moment; on the other hand I would not undertake anything outside obedience." This time, it was the feast of Don Bosco that became the solution to the problem. A former student offered Sister Maria her own land on a hill just outside the city and once the consent of the superiors and the Archbishop was received, work began. In 1973 they were able to integrate the first seven houses for the homeless which made up the *Ciudadela de Maria Auxiliadora* - No. 1 then others would follow. The inmates undertook to abide by a precise rule, a real Decalogue of the moral life for peaceful coexistence supported by daily prayer. Soon the "citadel" would be complete with a farm, a flea-market and a hall-cum-theater and a chapel.

In the multifaceted apostolic profile of Sister Maria Romero, beyond the various forms of apostolate, there was another expression of her missionary heart which was also of great importance: an activity that was built not of stones and cement, but with the gifts of hope, fraternal comfort and comprehensive and generous motherhood: gifts of evangelical love which Sister Maria dispensed with tireless dedication to those poor, disoriented and humiliated people who sought solutions to unspeakable difficulties: in the family or in solitude, in poverty or sickness, in a tormented life or one overwhelmed by the cruelty of others. It was her daily commitment to counsel for hours and hours, receiving and listening, comforting, advising and directing. More than many words, she communicated with her heart, a heart from which the goodness of the Lord shone: she became an interpreter and invited all to have recourse to Mary most holy: hearts felt warmed and were now reborn with new hope. These "audiences" (consultas), which at some point needed to be ordered reached the point of exhaustion but Sister Maria did not complain about it. She rejoiced and thanked God when a "lost" life blossomed in peace and faith once more. This was for her the most coveted recompense.

Her life unexpectedly came to an end on July 7, 1977 when out of obedience she decided to leave for a period of rest after a year of increasingly heavy work. It was a departure to an eternal rest, to contemplate the shining face of her King and to look on the sweet gaze of her Queen. □

Witnesses in & for Our Times

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS (1542 - 1591)

(DECEMBER 14)

by Mario Scudò



In our collective imagination, the greatness of a man is measured and admired not only for what how he knew to live his human adventure, but also for the way in which he faced his hours of supreme transition from the troubles of this mortal life to "the other shore" that is, of God.

The moment of one's death is a moment of definitive choices, is the moment of one's final "crisis" which everyone fears. John of the Cross on his death bed, asked his brothers who were reading to him the prayers for the dying, asked them to read something more "cheerful." He specifically asked them to read him some verses from the Song of Songs, that beautiful and overwhelming love poem from the Old Testament (which he knew so well). Wasn't he going to meet Love?

So, he wanted something more appropriate. After the reading John finished his earthly sojourn with the words: "Into your hands O Lord, I commend my spirit," that is, into the hands of



God of Love, for whom he lived, laboured and suffered; the God who had loved him and whom he preached and about whom he sang.

Extremely poor but extremely loving parents

John was born at Fontiveros not far from Avila in 1542 into a family rich in love but poor in mate-

rial means. The interesting reason for this: His father Gonzalo de Yepes, belonged to a noble and wealthy family from Toledo. On one of his business trips met Caterina, a weaver, an orphan, poor and beautiful. He fell in love with her and married her for love against the stubbornness of his parents and rich relatives who disinherited him.

John was the third son of the family. When his father died, Caterina received no help from her husband's relatives so she looked for work in Medina del Campo, an important commercial town.

Here John did his early studies while simultaneously doing odd jobs. He apprenticed himself to a tailor, a carpenter, a woodcarver and a painter. He was also a nurse, always kind and affectionate to the sick. That was how he paid for his studies. Later he attended the Jesuit College and completed his studies brilliantly. In the year 1563 he entered the Carmelite order and was now known as Brother John of St. Matthias.

Providential Encounter with Teresa

But just before he was ordained a priest, he had a providential encounter with a charming Carmelite nun called Teresa of Jesus who was almost thirty years older than him. She possessed a strong personality and was spiritually very mature. She had come through a long vocational and spiritual struggle while she was working quite successfully to reform the Carmelites.

At that time he too thought of extending this reform to the male branch of the Order. This was very

important for Teresa because men were able to link contemplation on the mystery of God to the mission. That meant they could work not only for their own sanctification in the convent but also for the sanctification of others.

Teresa explained to John her plan of reformation while asking him to delay his decision to change his order and he accepted.

In 1568 Teresa finally succeeded in starting the first convent at Durelo near Ávila. John (who from this time on would be called John of the Cross) thus began a form of religious life, sharing with Teresa the ideal of reform of the Carmelite life.

In Prison, on bread and water ...and God

The Superior of the Order had John arrested for being rebellious and disobedient and imprisoned in a convent in Toledo. They left him with only his breviary in his hand. He was mistreated, humiliated and incarcerated in a narrow prison cell with very little light and extremely cold. Nine months in prison: with bread and water (and some sardines) with just one habit rotting on him. To this was added more suffering (flagellation) every Friday in the refectory in front of everyone.

Devoured by hunger and lice, consumed by fever and weakness and forgotten by everyone except by Teresa (who protested vigorously even to those at the top but in vain) and even less by God.

Yes, God not only had not forgotten him, indeed God was always with him through his grace. John knew that even in the night of his prison God was in his heart ever present at every moment.

And a miracle took place. In a situation that in many ways and for many people could be have been a psycho-physical and spiritual wreck, John of the Cross (we can imagine an "input" from above) composed with biblical material, fervent and rousing poems of love, full of feeling, images and symbolism. Living in God and for God even in those circumstances he drew from him, the perennial source of all novelty and creativity, "Even if it was night all around."

Master of the Spiritual Life

On the eve of the Assumption of 1578 he courageously escaped from prison risking his life if he was apprehended.

The unprecedented nine months of suffering were not in vain. In fact, two years later, the Discalced Carmelites received recognition from Rome which meant they were not autonomous.

He was also sent to the south of Spain, to Andalusia where the climate and nature, the absence of confrontation and the success of the reforms of Teresa of Jesus (and his) gave him time and inspiration to compose most of his great works of spirituality to become one of the great masters of the Church.

Among his writings we recall in addition to what has already been cited, the Spiritual Canticle, in poetry, the Ascent to Mount Carmel and the Dark Night.

Despite having a solid philosophy and theological education (which certainly helped him), what John wrote was not so much the result of a system-

atic research done in a library but the fruit of his own ascetical and spiritual experience.

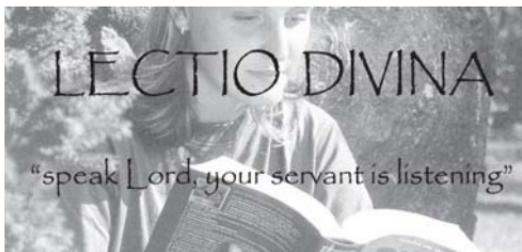
Becoming Nothing for God to be all in all in him

John of the Cross speaks of the renunciations of leaving everything, of nothingness (in comparison to God), of ascent, of a dark night, all terminology that characterizes the spiritual life according to him being a work (of self-correction and self-control in one's own actions and decisions), a serious commitment, a tremendous effort, a costly, gradual and constant asceticism ...which cannot be achieved overnight.

Naturally for John the most important word in this spiritual discourse is not renunciation but love. For him it is not so much a question of leaving or giving up something but of loving Someone. He invites us to leave small loves for a greater love indeed for the Total Love which is the Trinitarian God. Love is the decisive word: the love of God for us, the love of the creature for God, as seen as a response of our quest for love, to the point of being consumed in the God of Love (a spousal or mystical union).

And John of the Cross was summated in love for God till the end which arrived on December 14, 1591 in Andalusia, in Ubeda. To a nun who had written to him, hinting at the difficulties he had suffered, he replied: "Don't think of anything else except that everything is arranged by God. And where there is no love, put love and you will receive love."

Very valid advice even today, for everyone. ☐



FAITH AND GOOD CHRISTIAN LIVING

Ian Pinto, *sdb*

THE GOSPEL NARRATIVE

As Jesus came down the mountain after his transfiguration along with his close disciples, they saw a huge crowd gathered around the other disciples. There was a heated argument underway between the Teachers of the Law and the disciples. The argument centered around the possession of a young boy. The disciples were unable to cast out the demon and the Teachers began to question their authenticity. Finally, Jesus cures the boy and reprimands all those gathered for their lack of faith and unbelief (Mk 9:14-29).

THE BONDAGE OF UNBELIEF AND THE ANCHOR OF FAITH

There are a lot of counter measures for the various spiritual difficulties we face but for unbelief, there is none. There is hardly anything that can be done to remedy it. The only way to counter unbelief is through a fully conscious and willing assent to faith.

Jesus' public ministry was plagued by unbelief. Everywhere he went, he met people who re-

fused to believe in him, even though there were many who did believe in him. If you carefully separate the believers from the unbelievers, you will find that the latter group consisted mostly of the Pharisees, Scribes, Teachers of the Law, Priests and Officials who were all victims of unbelief! Imagine that, they were the people who had spent years learning about God and about His promises, but when the promised Messiah came, they were the first to reject him!

Unbelief is a serious problem and a difficult obstacle to overcome. To an unbeliever, no proof whether by word or argument, or by action or miracle, will suffice. *S/he* will seek out rational justification to prove the opposite, and if that is not possible, *s/he* will dismiss the whole affair as 'nonsense' or 'fake'. While on the one hand, such an attitude could characterize an atheist or a non-believer, on the other hand, it could characterize a believer. In the latter case, unbelief is a far more dangerous attitude than in the former,

as the latter is capable of doing more damage and wielding a greater amount of negative influence on fellow believers. His/her behaviour could become a cause for scandal and his/her lifestyle might not accommodate the spirit of the Church or of religion as a whole.

The Pharisees and others were renowned for their hypocrisy. Jesus called them out on it. He chided them for being punctilious about keeping the law but failing to recognize its spirit; for regularly making donations to the temple but turning a blind eye to justice and the love of God; for behaving ostentatiously and insisting on receiving public respect; for preparing unbearable burdens and loading them up on the people, without bothering to lift a finger to help; for living in ignorance and preventing others from acquiring the light of knowledge (Lk 11:39-52).

The learned Jews of the Gospel, professed faith in Yahweh but were not ready to accept the good works that were done through His Divine Power. They were aware that a Messiah would come but failed to accept Jesus when he came. They strictly followed the letter of the law, spending themselves trying to show love for God but forgot about their neighbour. Isn't this unbelief in action?

But before we think of pointing fingers, let's look at ourselves. Let us make a quick examination of our own lives.

1. What are my priorities in life? Does God feature in the top 3 or at least in the top 5?
2. Do I believe because I've been taught so or have I had a firsthand experience of Jesus?
3. What is my understanding of

the Church and of the Christian faith?

4. In what ways do I practice Jesus' teaching of 'Love of God and Love of Neighbour'?

5. Do I sincerely believe that God loves me, that I'm worthy of God's love, that I'm His child and that He loves all others as much as He loves me?

These questions will help us gauge our levels of faith and unbelief. Let's not forget that unbelief wasn't only a problem of the learned Jews but also of the disciples! The same disciples who performed mighty miracles, healings, exorcisms and the like in Jesus' name were doubtful of who he was and what he preached. We could be regular for the Church services and receive the sacraments, we might pray daily, engage in spiritual and corporal works of mercy and so on, but our hearts might be empty due to unbelief. We might fall into the trap, like the disciples, of doing the Lord's work without knowing and believing in the Lord!

In every unbeliever, there is a believer and in every believer, there is an unbeliever. The key is to find the rope of faith and to cling on to it with all one's strength. The winds of trial, difficulty and even unbelief will blow cold and hard, but if we are able to cling steadfastly on to the rope of faith, then our lives will really be fruitful. This is the challenge of Advent: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Lk 18:8) Let our preparation for Christmas begin with an intense effort to dust off the rope of faith and anchor it firmly in our hearts and minds. □

Quiet Spaces

THE STRENGTH OF THE LITTLE ONES

*On the morning of Tuesday, November 29, 2016,
the Holy Father celebrated Mass in the Chapel of Domus Sanctae Marthae.
The following is the edited English text of the Pope's homily which was delivered in Italian.*

To meet the Lord “who is and will be,” we must have “big hearts,” “humility” and a “childlike” attitude. In his homily during Mass at Santa Marta on Tuesday, 29 November 2016, Pope Francis continued his reflection from the previous day recalling the way of life to which Christians are called.

During the Advent season, he observed, Christians should be mindful of three things: vigilance “in prayer, carrying out works of brotherly charity and rejoicing and giving praise.”

The Pope focused on the Gospel image of Jesus (Luke 10: 21-24) who “rejoiced in praise of the Father.” What is the reason for Jesus’ joy? “For the Lord revealed to the little ones the mysteries of salvation, the mystery of himself,” Francis, emphasized – “to the little ones, not to the wise and the learned: to little children.” For the Lord cherishes children, he said, “to sow in the hearts of children the mystery of salvation,” because “the little ones are able to understand this mystery.”

This is confirmed in the day’s first reading, from the book of the prophet Isaiah (11: 1-10), which, the Pope noted, contains many “little things,” many “little details that make us see God’s promise of peace to his people” the promise “of redemption, the promise to always save them.” The text, Francis noted, points out that “on that day, a shoot will spring from the stump of Jesse.” the prophet “does not say: ‘An army will come to liberate you,’ but refers to ‘a small bud, a little thing.’” And, the Pontiff added, “at Christmas we see this smallness, this little thing: a baby, a stable, a mother, a father,” and thus the importance of having “big hearts but the attitude of a child.”

For “upon this bud will rest the Spirit of the Lord, the Holy Spirit.” And this bud, explained Francis, will have “that virtue” which is typical of little ones: “fear of the Lord.” He “will walk in fear of the Lord.” But, the Pope immediately clarified that fear of the Lord does not mean “dread.” It means testifying in

our own lives to “the commandment that God gave to our father Abraham: ‘Live in my presence and be blameless.’ And all this means humility. The fear of the Lord is humility.” That’s why “only the little ones are able to understand fully the meaning of humility, a sense of fear of the Lord, because they walk in the presence of the Lord, for ever:” they, in fact, “feel watched by the Lord, guarded by the Lord; they feel that the Lord is with them, which gives them the strength to go on.” The little ones, continued the Pope, understand they are “a little sprout of a very large trunk,” a shoot upon which alights “the Holy Spirit.” They therefore embody the “Christian humility” that leads them to recognize: “You are God; I am a person, I journey forward in this way with the little things of life, but walking in Your presence and trying to be above reproach.”

This is “true humility” not of course, a “‘theatrical’ humility” as ostentatious as he who said: ‘I am humble, but proud of it.’ The humility of the childlike, the Pope stressed, is that of someone who “walks in the presence of the Lord, does not speak ill of others, looks only at service, and feels that he or she is the smallest.... That’s where their strength lies.” A clear example, he added, can be seen in Nazareth: “God, in sending his Son, casts his eye upon a humble maiden – very humble – who immediately afterwards hastens to help a cousin in need and she tells her nothing of what had happened.” This is humility: “to walk in the presence of the Lord, happily, joyfully, because this is the joy of the humble: to be seen by the Lord.” Therefore, with the humility of which the Gospel reading speaks, we must always remember that “humility is a gift, a gift of the Holy Spirit.” It is what we call “the gift of the fear of God.” A gift, the Pope concluded, which we must seek from the Lord: “Looking at Jesus who rejoiced because God reveals his mystery to the humble, we can ask for the grace of humility for all of us, the grace of the fear of God, of walking in his presence, trying to be beyond reproach.” A gift that will help us to “be vigilant in prayer, carrying out works of brotherly charity and rejoicing and giving praise.” □

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HOMEMADE BREAD

From Fr. Ian Douilton's collection of stories

His mother had done all she could to keep him away from Irene but her sweet and somewhat hesitant manner of broaching the subject failed to dissuade him from his purpose. Probably, even if she was firmer she might not have succeeded. The aunt and other relatives believed in Mario's case stricter measures needed to be employed. In the end, they got together with an old cousin who usually refrained from interfering in family affairs was pressed into service. They decided to pose a united front to proffer some valuable advice for the welfare of the family.

Mario, who patiently listened to his mother's advice and admonition was content to simply shrug his shoulders whenever the sisters, or aunt or other concerned members offered him their brand of advice but he was rather curt with this cousin of his; he would snap at her whenever she even hinted at the subject.

He was all dirty and drenched in perspiration when he came home late one afternoon when they ganged up to batter him once more. With his hands akimbo he said in a low voice seething with anger: "Finally, can you tell me, what you have against Irene? You annoy me with your advice and the way you go on looking at me as if I were walking off a precipice! I am certainly not going to change my mind; you can keep up your torments. To tell you the truth, they don't bother me.

What would really bother me would be how you plan to treat Irene once she enters this house and has to put up with your rudeness."

As an afterthought he added: "Oh, don't you worry, Irene, is no namby-pamby who'll get frightened by your brusque reproaches!"

He was getting angry now and he looked at his sister and went on: "Tell me what does Irene lack? Isn't she hardworking, active and level-headed?" That was all his cousin needed to give vent to the venom that was piling up within her for quite a while.

"Oh, yes, yes, good, active and hardworking...but she has ideas that are too big for her head and besides she wouldn't fit into our home. Our lifestyle makes her laugh. Because she works as a high-end seamstress she won't even stoop to peel an onion. Here you are sweating after coming from the stable and slogging in the fields..."

Encouraged by this his mother added: "Am I not well enough? And aren't you earning enough?"

The old cousin pitched in again: "Already at this age she thinks she's so prim and proper; looking down on us with contempt, especially when she sees you coming back from the fields. It's enough for her to see mother or one of us and she sighs with condescending pity...I feel so sorry for mother, really I do."

Raising his hand he shouted above the cackle: "So, stop it!"



At the mention of his mother described as burdened over with the weight of misfortune he was at the end of his tether. "You," pointing to his sisters, his aunt and the old cousin he went on, "And you, all of you please don't interfere in my affairs. I've got my head on my shoulders, haven't I, and a solid head at

that, I warn you." Then pointing to his forehead: "When this head has an idea it won't change. Get that straight."

The sisters said no more. The others heard Mario's adamant views but no one breathed a word about it to Irene and her great aunts. He continued to go out with her every evening after work and by now everyone in the village considered them to be betrothed. He loved her.

Sometimes when he remembered all those depressing comments his sisters had made, and the shadow of sadness in his mother's eyes, he quickly drove those thoughts away assuring himself that Irene was good, submissive and would adapt to any kind of life. But he never spoke of this to her; he said nothing to his mother either...but she could read her son's heart like a clear stream in which she could count the pebbles at the bottom.

One day she mentioned the girl: "Son, when will you bring her home?" Mario flinched and stared at her anxious face raised towards him. The question caught him off guard. "Soon, we won't get married till Easter."

By Easter the skies would turn blue and the trees would begin to flower. It seemed so far away but Easter was such a cheerful season. At the moment everything seemed dark and depressing. The chill autumn breeze rattled the window frames and made everyone depressed.

"Easter... but there's the whole of winter before that," said his mother.

Now that the ice was broken;

the girl's name returned frequently in conversations between mother and son. Still, neither of them could imagine her moving into that old blackened kitchen from where, over the years so daughters had walked out as brides to start their adventure of family life. The mother couldn't understand why so often a wrinkle appeared on her son's forehead, yet she did everything possible to show him that the girl he had chosen was close to her heart too and that she would no longer be a stranger to her.

It was a calm morning and the sun's weak rays crept over the window curtain as she handed him a loaf of bread still warm from the oven, with a golden crust. She said: "I baked this just now with our flour: homemade bread, Take it and give it to Irene."

His mother believed there was no gift more precious than a loaf of homemade bread, made from the flour of crushed ears of corn grown in their own fields; those fields that clung to the hillside behind their house. It was the blessing of her hard work. For the poor, it was a sign of hope that often rose in their hearts often so anxious about the morrow.

Whenever she baked a batch of bread everything in the house took on an aspect of joy and celebration. It was as if an aura had spread over her humble gestures as she traced the sign of the cross over the soft white shapes on her little baking board. It brought her a sense of peace. She felt certain that her labour was being truly

blessed by the Lord.

Mario stared at his mother speechless. That simple gesture that brought Irene into the heart of the family should have filled him with joy; instead he could not shrug off the dark apprehension that tormented him. If he resisted his mother's kindly gesture it would feel heavier than a boulder.

He seemed to feign some irritation as if he were driving away confusing thoughts. He murmured a quick "thank you" that perhaps his mother didn't hear and he left the house.

Now he must hurry and take his mother's gift to Irene. He had to meet her and talk to her; there was no other way to dissolve the dark sadness. His simple little house was perched on a flat that hugged the hillside and the mule track that passed it descended sharply down to the town. Looking up he saw the sky was a tender shade of blue; that brightened his spirits, but the copper-coloured mountainside reminded him that it was still autumn and a long way to go. Further afield there were large squares of brown earth between patches of green meadow and rising here and there, thin plumes of smoke.

The still air seemed to have images of life suspended within it. The crops had been harvested and shepherds were leaving the hillsides and descending to the sunny plains. The evening reminded him of blazing firesides with families gathered around in safety and joy, secure from the harsh winter weather.

What passed before Mario's mind was not overflowing barns or shepherds or vigils, times of quiet rest, but perhaps he was thinking of the great peace that would come when he had his own sweet home. The scowl on his face slowly turned to a smile as he imagined Irene wandering around his dream house making every day beautiful just by her presence and her simple gestures.

He quickened his pace. Irene lived on the fringe of the village where the mountain slope seemed to fall sharply into the stream. A high wall surrounded her garden.

In the little kitchen garden behind the house, Irene's mother and sister, a girl with bright eyes were digging up onions.

"Hi there, where's Irene?" Mario shouted as he neared the house.

"In the house," replied the mother. The girl raised her head and added: "Where would you want her ladyship to be? At home, peaceful and undisturbed; ah, if I'm born again I want to be like her."

Mario, without hearing the



end of the speech - which was making him uncomfortable - moved towards the house.

Irene was busy sewing. She only raised her head when she saw him. She was a beautiful girl, tall, with perfect features and soft brown hair, but her eyes held a cold expression which cast a shadow over her beauty.

"Oh, so you've come?" There was something cold in her voice.

"Yes," he tried to sound casual.

As he stood there he turned the big loaf over in his hands,

as if it was a bulky parcel that he didn't know what to do with. "I was on my way to town to get some seed so I thought I'd drop by."

When Mario had something to say to someone he never lowered his gaze. But now he was uneasy, he did not know how to give Irene this gift his mother had sent. Suddenly there surged within him an inexplicable anger for the girl's attitude. It could burst out at any moment so he was cautious and afraid to say a word too many.

All he said was: "Irene... mother sent you this bread. She made it herself this morning, you know?"

He put the bread on the table in front of her in a gesture that almost seemed religious.

"Be careful, gently," the girl snapped. "Can't you see the fabric is very delicate; it's costly?"

Her tone changed: "Oh, homemade bread!" She gave a little laugh that hurt Mario; she went on harshly: "Even you have homemade bread? You say it as if it was something so precious. Imagine, sometime in the future the bread that I'll be eating will be the bread that I will have to knead!" Then realizing she had said too much she added: "No, forget it!"

But it was too late, she realized that her words hurt Mario more deeply than she had intended. She tried to soften her tone, but her intentions were as unpredictable as the wind.

"You see, I prefer to tell you what I'm thinking in advance. I don't like promising you

heaven and earth before we get married and then have to hear you say: 'go slog it out there!' and then... your many other customs..."

But Mario no longer heard her. He had taken back the bread, the bread so affectionately made by the blessed and hardworking hands of his mother and he moved towards the door.

"Are you leaving, Mario?" She put down her needle and looked up.

Mario turned to her. There wasn't any anger in his eyes but only a deep, deep sadness. From where he stood, Irene seemed so far, far away!

Now, he thought only of his mother, her face anxious and eager, hoping for something to blossom when she gave the bread for his girlfriend.

Irene waited anxiously for him to say something: his silence troubled her more than her flash of anger because she realized that something had been irreparably destroyed. She didn't want to look closely at what that 'something' was as she waited a little longer, still hoping. She asked again: "Are you leaving, Mario?"

"Yes," he replied, "It's better that way, Irene."

What was "better"? He didn't say nor did Irene ask because she already knew.

She followed him with her cold hard stare while he slowly walked away with the parcel of homemade bread under his arm.

She realized that he would never be back. She had sent him away forever. □

FIORETTI OF DON BOSCO

11

by Michele Molineris

Third Multiplication (1864)

Another surprising fact occurred in the first months of 1864. Once Don Bosco said Mass after the community, and he knew that the ciborium was empty of consecrated hosts but he didn't think of consecrating any. However, around communion time, two or three youngsters went up to kneel at the altar step. The saint looked up to see how many they actually were and he began to break the big host into four parts and then began to distribute communion to the youngsters. The first was Francis Vicini, the second was Joseph Sandrone. The youngster holding the candle looked surprised when he saw another ten youngsters approach the sacred table and wondered to himself what Don Bosco would do. Then he saw the saint break the remaining sacred species again to distribute the wafers of equal size to the first. The fact was spoken of among the youngsters of the Oratory but by now they were so accustomed to seeing Don Bosco as a man of miracles that they didn't make much of it.

Fourth Multiplication (1885)

This other miracle took place in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians at the altar of St. Peter (where today rises a monument to Don Bosco), in the presence of the dukes of Norfolk. It was May 24 and Don Bosco had celebrated Mass for the two illustrious English gentlemen.

Since the altar had no tabernacle, a small ciborium holding some twenty hosts was placed on the altar, enough for the dukes and their retinue to communicate.

The saint consecrated them. When the moment of communion arrived, numerous devotees saw who the celebrant was and that the dukes were receiving communion; they crowded there to receive communion too. The cleric and the one in charge of the sacristy tried to persuade them by telling them that there were few particles there and they were sufficient for the English group; but it was like talking to the wind. They seemed to have deemed it their good fortune to receive communion from Don Bosco.

And when Don Bosco saw this he said to the server: 'Let it be.'

'But the hosts are counted! Do you want me to bring some from the main altar?'

- 'Let it be,' replied the saint. The cleric stopped insisting but in the meanwhile he just looked on at the multiplication miracle with growing astonishment. Don Bosco without breaking even a single host distributed communion to over two hundred people. (from the Biographical Memoirs).

36. Charles' last confession (1849)

On May 7, 1922 the Marquis Philip Crispolti while offering his congratulations to the Servant of God Father Philip Rinaldi on his election as Rector Major of the Salesian Congregation, was pleased to give him some "unpublished news about Don Bosco, taken from the correspondence of the Marchioness Fassati De Maistre." He had received this

information some years earlier from his daughter Azelia.

Among these unpublished information there was also the narration of a resurrection accomplished by Don Bosco. Thinking that not everyone would simply accept her testimony to be so out-of-the-ordinary, in Don Bosco's own house where they were so accustomed to the miraculous, the Marchioness added in her own hand the description of the fact at the bottom of the page: "I had this narration from the mouth of Don Bosco himself, and I have tried to write it down as faithfully as possible."

Here is the description of the fact: "One day they came to call on Don Bosco for a youngster who ordinarily attended the Oratory. He was seriously ill. Don Bosco was not in. He did not return to Turin till two days later and even then, only on the following day around four in the afternoon was he able to visit the sick boy's home. As soon as he arrived he saw black banners on the door with the name of the boy he had come to see. Nevertheless, Don Bosco wanted to go up and comfort his parents; he found them immersed in tears when he learned that their son had died that very morning. Don Bosco asked them to take him to the boy's room to be able to see him once more.

A servant took him there. On entering - Don Bosco recounts - it occurred to me that the youngster might not be dead. I went to the bed and called him by name: "Charles!"

Then he opened his eyes and greeted me in a voice of profound astonishment: "O Don Bosco, you

have awakened me from a most frightening dream!"

At the sound of that voice several people who were in the room fled in terror shouting loudly and overturning the candles while Don Bosco hurried to tear off the sheet in which the youngster's body was wrapped.

Meanwhile he continued to say: "I seemed to be pushed into a dark cave, it was so narrow that I felt I was out of breath. In the distance was a larger and better lit place where many souls were on trial and I saw with growing terror that many of them were doomed. Finally my turn had arrived and I was already about to suffer my horrible fate for having made a bad confession, when in fact, you work me up.

Meanwhile, the parents of the youngster, learning that their son was alive flocked there in great joy. He greeted them cordially, but immediately told them not to hope for his recovery. He embraced and kissed them and told Don Bosco that he had the misfortune of falling into sin and it was serious and he had stopped going to confession. It was because of this that he sent for Don Bosco, feeling that his illness was getting worse. Not having found him, another unknown priest was brought and to him he did not have the courage to confess this fault.

Well, God wanted to show him how, for a sacrilegious confession he deserved hell. He then painfully confessed his sin, received absolution, closed his eyes and died serenely."

According to later evidence, this took place in the first months of 1849. The boy may have been called Joseph Julian and he was

seventeen. His father must have managed the Gelso Bianco hotel, on number eleven via del Carmine, on the corner of Via dei Quartieri in Turin. (da M.B., III, 495).

37. The Polenta Priest (1849)

Joseph Brosio once wrote to Father Bonetti: "One day, while I was in Don Bosco's room, a man presented himself to ask for alms, saying he had four or five boys who had not eaten since the day before, and the poor children were hungry. Don Bosco looked with pity at him and then rummaging around finally found four soldi and gave them to him accompanying it with a blessing. That man, after thanking him went away.

When we were alone, Don Bosco told me that he regretted not having anything more to give to the poor fellow who was really in need and that what he had said about his children was true.

- Should I have had a hundred lire I would have no scruples to give them to him.

- And how sure are you that the man told you the truth? He could be a scrounger, and there's no lack of them everywhere.

- No, - asserted Don Bosco - that man is sincere and truthful; indeed, he's hardworking and loves his family; it has been misfortune that has reduced him to that state.

- And how do you know that?

Then Don Bosco took me by the hand and squeezing it, looked me straight in the eye and then as if to confide in me he said:

- I read his heart.

- Oh, beautiful! Then you can even see my sins...

- Yes, I can smell them.

In fact, if I forgot to tell him

something in confession, he was the one to call me back and remind me without going into the details.

This is confirmed by the fact, that one day I had done an act of charity which had cost me a lot but which I had not told anyone about. As soon as Don Bosco saw me, he took me by the hand as usual and said to me: "Oh, what a fine thing you have prepared for paradise today!"

- What thing?
- And he repeated to me, point by point what had happened to me, going into detail about things I hadn't paid much attention to.

Sometime later, I met the man to whom Don Bosco had given the four soldi; he recognized me and stopped me to tell me that with the money he had gone to buy some flour and they had made polenta. They had eaten their fill and that, after Don Bosco's blessing, his business had improved to the point of allowing him some comfort.

But in the family, he added, they no longer called him Don Bosco, but the Polenta Priest, because four soldi worth of flour should have been enough to feed two people, instead seven of them had eaten and there was still some left over." (da M.B., III, 493).

38. The Multiplication of Chestnuts (1849)

In 1949, on a Sunday after the feast of All Saints, Don Bosco conducted the Exercise for a Happy Death (a monthly recollection) and led the young boys, both the boarders and the day scholars to the cemetery to pray for the dead. He promised them chestnuts when they returned to Valdocco. Mamma Margaret had bought

three bags; but thinking that her son needed just a small amount to please his boys, she cooked just a little. Joseph Buzzetti who had reached home early before his companions entered the kitchen and saw a small pot boiling and told Don Bosco's mother that there would not be enough chestnuts for everyone. Unfortunately, the lack could not be remedied immediately. The youngsters had already arrived and were crowding around the door of the church of St. Francis. Don Bosco himself went to the threshold to start the distribution.

Buzzetti poured the pot into the basket and held it in his arms. Don Bosco, believing that his mother had cooked all the chestnuts that were bought filled the cap of every youngster. Buzzetti, seeing that Don Bosco was distributing too much to everyone: Don Bosco, what are you doing? He shouted. We don't have enough for everyone. If you give out that much it won't reach halfway.

"Yes," replied Don Bosco, "We bought three bags and my mother cooked them all."

"No, no, only these, only these," replied Buzzetti.

However, regretting Don Bosco's portions, he told him quietly: "We will continue to give everyone his share as long as it lasts."

And he kept on giving the others the same amount as the first. Buzzetti looked down at Don Bosco, until there was just enough for two or three. Only a third of the youngsters had received the chestnuts and there were around 600 of them. The cries of joy were followed by a silence of anxiety as those closest to Don Bosco realized

that the basket was almost empty.

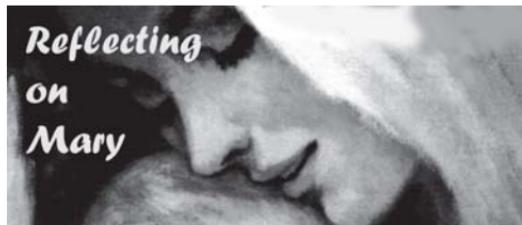
Then, Don Bosco believing that his mother had set aside the other chestnuts to save them, ran over to get them; but he found, to his surprise, that they had not been boiled and that instead of the large pot, the smaller pot was set on the fire which was destined for the superiors. What was to be done? He did not get upset but said: "I promised you and I will keep my word."

Taking the large ladle, he filled it with chestnuts and resumed distributing the few that remained and here the wonder began. Buzzetti was standing by his side. Don Bosco lowered the ladle into the basket and filled the ladle till the chestnuts overflowed; while the quantity in the basket remained the same, it did not seem to diminish. Not two or three, but about four hundred had their fill.

When Buzzetti brought in the basket to the kitchen he saw that there was still a portion remaining. It was that of Don Bosco, because, perhaps the Madonna had reserved his share for him. The news of the fact spread from those who were near to those who were far away. Everyone waited holding their breath till the end and when the last one received his share a universal cry broke out: "Don Bosco is a saint, Don Bosco is a saint!"

Don Bosco immediately asked them to keep quiet but it took a lot of effort. They all gathered around him.

In memory of this prodigy, Don Bosco wanted chestnuts to be boiled and distributed to all those in the Oratory on the evening of All Saints (as Canon Anfossi asserts) (M.B., III, 576). □



THE SOIL FOR FAITH, SILENCE AND PRAYER

Don Giorgio Chatrian

The rich moments of silence for reflection and prayer after the birth of Jesus and when he was found in the temple: "Mary, on her part, pondered all these things in her heart" (Lk 2:19).

Being amazed at her Son when she heard the words of Simeon: "His father and mother were astonished at the words that were said about him" (Lk 2:33). When Jesus was twelve and stopped by the temple: "His mother kept all these things in her heart" (Lk 2:51).

Today we're afraid, indeed even terrified of silence. At home the TV is always on or the radio constantly blaring. In their cars, some listen to music so loudly that even those in other cars at traffic lights can hear them. At discos the music pounds so loudly that paradoxically everyone is silent because, if you talk you won't be heard. Even at society meetings everyone is talking at the same time, shouting in fact and no one is listening.

And yet those who manage to experience moments of genuine

silence are unexpectedly happy.

Mary had seasoned her silence with meditation, reflection and prayer, a lifestyle to be learned.

"I had already thought about it while I was on the road to Bethlehem and more so because very often I was forced to become aware that I carried something very awesome in my womb.

Joseph, attentive to my every move thought of tugging the halter of the donkey on which I rode stopping it out of concern for me. Sometimes a glance and a smile were enough and then patting the donkey on its back we were off again. At other times when my face was gripped with exhaustion he would help me down, spread his cloak like a little cushion on a piece of level ground and help me down to sit and rest.

Was the big day coming soon? He gave me courage: just a little, telling me we would be in Bethlehem before nightfall. When we resumed our journey the thoughts resumed but they spontaneously turned into prayer.

What would this child - announced by the angel - be like?

O Father, in nine months my faith in you has grown because of a thousand signs you gave me. But now you give me yet another sign: my son, Your Son would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. The prophecy was coming true.

But then, as usual, once again you broke the mould. In fact, once there, there was no room in private houses or in the inn to welcome us. Jesus, your Son, O Most High, Creator of Heaven and earth, had for his first cradle a manger in a stable!

Suddenly we saw that he looked at the world with other eyes and another heart: the eyes and heart of the little ones, of the simple, the poor who felt love and who put their lives at the service of love.

Thank you, O Father, for this lesson.

So many things happened so quickly and all at the same time: the joy of being a mother, attentively wrapping the child, cleaning it, putting it to sleep after nursing it. O Lord, I was so afraid of hurting him.

However, in these simple acts he was like everyone else.

But I was left speechless when the shepherds arrived: their smiling faces and swollen eyes, they placed their poor gifts at the feet of Jesus and then nodded saying it was all true! Putting together their half-sentences I realized that they had heard the news of the birth from an angel and had come to the stable following the star.

In the birth of Jesus, you, O Father, manifested your glory; Who you are: a God who makes your greatness consist in giving

us the Son who truly becomes Emmanuel, God-with-us, ready to bring peace to earth, hungry and thirsty for love.

It's all so huge and so beautiful. I still have to reflect a lot on it and pray very much too.

This prayer prepared me for another incredible moment. We had gone up to the temple with two doves to offer you for my purification. With Joseph I felt that I held in my hands this priceless treasure: Jesus your Son who was coming for the first time to the temple: your home and our home; bringing him there was a bit like giving him back to you, returning your gift. Two elderly people were waiting for us: Simeon and Anna who exploded with joyful songs of praise to you, O Father!

Simeon even scared me a little when he took Jesus into his arms; then those words about him being salvation for all and a light for the nations and the glory of Israel. I still couldn't believe this: that all this would happen thanks to my son, still so small.

I will still have to meditate and pray particularly keeping in mind those words about the sword that would pierce my soul. I was terrified, I was afraid perhaps even more than when the angel announced to me the plan you had for me, O God.

Then I said to myself with trust and confidence that with you I would handle the pain that would become my constant companion. I don't know how and why. You know it, you know what I'm made of and that's enough for me, my God, my guide.

I trust in you, O Father, Thank you! □

LA RIOJA, ARGENTINA



At 10:42 a.m. on Saturday, April 27, 2019, Francis' seventh year of pontificate, Angelelli and three other people were formally registered as blessed. The Pope's envoy, Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu spoke of "Christian witness given until martyrdom," of "military dictatorship marked by a regime that considered indecent whatever social justice action aimed at the promotion of the weakest within the framework of the Church's social doctrine," "of a faith - the faith that today's four blessed strove to promote - that had an impact on life in such a way that the Gospel would become a leaven of society and generate a new humanity."

43 years have passed since the violent death of Angelelli, Murias, Longueville and Pedernera, four after the opening of the process of beatification, only six years from the condemnation to life imprisonment of the senior officials who perpetrated the crime, and just year from the declaration of martyrdom in hatred of the faith that opened the way to their beatification.

Many have lived with Murias

and Longueville, have received baptism or some other sacrament from their hands, have in some way witnessed their kidnapping, have seen their corpses defaced. Wenceslao Pedernera's wife, Martha Ramona Cornejo, with one of her three daughters, Maria Rosa, has listened in the park of the city of La Rioja to the proclamation of her husband blessed, the same man she saw shot to death at her front door on July 26, 1976.

At the end of the ceremony, Arturo Pinto, Angelelli's driver at the time of the accident caused on the road that connects La Rioja to Chamental, recalled that last trip and spoke of Angelelli as a "tough guy" who did not abandon the road and his flock: "They had to take him off the road in a bad way" to stop him.

When the first of the three groups of Argentine bishops travelled to Rome to meet the Pope, the Archbishop of the city of Paraná, Monsignor Puiggari, announced that among the purposes of the trip there was also that of inviting Bergoglio to his own country. In a certain sense we can say the Pope "travelled" to Argentina by sending something of himself: a strong message about a caring Church, a "synodal" church, as the current Archbishop of La Rioja, Dante Braida, calls it, a church "committed to the poor, well rooted in the people, attentive to the enhancement of the laity, present and active in public life." □ *Alver Metallì, LaStampa*

IN A CHEERFUL MOOD

For A Good Cause

A small shopkeeper, much to the astonishment of his neighbours, suddenly decorated his shop window with a lovely new blind. There were many remarks made about the new blind.

"How much did you pay for that nice blind, Jim?" asked a friend.

"The customers paid for that," said the shopkeeper.

"What do you mean?" asked his friend, incredulously.

"Yes, I put a box on the counter marked "For the Blind," and the customers filled it."

A Ghost of A Chance

Rastus: "Ah hear you stayed in de haunted house last night. What happened?"

Samba: "Bout two o'clock ah woke up, and a chost came through de side wall, jest as if de wall wasn't there."

Rastus: "And what did you do?"

Samba: "Ah went through de other wall de same way."

Practice Makes Perfect

A woman, who had just completed a First Aid course, saw a man lying prone in the street, and was shocked that passers-by callously paid no attention to him. So she rushed up, and began giving him artificial respiration.

The man raised his head, and said: "Lady, I don't know what you are trying to do, but I'm trying to get a wire down this manhole."

Sight Unseen

Magistrate: "Have you anything

to say before I pass sentence?"

Burglar: "Yes, m'lord. It's a bit thick being identified by a bloke who kept his head under the bedclothes all the time."

Optics and Politics

"Whom did you vote for?"

"I didn't vote for anyone."

"Why so?"

"Well, the last man I voted for went blind."

"Yes, before the election he used to see me from the other side of the street and run across to shake hands with me. But ever since he was elected, he would pass within a yard of me, and never see me."

A General Scourge

A party of Z-reservists were about to rehearse an important attack and were being addressed by the General.

"There are," he began, "certain essential differences between a rehearsal and the real thing. In the first place, there is the absence of the enemy. In the second..."

He turned to the Sergeant-Major "tell the men the second essential difference," he said.

"The presence of the General," replied the Sergeant-Major triumphantly.

Toddler kudos

A four-year-old watched his father for the first time take round the collection plate. Then he let out a yell: "Hooray! Daddy won!" which reverberated throughout the church. □

ADAM'S CHRISTMAS PRAYER

by John Scally

It was Christmas Eve and Adam Minogue knelt down beside his bed to say his prayers. After he said his normal prayers, he added one of his own. "Please God, make Christmas come for Daddy this year."

Adam was seven years old. He loved his father very much, because he was such a good man. He was also very kind and gentle. Every morning Mr. Minogue put a grain of sugar on Adam's tongue and another on top of his ears. He thought that if he did that it would help Adam say nothing but nice and sweet words all day and hear nothing but good news and kind words all day. At night he would put a grain of sugar on Adam's head so that he would have sweet dreams. Then he put a grain of sugar on his eyebrows so that the last thing he would see before he went to sleep and the first thing he would see when he woke up was something nice.

Adam found it very sad that his father refused to believe in Christmas. Mr. Minogue was a very successful businessman who treated all those who worked for him very well indeed. He was used to dealing with money and things he could buy and sell. He had no faith in all that nonsense which Christians celebrate at Christmas: the idea of God becoming human was too far fetched to be seriously considered by any thinking person.



He kissed his wife on the cheek as she headed out to church for the midnight service. As she drove off in the car, snowflakes began to fall, timidly at first, then gathering momentum as the shyness appeared to wear off them.

Adam's Christmas prayer answered

At that moment, he heard a strange sound coming from the side of the house. Three little birds had been frightened by the sudden heavy snowfall and in their panic had sought to find shelter by flying through the sitting room window. "It wouldn't be right to leave these poor little creatures out there in the freezing cold," he thought. He decided that he would put them into the bicycle shed at the bottom of the garden, where they would be dry and warm. He put on his coat and his big boots and marched through the snow to the shed. He opened the door wide and turned on the light. But he could not persuade them to come into the shed. Then he got a brain-wave. "Food

will tempt them in," he thought. He rushed back to the house, stumbling a few times on the way in the blanket of snow. In the kitchen he got a few slices of bread and chopped them up into tiny pieces, which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail into the barn. However, the birds paid no attention to the crumbs and remained in the exact spot where they had landed. He tried to direct them into the shed by walking around and waving his arms and shouting at the top of his voice. They scattered in every direction except into the lighted shed. "They must find me a weird and frightening creature; there is no way I can make them trust me," he said to himself. "If only I could become a bird myself for a

few minutes, then I could lead them to safety."

At that very moment, the church bells began ringing. He raised up his hands to heaven. "Now I know why," he whispered. "Now I realise why You had to do it." The following morning, Adam listened attentively as the priest gave his Christmas sermon. He said: "The simple truth of Christmas is that God sent his only son to become human like us, so that we might be saved." Adam looked up at his father who was sitting beside him in the chapel. Mr. Minogue winked back at him. Adam smiled to himself as he thanked God for answering his Christmas prayer. □ (From *St. Martin's Messenger, Ireland*)

THE ADVENT WREATH

In many churches at the beginning of Advent you will see a wreath of evergreens on a stand at the front of the church. Four candles are placed on the wreath to represent the four weeks of Advent. On the first Sunday one of the candles is lit and one each on the remaining Sundays. With the weekly addition of one candle the light grows brighter as we come closer to Christmas and the celebration of the birth of Christ the light of our lives. Light is a symbol of Christ and the wreath, which was



the symbol of victory, symbolises the glory of the birth of Christ, a Christ who would be victorious over sin and death. The evergreen branches of the wreath also symbolise the endless nature of God's love for his people. □

LOVING CHILDREN TO THEIR LOVING MOTHER

On June 13, 2019 my son, who is a pilot, was on flight duty from Calcutta to Delhi. At 5000 feet the aircraft was hit by bird, causing damage to the aircraft. They had to turn around and emergency land at Calcutta. Our Heavenly Mother Mary was there, as a major disaster was averted. My son prays the rosary daily before going to duty and after coming back from duty. Thank you Mama Mary.
P. T. Lopes, Vasai

My most sincere thanks to the Blessed Virgin Mary for helping my daughter to recover from her recent illness of severe vomiting. She was not able to get up. I prayed to our Blessed Mother to help her to recover. My prayer was heard and my daughter is back on her feet again. Thank you Mother Mary.
A Devotee

Thank you Lord Jesus and dear Mary Help of Christians for the success of our son in his final exam in his final year of college. My niece too got her speech back after a brain stroke. Thank you Mary Help of Christians for your powerful intercession.

Mrs. K. Pereira, Mumbai

Thank you dear Jesus and Mother Mary, Help of Christians who helped us to build our house without any problem. Thanks for being with us, mother in all our difficulties. We have great faith in you Mother. Thanks for healing me when no medicine could not. Please protect my family, Mother. Please help us now. We need your help badly.
P. Anto, Goa

THEY ARE GRATEFUL TO OUR LADY AND DON BOSCO

I am grateful to Our Lady, Mary Help of Christians and St. Pio of Pietrelcina for a successful hernia operation at an advanced age.

Isac, Hilario Dias, Goa

I, Mrs. Cynthia, Tony D'Souza wish to thank Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco and Dominic Savio for saving me from a heart attack and bringing me safely home. Always take care of us.
Cynthia T. D'Souza

Deep from my heart I thank you mama Mary, Don Bosco and dear Dominic Savio for my daughter-in-law's unexpected premature delivery. Thank you for keeping both the child and the mother safe and also for a normal delivery. It is only by the favour of your intercession that everything went on well. Thank you once again and protect all your children and bring them closer to God.

A Devotee, Sewri, Mumbai

Dear Jesus I thank you, for through the intercession of Mary Help of Christians, St. John Bosco and Dominic Savio, for the numerous favours received; a complete cure of breast cancer and lung cancer. I thank the Lord for averting another surgery or radiation. Please keep us under your care and protection.

Maria Goretti Miranda, Mumbai

APOSTLESHIP OF PRAYER DECEMBER 2019

Universal: That every country determine to take the necessary measures to make the future of the very young, especially those who suffer, a priority.

Regd RNI no. 9360/57;
Postal Regn. MH/MR/North East/089/2012-2014
posted at Mumbai Patrika Channel Sorting Office
on 1st & 2nd of every month

Subs: (one copy Rs. 20/-); **Inland Rs. 200 p.a.**; **Airmail: Rs 500 p.a.**

MARY WAS THERE

It was July 31, 2017. I had finished my Rosary, had dinner and was about to go to the kitchen, but delayed to watch the TV serial. Suddenly, the whole hall shook, windows rattled and before I could get my wits about me, there was a loud bang. Trembling with fear I stood at the kitchen door and saw that the kitchen ceiling had come crashing down along with debris all over. Had I been in the kitchen at that moment I could have been killed on the spot. Not only that, surprisingly the mixer-grinder and the fridge I had bought only a day earlier were intact without a scratch. Besides my life even that was taken care of by our Loving Mother. My neighbours came running up and were glad and surprised to see that I was safe and alive. Thank you Lord Jesus and Mother Mary.

Maria D'Souza, Mumbai

Don Bosco's Madonna, has developed to its present form from a folder published in 1937, by late Fr Aurelius Maschio, on behalf of the Salesians of Don Bosco, Bombay.

The magazine is sent to all who ask for it, even though there is a fixed subscription (*Rs 200/- India & Rs 400/- Airmail*). We trust in the generosity of our readers/benefactors. Whatever you send us will help cover the expenses of printing and mailing; the surplus if any, is devoted to the support of orphans and poor boys in our schools and apostolic centres.

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Please address all correspondence to:

**Rev. Fr. Edwin D'Souza, sdb.,
SHRINE OF DON BOSCO'S MADONNA,
Matunga - MUMBAI - 400 019 - INDIA**

Phone/Fax: 91-22- 2414 6320, email: dbmshrine@gmail.com